



COMMITTEE ON  
EDUCATION & LABOR  
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STATEMENT

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**Opening Statement of Rep. Lloyd Smucker (R-PA), Republican Leader  
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment Hearing:  
“The Cost of Non-Completion: Improving Student Outcomes in Higher  
Education”  
May 9, 2019**

It's graduation season. Across the country, millions of students are celebrating the years of hard work they dedicated to earning their degree. Finally, no more late nights in the library, flash cards of the periodic table, or dorm room ramen. These students are on to bigger and better things.

This is the reality for some, including my oldest daughter Paige, who graduates next week. Their achievement is cause for celebration. But going unseen are the millions of men and women who won't be graduating this month because they were unable to complete their degree.

Part of the legacy of the *Higher Education Act* was making college accessible to more Americans. This objective was, on the whole, very successful. Between 1995 and 2005, university enrollment increased by 23 percent, followed by another 14 percent increase over the following decade. By 2015, approximately 20 million students were enrolled in postsecondary education.

Enrolling in college is a deeply personal and emotional decision. For many students, they may be the first in their family to pursue a postsecondary degree. Some may never have thought college would be an option for them. By enrolling, they are taking a step in faith toward a better life and a better future.

Just 58 percent of enrollees graduate in six years. Not four years – six years. This percentage measures full-time students, and as someone who was a non-traditional student, I know the outcomes can look far worse.

These numbers are not okay. We cannot afford to be complacent about that fact that 42 percent of American students are unable to complete their education within six years. Because this means that many of these students are exiting programs with significant student loan debt to their name, and without the value of the degree - hurting their ability to provide for themselves or their families.

A recent study by the Wall Street Journal found that when factoring in outstanding student loan debt, students who drop out before attaining a degree have worse financial outcomes than those who never pursue postsecondary education in the first place. There has always been a degree of risk involved in pursuing a college education, but student loan debt has upped the stakes to devastating levels for too many students.

Easy access to taxpayer-funded student loans has driven up postsecondary tuition and fees so that today, aggregate student loan debt stands at a staggering \$1.5 trillion, and the number keeps growing. The absence of downward pressure on rising costs paired with the fact that postsecondary institutions do not share in the risk of students' noncompletion has woefully harmed students' chances at future success. Whether a student sticks with the program or not, institutions continue to receive tax dollars uninterrupted. That needs to change. Institutions must have a greater stake in their students' success and a reason to spur them on to the finish line.

Postsecondary education is a vital pathway to good-paying jobs and career success, and we must work to ensure this pathway remains available to students of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. But getting these students to the starting line is not enough; we must encourage them to complete a program and earn a credential.

Across the country, we have more than 7 million unfilled jobs, and employers desperately need workers with the right skills and credentials to participate in the workforce and drive our economy forward. Now more than ever, we need solutions that align postsecondary education with in-demand jobs and give students in school a reason to finish their program.

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