GOP higher ed update clears committee after marathon markup

Submitted by Andrew Kreighbaum on December 13, 2017 - 3:00am

After debating and voting on amendments all day Tuesday, the House education committee advanced to the full chamber on a party-line vote a rewrite of the federal law governing higher education in the U.S.

The legislation, called the PROSPER Act, would change accountability for colleges and universities, alter the student financial aid landscape, and loosen restrictions on short-term and for-profit programs.

Representative Virginia Foxx, the North Carolina Republican who chairs the education committee, said Americans can’t afford simply a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, but need real reform of the law. Her Democratic counterpart, Representative Bobby Scott of Virginia, however, said Republicans chose to do so in a partisan manner, behind closed doors and with no input from committee Democrats.

He said the U.S. could support multiple pathways to higher education while adding support for programs that provide student aid and help colleges promote student completion.

"This is the latest battle in the majority’s war against students," Scott said. "That war began in earnest this year with the proposed tax bill."

The higher education bill would end some grant programs like the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant and benefits to student borrowers such as loan interest subsidies and Public Service Loan Forgiveness -- part of a larger effort to simplify the student aid system by offering one grant and one loan with the same repayment options for all students.
The committee considered more than 60 votes Tuesday. Democrats offered the vast majority of those with 40 amendments to the GOP legislation, nearly all of which were rejected on party-line votes. One would have made recipients of the new single federal student loan proposed in the bill eligible for Public Service Loan Forgiveness. That amendment failed 20 to 19, with two Republicans -- Representative Glenn Thompson and Representative Lou Barletta, both of Pennsylvania -- joining the Democrats.

Another amendment would have made Pell Grant funding mandatory -- meaning it would be authorized in law permanently -- and boosted the maximum grant by $500 while indexing the value of the grant to inflation, an aim of many Democrats and student aid advocates. Under current law, Pell is funded through a combination of mandatory and discretionary spending and Congress must vote to approve any increases to the grant's value.

Other Democratic amendments sought to expand eligibility for federal student aid to those covered by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival program, repeal the federal student unit record ban and restore Obama-era regulations on for-profit colleges.

Committee Republicans, though, had little interest in maintaining separate definitions of nonprofit and for-profit higher ed programs.

"If we want transparency, if we want accountability, if we want what you say you want, let's apply that to everybody," said Representative Paul Mitchell, a Michigan Republican. "The false dichotomy continues to devalue career and technical education, which is wrong in this economy."

Mitchell, a co-sponsor of the College Transparency Act, also expressed frustrations in a statement after the markup that the committee hadn't done more to make data available beyond that which is reported for low-income students who rely on federal aid. *(Note: This story was updated to more accurately reflect Mitchell's concerns about student data.)*

"With today's legislation, we had a rare opportunity to make meaningful change, and we fell short," he said.

Mitchell was absent from the markup when a Democratic amendment to repeal the federal student unit record ban failed to pass.

Democrats and higher education groups on Tuesday continued to voice complaints over the speed of the process to mark up the legislation just over a week after the
542-page bill was introduced. The American Council on Education [1] as well as the American Association of Community Colleges and the Association of Community College Trustees took issue with the time frame in letters to committee leaders this week.

As the markup unfolded, others said there hadn't been sufficient time to examine whether there are adequate safeguards in place, for example, where the bill would allow new higher ed programs to access federal aid.

"We are greatly concerned that the rushed process thus far has not allowed for thoughtful consideration by policy makers and stakeholders of complex policy proposals," said Craig Lindwarm, director of congressional and governmental affairs at the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities. "The risks of getting this wrong are too great to not slow down and think through implications."

Foxx was dismissive of those complaints from Democrats in particular, even offering a list of bills -- and markup dates -- for legislation crafted by the previous Democratic majority.

"Our colleagues are suffering from amnesia when they say this process has been rushed," she said.


Links: