



PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

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February 14, 2018

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor
and Pensions
United States Senate
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor
and Pensions
United States Senate
648 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

The Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA) commends the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) for its comprehensive approach to the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act and appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback and insight into accountability concepts in higher education. PAEA represents the 229 accredited PA education programs in the United States, which collectively graduate more than 8,000 PAs each year. As the only national organization representing PA programs, PAEA has a clear interest in high-quality, equitable education to ensure that the future PA workforce is fully equipped to meet the nation's growing health care needs.

As discussed in the recent white paper on the current state of higher education accountability released by the committee, the principle of accountability measured at the institutional level has become increasingly unsuitable in light of significant variance in graduate outcomes among programs of study. According to the most recent salary report published by the American Academy of PAs (AAPA), the median starting compensation for new PA graduates

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is \$102,000, with the potential for significant increases over time.¹ As national demand for PA services rises, in the context of growing physician shortages, the prospects for increased earnings significantly diminish the likelihood of federal student loan defaults among PA borrowers. PAEA is in agreement with the Chairman's white paper assertion: "Different programs of study unlock different employment options upon completion. Sanctioning an entire institution for poor performance risks hampering programs at the institution that do provide robust returns to students." We look forward to working with the HELP Committee to explore new options for program-level accountability in the reauthorization of the HEA.

In addition to program-level accountability, PAEA is supportive of the provision in H.R. 4508, the PROSPER Act that would eliminate the gainful employment rule. While we recognize the commendable intent with which the rule was promulgated, the significant earning and loan repayment capacity of PAs following graduation illustrates the inherent shortcomings of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to protecting students from unmanageable debt.

Finally, as efforts advance to ensure that students receive a significant return on their educational investment, we urge the Committee to address factors contributing to recent increases in the cost of higher education for both students and taxpayers. In the context of PA education, we urge the Committee to examine the shortage of clinical training sites, inadequate faculty development opportunities, and a disparity in the annual and aggregate borrowing limits under the Direct Loan program for PA students relative to other health professions. These issues have all led to higher out-of-pocket costs for PA students. PAEA encourages the HELP Committee to recognize and address the role these issues play in the capacity of PA programs to meet accountability standards and build a strong PA health care workforce.

We appreciate your leadership in reauthorizing the Higher Education Act and look forward to working collaboratively with the Committee to ensure PA students receive the education they need to provide high-quality care to the nation's patients. With any questions or should you require additional information, please contact Chief Policy and Research Officer Dave Keahey at dkeahey@PAEAonline.org or (703) 667-4339.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Lisa Mustone Alexander".

Lisa Mustone Alexander, EdD, MPH, PA-C
President

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Timi Agar Barwick".

Timi Agar Barwick, MPM
Chief Executive Officer

¹ American Academy of Physician Assistants, *2017 AAPA Salary Report*. Alexandria, VA: AAPA, 2017. Accessed February 8, 2018.