



PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
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March 21, 2018

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

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education Labor
and Pensions
United States Senate
648 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

As the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) continues its efforts to reauthorize the Higher Education Act (HEA), the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA) welcomes the opportunity to submit policy recommendations, which we believe will most effectively strengthen our member programs' ability to educate and prepare a well-trained future PA workforce. PAEA represents the 229 accredited physician assistant (PA) education programs operating in the United States, which graduate more than 8,000 new PAs each year. We believe that HEA reauthorization presents a unique opportunity to improve borrowing and loan repayment options for PA students, advance health equity through the preparation of a more diverse PA workforce, and ensure PA education programs have the resources necessary to meet workforce demands. As HEA reauthorization advances, we urge the Senate HELP Committee to consider the following priorities:

Direct Loan Parity for PA Students

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Under current law, PA students borrowing through the Federal Direct Loan Program are restricted to the annual and aggregate limits established for non-health professional graduate students. This policy has resulted in a notably unusual disparity between health professions students, such as those pursuing a Master of Public Health or a Master of Health Administration degree who do not provide direct clinical care and are eligible for higher borrowing limits, and PA students who have the additional cost of clinical training factored into their tuition yet are restricted to lower limits. As a result, this restriction has forced PA students to use loan options with higher interest rates and less favorable repayment terms.

PAEA is supportive of the increased annual (\$41,000-\$45,167) and aggregate (\$235,500) loan limits proposed in the PROSPER Act and the inclusion of PA students as health professions students under the Federal Direct Loan Program. PAEA urges the Senate HELP Committee to include a companion provision in its HEA bill.

Preservation of Grad PLUS/Public Service Loan Forgiveness

PA students have traditionally relied upon the Grad PLUS loan option to finance their education. **In the absence of additional congressional action to address the factors contributing to the rising costs of health professions education, such as a lack of clinical training sites and insufficient faculty development, PAEA strongly recommends that the committee preserve Grad PLUS as a component of HEA reauthorization.**

PAEA has consistently supported the incentives created by the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program for students to work with medically underserved populations following graduation. We are seriously concerned about the long-term potential impact of the proposed elimination of PSLF on existing health disparities and sub-optimal workforce distribution. **PAEA urges the HELP Committee to protect Public Service Loan Forgiveness Programs as HEA reauthorization moves forward.**

Incentivizing PA Program Development at HBCUs and HSIs

As the health professions community works to eliminate disparities based on race and ethnicity, PAEA has advocated for the development of a diverse workforce as a foundational principle. We believe that a diverse PA workforce is crucial to ensuring the provision of



culturally competent care, while reducing health disparities. In pursuing the preservation of PA workforce diversity, PAEA has identified PA program development at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) as a key priority.

PAEA strongly urges the HELP Committee to add PA education to the list of programs eligible for existing grant opportunities at HBCUs and Predominantly Black Institutions and to prioritize the provision of grants to PA education programs at HSIs under sections 723 and 724 of the Higher Education Act.

Loan Forgiveness for Service in Areas of National Need

Under current law, nurses, dentists, mental health professionals, physical therapists, and allied health professionals, among others, are eligible for loan forgiveness in exchange for service in areas of national need. **Due to the comparable services provided by PAs and the role of health providers' student loan debt in driving up costs for patients, PAEA recommends that PAs be added to the list of eligible professionals for loan forgiveness under this program.**

We appreciate the opportunity to share PAEA's recommendations for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act and look forward to working with the HELP Committee to ensure that the reauthorization produces optimal outcomes for students, faculty, and patients. If you would like additional information or have any questions, please contact PAEA Chief Policy & Research Officer Dave Keahey at dkeahey@PAEAonline.org or 703-667-4339.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lisa Mustone Alexander".

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Timi Agar Barwick".

Timi Agar Barwick, MPM
Chief Executive Officer