



Coalition for Higher Education Act Reform

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NEWS ADVISORY

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Drug Treatment, Rehabilitation and Policy Reform Leaders Call for Repeal of Financial Aid Drug Penalty *Since 1998, more than 140,000 students have been denied federal aid*

WASHINGTON, DC – Data from the Department of Education reveal that more than 140,000 would-be college students have been found ineligible for federal loans and grants since a provision denying aid to drug offenders was added to the Higher Education Act (HEA) in 1998. A drug conviction is the only offense that bars students from receiving aid.

Recently, drug treatment professionals have been joining the fight to repeal the law. “We should be focusing on solutions that tap the proven expertise and effectiveness of prevention, intervention, and treatment professionals. Instead, the drug provision is strictly punitive,” said **Pat Ford-Roegner, Executive Director of NAADAC-The Association for Addiction Professionals**. “If we want to help these young people become productive members of society, hindering their access to a college education is foolish - in fact it increases the likelihood that their drug misuse will continue.”

According to a national policy panel convened by JoinTogether, a national network of prevention and substance abuse professionals and community leaders, and the American Bar Association’s Standing Committee on Substance Abuse, the HEA drug provision is a counterproductive policy that denies people an opportunity for education and training that will enable them to get a job and earn an honest living. “The HEA drug provision denies opportunities to those that need them the most,” notes **David Rosenbloom, Director of JoinTogether**. “In his State of the Union address President Bush said, ‘America is the Land of Second Chances,’ but the drug provision legally prohibits a second chance to people with drug convictions on a daily basis.”

Thankfully, there is momentum in Congress to reform the drug provision. S. 1860, a bill to reauthorize the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), will likely revise the 1998 drug provision of the Higher Education Act (HEA) by making the law applicable only to people who were in school at the time they committed their drug offense. While this reform is welcome, a college education will still be denied to many students who want one, including students who have paid their debt to society through the criminal justice system and who are in a treatment program seeking to get clean.

Furthermore, H.R. 685, introduced by Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) would, “amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to repeal the provisions prohibiting persons convicted of drug offenses from receiving student financial assistance.” Since the bill was introduced in February 2003, 69 other Representatives have signed on as co-sponsors; which is the most co-sponsors ever on a bill to repeal the drug provision.

“H.R. 685 is very exciting. More and more Representatives see that existing law is counterproductive, and the only real solution is passage of H.R. 685,” says Scott Ehlers, Outreach Director of the Coalition for Higher Education Act Reform (CHEAR). “The Representatives supporting H.R. 685 are really supporting students across the nation. H.R. 685 means individuals with a drug conviction will be able to get what they need most — an education.”

In the meantime, the Drug Reform Coordination Network (DRCNet) is helping drug offenders stay in school. DRCNet, in partnership with Students for Sensible Drug Policy, has established the John W. Perry scholarship fund. John Perry was a New York City police officer who lost his life in the 9-11 attack on the World Trade Center, who was also an outspoken civil libertarian and opponent of the War on Drugs. The Perry Fund awards scholarships of up to \$2,000 to students who have been denied financial aid due to drug convictions (www.raiseyourvoice.com/perryfund/).

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