



Coalition for Higher Education Act Reform

1623 Connecticut Avenue, NW • 3rd Floor • Washington, DC 20009

voice: (202) 232-7111 • fax: (202) 293-8344

e-mail: heareform@raiseyourvoice.com • web: www.RaiseYourVoice.com

August 3, 2009

The Honorable _____
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear _____:

We, the undersigned, join our voices as organizations representing millions of Americans concerned with opportunities for education, recovery from addiction, faith, civil rights, and law, to call on Congress to remove a harmful roadblock to higher education. We refer to the Higher Education Act Aid Elimination Penalty (20 U.S.C. 1091 (r)), which has stripped college financial aid from over 200,000 aspiring students with drug convictions since the law took effect in 2000. While the penalty is intended to reduce drug abuse, it actually fosters the opposite effect by blocking access to education to Americans committed to getting their lives back on track.

Please co-sponsor H.R. 3295, the *Removing Impediments to Students' Education (RISE) Act*, sponsored by Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA), Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX), and Rep. Donna Edwards (D-MD). The bill would reinstate aid to aspiring students by removing the confusing drug conviction question from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, as recommended by Congress's own Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance. The committee called the question "irrelevant" to determining eligibility and stated that it "add[s] complexity to the form and can deter some students from applying for financial aid" -- even some who are actually eligible but assume the question implies they are not. Further, the Obama administration recently called on Congress to eliminate questions from the FAFSA application that are irrelevant in determining need-based aid eligibility.

Education has enormous benefits – for individuals and for society. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, college graduates contribute more than twice as much to the federal income tax pool than those with only high school diplomas. Numerous studies have concluded that persons who obtain college degrees are far less likely to break the law and become costly drains on the criminal justice system or to rely on programs like food stamps or public housing¹. Denying aid to otherwise qualified applicants costs taxpayers more in the long run through lost tax revenue and increased spending on law enforcement and social programs.

Federal college aid programs require students to meet minimum performance standards to maintain eligibility. Therefore, the penalty only punishes hardworking students who are doing well in their classes and who are likely to be good investments in our nation's economic future, regardless of their past mistakes. Also troubling is that the penalty affects only persons on the lower end of the economic spectrum who rely on financial aid. Finally, because of unresolved racial disparities in drug law enforcement, the penalty has a disproportionate impact on people of color.

Though a partial reform enacted in 2006 limits the penalty's impact to a smaller number of people, tens of thousands of would-be students continue to suffer its ill effects, all of whom have already been punished for their offenses through the criminal justice system. For these and other reasons, more than 250 organizations across the country have called for the full repeal of the aid elimination penalty². America's chance to reopen doors of opportunity to tens of thousands of bright and eager would-be students is now. We respectfully urge you to co-sponsor the RISE Act.

Sincerely,

¹ Education Pays: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society. The College Board, 2004.

² The Coalition for Higher Education Act Reform, <http://www.RaiseYourVoice.com/supporters.shtml>.

- A New PATH (CA)
- ACLU of Nebraska
- African American Family Services (MN)
- American Academy of Addiction Psychiatry
- American Association of University Women
- American Civil Liberties Union
- American Humanist Association
- American Probation and Parole Association
- Association of Independent Colleges of Art and Design
- BACCHUS Network
- Brandywine Counseling (DE)
- Burke Council on Alcoholism & Chemical Dependency, Inc. (NC)
- Campaign for America's Future
- Campaign for Youth Justice
- Campus Progress Action
- Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants
- Coalition of Essential Schools
- College Board
- College Parents of America
- Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition
- Common Sense for Drug Policy
- Correctional Education Association
- Delaware Chapter: National Alliance for Medication Assisted Recovery
- Drug Policy Alliance
- Drug Policy Forum of Hawaii
- Drug Policy Forum of Texas
- Drug Reform Coordination Network
- Efficacy (CT)
- Faces & Voices of Recovery
- FEDCure
- Fellowship of Reconciliation
- Friends Committee on National Legislation
- Graduate Student Association of University of California-Davis
- Interfaith Drug Policy Initiative
- International CURE
- Justice Policy Institute
- Law Enforcement Against Prohibition
- Legal Action Center
- Legal Services for Prisoners with Children (CA)
- Marijuana Policy Project
- Maryland Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants
- Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
- Minnesota Affiliate of the National Council on Alcoholism & Drug Dependence, Inc.
- NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.
- NAADAC, The Association for Addiction Professionals
- NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
- National African American Drug Policy Coalition
- National Alliance for Medication Assisted Recovery
- National Association for Public Health Policy
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
- National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers
- National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers
- National Association of Graduate-Professional Students
- National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators
- National Black Police Association
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse – St. Louis Area
- National HIRE Network
- National Lawyers Guild
- National Lawyers Guild Drug Policy Project
- National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws
- National Youth Rights Association
- Nevada Hispanic Services, Inc.
- North Carolina Association of Alcoholic Residential Facilities
- North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition
- November Coalition Foundation
- Ohio Citizen Advocates for Chemical Dependency Prevention & Treatment
- Open Society Policy Center
- Oregon Student Association
- Perspectives, Inc. (MN)
- Prison Legal News
- Prisons Foundation
- Progressive Jewish Alliance
- Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia (PA)
- Public Justice Center (MD)
- Rainbow-PUSH Coalition
- Reaching Out to Others Together
- Remove Intoxicated Drivers
- Restoring Dignity, Inc.
- Rhode Island Patient Advocacy Coalition
- Safer Alternative For Enjoyable Recreation
- Sensible Colorado
- South Carolina Re-entry Initiative
- Students for Sensible Drug Policy
- The Brown Angel Center
- The Sentencing Project
- Therapeutic Communities of America
- United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
- United States Student Association
- Women's City Club of New York
- Women's Employment Rights Clinic (CA)