Artificial Intelligence and Higher Education Policy Proposals

Northeastern University and Gallup recently released a poll that reveals that most Americans believe artificial intelligence and automation will fundamentally change the American workforce over the next decade. The poll also shows that Americans are optimistic about these coming changes, despite the fact that most believe they are underprepared and will need additional education and training to succeed in the global digital economy.

As Congress takes up the important task of reauthorizing the Higher Education Act this year, these findings are a call to action for higher education, industry, and government to craft higher education policy built for the 21st century.

H.R. 4508, the Promoting Real Opportunity, Success, and Prosperity through Education Reform (PROSPER) Act, which was recently approved by the House Education and Workforce Committee, takes important, but modest, steps towards incentivizing the type of innovation we need to prepare students for the future. These include making important changes to the Federal Work-Study program that would allow students to use work-study funds during full-time co-ops at private employers, establishing a new grant program for industry/higher education earn-and-learn partnerships, loosening federal rules regarding the definition of a credit hour, and increasing flexibility in the accreditation process.

These are important provisions, but they do not go far enough. The bill intends to help students “enter the workforce with the skills they need for lifelong success.” Yet nowhere in the 542-page bill text—or in the accompanying bill summary—is there any mention of the terms “artificial intelligence” or “automation.”

Given the unanimity across the political spectrum that these twin forces are on the precipice of remaking the nation's economic landscape as we know it, this is unacceptable. Promoting innovation that prepares students for the coming technological transformation of the global workforce must be the primary focus of higher education reform efforts.

Northeastern University urges Congress to support reforms that tap into America's optimism about artificial intelligence and automation and ensures students and workers are prepared for the ways that artificial intelligence and automation will change the American workplace:

• Congress should fund innovation grants and student assistance program bonuses to incentivize the design of curricula that break down outdated academic silos; encourage co-design of programs jointly with employers aligned to workforce needs; and integrate 21st century literacies of technology and data, and the human attributes of creativity, cultural agility, and empathy.

• Congress should do more to incentivize experiential learning, including making students enrolled in a career-aligned co-op program eligible for the PROSPER Act's new Pell bonus, which, as written, is only available to students who complete 30 or more credits in one academic year; and incorporating global experiences into federal programs that support experimental learning, such as the Federal Work-Study program and the PROSPER Act's new earn-and-learn grant program.

• Congress should encourage innovation by funding grants for the development and administration of experimental sites, such as those established through the Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships (EQUIP) program. Experimental sites serve as valuable laboratories for the development of innovative higher education and industry partnerships.

• Congress should establish a National Board on Higher Education Innovation to advise the White House and Education Secretary. This board could be modeled after the National Advisory Council on Innovation and Entrepreneurship or the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board. Membership should include college and university presidents and chancellors, CEOs, and representatives from national student and faculty organizations. The board would make recommendations to the secretary about ways the Department of Education can better enable innovations in higher education.

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