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Proposed rule a barrier to college education

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In today's challenging economy with continued high unemployment rates, higher education and real-life experience are critical in gaining a leg up in this stagnant job market.

However, despite the bleak job climate, the U.S. Department of Education has proposed a rule that would create more hurdles for many students in Pennsylvania, and across the country, interested in obtaining a college education and the training necessary for the careers of their choice.

The proposed "gainful employment" rule would make entire programs at for-profit and career colleges ineligible for Title IV financial aid if they fail to meet two arbitrary formulas derived from a debt-to-income ratio and loan repayment rates. The debt-service to total income measure is inherently biased against high-quality, degree programs that prepare graduates to be strong, marketable candidates, because these programs often require students to borrow to pay for school, whereas less expensive diploma and certificate programs are easier to finance and thus much less impacted by the proposed regulations.

This rule is problematic on two levels. First, the proposed rule unfairly targets proprietary institutions and nontraditional students (working adults, minorities, veterans) who take advantage of the viable career training programs they offer. In Pennsylvania, Education Management Corp., headquartered in Pittsburgh, prepares students at three Art Institutes in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and York for careers in such fields as culinary arts and graphic design.

In the Lehigh Valley, schools such as Triangle Tech, McCann School of Business & Technology and Lincoln Technical Institute would be affected by the proposed rules.

These schools play an important role in training students for careers that contribute to our local economies and fuel our statewide economic engine. These students — more than 20,000 enrolled in Pennsylvania — should not be penalized for pursuing their goals to be chefs, web designers, photographers and more because they have chosen to attend a career college and because they needed to obtain loans to pursue their education.

Second, the rule would impact many employers in the hotel and restaurant industry, as well as marketing and creative design firms, all of whom rely on the Art Institutes to produce graduates who are well trained and ready to work on day one of their

employment. Many employers coordinate closely with the schools to advise them of the skills and qualifications they seek in their prospective candidates to more effectively match the students' skills with the employers' workforce needs. The proposed "gainful employment" rule would reduce this field of job-ready workers to the detriment of businesses across Pennsylvania.

While student debt is a shared concern, the proposed rule is an inappropriate response to a complex problem. Rather than limit their options and penalize students for selecting certain career paths and educational institutions, the focus should be on providing the education and counseling necessary to help students and their families determine what is an appropriate financial commitment for their own personal educational goals.

Education is a key component in creating economic stability. So long as Pennsylvania's students are fully informed about the cost of their education and the income potential of their chosen career path, they should be allowed to make their own educational choices free of interference from the federal government. Otherwise, our students will no longer have control over their choice of careers and our employers will lose a vital source of qualified, skilled workers. I would urge the Department of Education to abandon this ill-conceived "gainful employment" rule in favor of less-intrusive measures that allow our students to control their own destiny.

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