



PRESIDENTS FORUM



RETAIL INDUSTRY LEADERS ASSOCIATION



SEMICONDUCTOR INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION



U.S. Chamber of Commerce



January 25, 2023

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Chairwoman
Education and the Workforce Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
Chairman
Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Ranking Member
Education and the Workforce Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Bill Cassidy
Ranking Member
Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, Chairman Sanders, and Ranking Member Cassidy:

Congratulations on your leadership roles overseeing federal education and workforce policies in the 118th Congress. The Skills First Coalition – a group of U.S. businesses and innovative education and training providers – stands ready to work with you to advance policies that invest in and strengthen American workers.

The 117th Congress took significant, bipartisan action to address America’s global competitiveness – from upgrading our transportation and energy grids with the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act to expanding 21st century manufacturing with the CHIPS and Science Act. These initiatives represent progress in strengthening our economy and workforce, yet significant challenges remain. Today, there are nearly [10 million open jobs](#) nationwide, with [every state experiencing more open positions](#) than they had prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Employers are responding by [investing](#) in the reskilling of their current workforce to keep pace with rapid advances in technology and stay relevant in the modern, digital economy. At the same time, job seekers increasingly want more flexible, affordable, and career-relevant education aligned to the labor market. Today, [nearly 60%](#) of enrolled students are working and the number of students taking online courses is [97% higher](#) than it was pre-pandemic.

As the U.S. workplace and our labor force undergo significant transformation, our higher education and workforce development systems must meet the demands of today’s digital market and shift away from the traditional “one-size-fits-all model.” To meet every American learner and worker where they are in their career journey, the Skills First Coalition supports a multi-pronged strategy that includes the following initiatives:

1. ***Promote Multiple Pathways:*** Improve access to and promote traditional and nontraditional pathways to employment to help more job seekers across all demographics access in-demand, skills-related education and training programs. Policies to pursue include:
 - Shifting the focus from traditional four-year degrees as proxies for knowledge to verifiable competencies and skills and expanding applicant pools to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.
 - Scaling work-based learning opportunities, including earn-while-you-learn programs, apprenticeships, internships, and other on-the-job training initiatives.
 - Expanding Pell grants to fund shorter-term, quality workforce-related education and training programs, including online learning.
 - Streamlining the apprenticeship registration process to expand access to nontraditional pathways.

2. ***Make Postsecondary Education and Training More Affordable:*** Make the cost of education and training affordable for all learners, ensuring there is a return on investments through good-paying, in-demand job placements. Policies to pursue include:
 - Moving beyond the traditional time-based education marketplace towards a competency-based education system.
 - Addressing gaps in the recognition and verification of knowledge and skills attained by job seekers in prior work and life experience.
 - Improving the transfer of credits between institutions of higher education.
 - Better aligning skills and competencies for career pathways with industry.

3. ***Encourage Innovation:*** Support modernizing the delivery of education and training through innovation and flexibility to better meet learner needs. Policies to pursue include:
 - Promoting multiple models for training – including online and hybrid – to better meet the schedules of students, job seekers, and workers.
 - Embracing new modes of credentialing and skills verification, in partnership with industry, that assure privacy and security for the individual and empower employers to easily identify talent.

4. ***Improve Link between Education and Employment:*** Support improving the link between education and employment so learners are prepared for in-demand jobs. Policies to pursue include:
 - Establishing partnerships between employers and education institutions to create skills frameworks that define credentials and postsecondary courses at scale, particularly in high-demand industries such as manufacturing, healthcare, technology, and logistics.
 - Supporting the modernization of the Department of Labor’s O*NET to include employers and education providers. Data must be real-time for the labor market to better define skills for jobs.
 - Enhancing data-driven decision-making in federal, regional, state, and local job training initiatives by better connecting to Unemployment Insurance wage records and other data sources.

The speed at which technology is advancing requires a broad rethinking of the way we educate and upskill our current and future workers. It demands on and off ramps for education throughout careers, and it requires flexibility and ingenuity in delivery to best meet the needs of workers and employers alike. U.S. [employers](#) are already stepping in and fulfilling the growing demand for high-quality, online skills training and certification programs that offer flexibility, relevance, and valuable learning outcomes for employees. Close collaboration between businesses, educators, and lawmakers to advance the aforementioned policies will further enhance efforts to meet the needs of workers and employers while future-proofing the U.S. economy. The stakes have never been higher to meet the demands of this moment for current and future generations.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our collective perspectives with you as you commence the 118th Congress. We look forward to working with you on new and innovative proposals to ensure all Americans have opportunities for family-sustaining careers. If you have any questions or would like to learn more about the Skills First Coalition, please

contact co-chairs Rosemary Lahasky with Cengage Group, rosemary.lahasky@cengage.com or Yelena Vaynberg with IBM, yvaynbe@us.ibm.com.

Sincerely,

The Skills First Coalition

IBM Corporation
Cengage Group
Boeing
EdAssist Solutions
HP
The Presidents Forum
Randstad
RILA – Retail Industry Leaders Association
SIA – Semiconductor Industry Association
U.S. Chamber of Commerce
Western Governors University

cc: Speaker McCarthy, Democratic Leader Jeffries, Majority Leader Schumer, Republican Leader McConnell, Members of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, and Members of the Senate Health, Labor, Education, and Pensions Committee