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PENNSYLVANIA

COMMITTEES:
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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING
JOINT ECONOMIC

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20202-1475

John King, Jr.
Deputy Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, Southwest
Washington, DC 20202-1475

November 16, 2015

Dear Secretary Duncan and Deputy Secretary King:

A college degree is one of the stepping stones to the middle class and life-long economic security. However, for too many Americans, we fail to provide the opportunities to seek post-secondary education. In many cases, we fail to provide students who do enroll in school with the tools they need to succeed. I write regarding ways the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) can improve college completion for students with disabilities, a group which historically has lagged behind in post-secondary entry and attainment. In particular, I seek your assistance regarding increased access to information and improved data collection for students with disabilities to help students and families make more informed decisions. Improving data collection will provide young adults and their families with critical knowledge to transition with success.

I. Data Collection

I commend the Department on its efforts to improve access to timely and useful information about colleges and universities through the development of the College Scorecard. The data and information provided for students and families has the potential to support and improve rates of transition for all young adults from high school into the postsecondary setting. However, I am concerned that this tool is not as useful for students with disabilities because institutions of higher education are failing to complete a section of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) form that would help these students and families access information about disability services on campus.

Three generations of students with disabilities have graduated from school having received support from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and/or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Due to this sustained investment and our efforts under ESEA, students with disabilities are graduating from high school at higher rates than ever before, and many of these students are interested in postsecondary education. Sixty percent of students with disabilities continue on to some sort of postsecondary education within 8 years of high school. While this success should be celebrated, unfortunately this attendance does not translate to high college completion rates as only

40 percent of students with disabilities complete a postsecondary program compared to 52 percent of students without disabilities.¹ Research suggests one reason for this disconnect is that students with disabilities may have a difficult time navigating the college disability system and need better information about available services. As colleges admit greater numbers of students with disabilities and returning veterans with newly acquired disabilities, it is vital these students have transparent disability services information. I therefore urge the Department to make the following changes to the Part C- Disability Service section of the “Institutional Characteristics” part of the IPEDS survey:

1. Add a required question for institutions to provide the contact information for the campus disability services center. In a survey of College Navigator data conducted by the National Center for Learning Disabilities in 2013, only 6 out of 400 institutions provided this information, and there is currently no information about students with disabilities on the College Scorecard website.
2. Add a second question, modeled off the “Part B: Services and Programs for Servicemembers and Veterans” section that asks: “Which of the following are available to students with disabilities” and provides a series of common accommodation options for institutions to check such as: a full-time dedicated staff member who provides disability services, accessible housing, interpreters, note takers, and procedures to ensure students can utilize given accommodations.
3. Add a search option on the College Navigator Dashboard for “Disability Services.” This ensures the additional information added to the survey is truly user-friendly for families.

These small yet significant changes will clarify to the thousands of students with disabilities graduating high school each year and their families that disability support services are available and that college is a place they can succeed.

II. Information For Young Adults and Their Families

I was encouraged to see that for the first time Congress funded and the Department issued a request for proposal for the National Center for Information and Technical Support for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities. Self-advocacy is an essential skill for all youth, but particularly students with disabilities. We must do more in high schools to help develop these skills because as students with disabilities enter higher education and the workforce, these skills are essential to their success. This center will provide sorely needed assistance to ensure as smooth a transition as possible by equipping students with disabilities and their families with information on best practices and assistance with transition planning. It will also provide information on available support services and information on networking opportunities to improve employment and postsecondary outcomes.

¹ Post-High School Outcomes of Young Adults With Disabilities up to 8 Years After High School. Chapter 2 p. 48 National Center for Special Education Research, IES.
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncser/pubs/20113005/pdf/20113005.pdf>

I ask that you ensure the Center's work is integrated with other activities at the Department focused on improving access to information for all potential college students, such as advice on financing college, access to PELL grants and loan programs, and help with the application process. All students need clear and timely information about financial aid and application assistance, but transparency is especially important for students with disabilities as they face unique challenges with how their disability impacts the timing of these transition decisions. The Technical Assistance Center is an essential asset to the Department of Education's effort to improve college access and success.

Students seeking better education and employment outcomes should not be excluded simply because of a disability. Thank you for your partnership and continued support in ensuring students with disabilities have the opportunity for postsecondary success. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me or my staff at 202-224-6324.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Casey, Jr." in a cursive, slightly slanted script.

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator