

Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Opening Statement
The College Opportunity and Affordability Act
November 14, 2007

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Our economy is growing more diverse and more global. Our American competitiveness and ingenuity is dependent on a skilled workforce that reflects the needs of our economy.

As the first in my family to graduate from college, I realize the value and importance of a good education. It is the doorway to success and a critical piece to making our country more competitive in a global economy.

As someone who is still paying off student loans, I understand the challenges faced by parents and kids who see the cost of college rising.

While I don't agree with every provision in this bill, I am pleased that the bill we are considering today aims to improve America's competitiveness, works to make college more affordable and cracks down on the fraudulent practice of "diploma mills" where people manufacture fake diplomas.

First, this bill includes language I have worked on since last year to improve our competitiveness. Today, over half of China's undergraduate degrees are in math, science, technology and engineering. Yet, only 16 percent of American undergraduates pursue these fields. In 2002, foreign nationals accounted for over half of all engineering and math doctorates, and almost half of all computer science doctorates.

If current trends continue, by 2010, more than 90 percent of all scientists and engineers will be living in Asia, not the United States. It concerns me that South Korea will graduate more engineers than the U.S. this year. We must home-grow our own engineers, scientists and mathematicians.

To meet the demands of an increasingly advanced, global marketplace we must better train and equip our nation's workforce.

Through the Byrd Honors Scholarships, we will refocus the program to award graduate and post graduate scholarships to students studying in math, science, engineering or computer science – providing they agree to work in their field for five years after graduation.

We aren't just seeing a shortage of engineers and scientists. America must focus and train home-grown welders, plumbers, auto mechanics, lab technicians, doctors, nurses and pharmacy technicians.

In my Eastern Washington district, manufacturers are turning away job applicants because they do not have the math skills needed for precision manufacturing. These are good paying jobs, on average \$42,000 a year – and most of them come with paid medical and other benefits.

In addition to competitiveness, the rising cost of college must be addressed.

We must support loan and grant programs that give students more options and opportunities for post high school education. College tuition continues to increase, impacting students' ability to afford college.

Our focus must be to ensure that those who want to go to college have the opportunity. The best way to do that is to fund grants and loan programs to make college affordable. That is why I have fought to restore funding to the Perkins Loan Program.

Each year approximately \$8.7 million is disbursed to students at Eastern Washington colleges and universities through the Perkins Loan program. I am pleased that in the bill we are considering today, the Perkins Loan program is funded.

This bill is also helping students with disabilities, especially our veterans. I was pleased to work with my friend Congressman Altmire to make it easier for our veterans to get student loan forgiveness if they have a permanent total disability rating from the Veterans Administration.

Finally, I am pleased that we are working to eradicate the practice of diploma mills. Language in this bill increases transparency to give consumers more information and creates a task force to develop legislation that will further crack down on diploma mills.

In Spokane, purchasers of phony degrees from a local diploma mill included at least 135 US government employees – we need to protect the integrity of our higher education system and the diplomas that so many of us worked so hard to earn.

I thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for their efforts on this important bill. We must do all we can to prepare our kids for success. If we equip them with skills in high demand fields, America will continue to lead in innovation and excellence.