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Higher ed leaders in 2nd Congressional District discuss updating federal policies

By Bobbie Hayse Messenger-Inquirer 8 hrs ago

Higher education leaders in the 2nd Congressional District told U.S. Rep. Brett Guthrie during a roundtable at Kentucky Wesleyan College on Monday they want the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act to make the federal financial aid process easier for students and their families.

Guthrie, a Bowling Green Republican and chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee's Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development, asked the school officials for suggestions on how to restructure the act, which provides resources and financial aid services to colleges and universities.

"This is something I'm passionate about," he said.

The discussions included representatives from Asbury University, the Association of Independent Kentucky Colleges and Universities, Brescia University, Centre College, Elizabethtown Community & Technical College, KWC, Owensboro Community & Technical College, Southcentral Kentucky Community & Technical College, and Western Kentucky University.

Guthrie emphasized that the government wants to be helpful when it comes to dispensing federal aid.

Scott Williams, OCTC president, said making financial aid more accessible while being able to provide more loan information upfront to students would be beneficial.

Williams mentioned the experimental Pell Grant pilot program in which OCTC has been involved for the past two years that provides the federal funding for college courses for students while they are still in high school. Pell Grants are some of those provided by the federal government.

Williams said investing in such programs, and allowing more access to that kind of funding, has been helpful for students to begin and complete their programs early.

He and the other higher education leaders also suggested giving schools the power to provide some type of loan counseling before students are given loans.

Bart Darrell, KWC president, said it's a good process for Congress to include higher education in this discussion, and reiterated what many in the room were saying about making the financial aid process less complicated.

"The whole point is to get them in the classroom," he said. "Students are here to get an education -- they spend so much energy having to maneuver the financial aid process."

Guthrie said the issue about how federal aid is allocated is one he and other members of Congress will be considering. He questioned whether or not it's helpful to give students one big lump sum payment for their loans, or whether it would be better to spread out the loan disbursement over the course of a semester.

Many of the educators said they sometimes have students who receive their Pell Grant and then decide not to go to classes or finish their semesters.

"These are the things we need to figure out," Guthrie said. "The problem is when you hear all these different scenarios, that's where a simple bill becomes a complicated bill."

He will take these concerns back to Washington, D.C., he said, to see how they can be taken into account "and still accomplish the goal of still making things easier for parents, young people and adults who attend higher education."

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