

How the HEA Drug Provision Changed My Life

By Marisa Garcia

In 1998, without debate or a recorded vote, Congress passed the Higher Education Act Drug Provision, which strips financial aid from students with prior drug convictions. Since that time, more than 160,500 students have been affected by the HEA Drug Provision.

I am one of those students.

In January 2000 I was caught with a marijuana pipe. I plead guilty, paid my fine, and thought I'd be able to move on with my life. But when it came time to fill out the FAFSA, I came across a question asking if I'd ever been convicted of a drug charge.

Although my mom was disappointed, she didn't want my mistake to keep me out of school. But without financial aid it was nearly impossible. Luckily my mom was refinancing our house at the time, so she had some extra money to help pay tuition. I had to charge my books on her credit card.

Though this created an immense burden on my family, I had a support structure to help me get through this. Many others are not so fortunate.

Some politicians are suggesting that the law should only be rewritten instead of repealed. Under this proposal, thousands of students like me would be left behind.

Many students from low- and middle-income families would still face obstacles to attaining their degrees. Wealthier students can afford tuition on their own and don't have to worry about losing access to college because of a drug conviction. The Congressman who wrote this law, Rep. Mark Souder (IN-3), even remarked that the Drug Provision wouldn't affect his own son since he doesn't rely on financial aid to go to school.

It's time for Congress to admit that passing the HEA Drug Provision was a horrible mistake. Only full repeal of this law will allow students like me an equal chance to go to college.

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