

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051
MINORITY (202) 225-5074
<https://oversight.house.gov>

October 5, 2021

The Honorable Noe Ortega
Secretary
Pennsylvania State Department of Education
333 Market Street, Tenth Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17126

Dear Secretary Ortega:

The Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy seeks information about a troubling practice among institutions of higher education (IHEs): withholding copies of transcripts from students who have unpaid bills. When IHEs withhold transcripts, students cannot apply course credits they have already earned toward their degree at a new institution, or use their transcripts to help obtain a job. As a result, some students end up saddled with debt, and without a college degree or a job that will help them pay off that debt. Roughly 6.6 million students may have what experts call “stranded credits” due to debts, including some as low as \$25.¹

Unfortunately, withholding transcripts is a common practice of IHEs. In a 2016 survey conducted by the National Association of College and University Business Officers, 98% of respondents said that they withhold transcripts from students to collect debts. When the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) conducted a similar survey in 2020, 95% of respondents admitted they withheld transcripts for “one or more reasons.” Shockingly, 64% of respondents in the AACRAO survey said they withheld transcripts even if students owed under \$25.²

One study found that students with stranded credits are more likely to be low-income, and from underserved minority populations, exacerbating racial and socioeconomic inequities in our country’s higher-education system.³

¹ Julia Karon et al., *Solving Stranded Credits: Assessing the Scope and Effects of Transcript Withholding on Students, States, and Institutions*, Ithaka S+R (Oct. 5, 2020) (online at <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/solving-stranded-credits/>).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

Furthermore, withholding transcripts is not an effective debt-collection tool. One study found that Ohio public universities recovered less than seven cents on the dollar from current and former students, even when employing aggressive debt collection practices.⁴

In response to mounting criticism, some institutions have stopped holding transcripts hostage.⁵ California recently passed legislation banning public and private IHEs from withholding student transcripts due to unpaid debts. Other states have considered similar legislation.⁶ However, in most states, students have no such protections.

For these reasons, by October 19, 2021, please provide the following documents and information from January 1, 2016, to the present, for all public two-year and/or four-year IHEs:

1. For each transcript withheld by an IHE due to an unpaid balance, please produce documents sufficient to show:
 - a. institution name;
 - b. institution type (two-year or four-year);
 - c. year in which the transcript was withheld;
 - d. race or ethnicity of student whose transcript was withheld;
 - e. whether student whose transcript was withheld was PELL-grant eligible;
 - f. unpaid balance amount resulting in the withheld transcript;
 - g. whether the unpaid balance included a debt to the institution, a federal loan debt, or both; and
 - h. amount of money recouped based on the withheld transcript;
2. A list of all policies and/or practices related to the withholding of transcripts at IHEs due to unpaid balances, including descriptions of any unwritten policies and/or practices, and copies of such policies and/or practices; and

⁴ *States Step in to Stop Colleges Holding Transcripts Ransom for Unpaid Bills*, National Public Radio (Apr. 8, 2021) (online at www.npr.org/2021/04/03/982676353/states-step-in-to-stop-colleges-holding-transcripts-ransom-for-unpaid-bills).

⁵ *City University of New York Reverses Its Policy on Withholding Transcripts over Unpaid Bills*, Hechinger Report (Aug. 13, 2021) (online at <https://hechingerreport.org/city-university-of-new-york-reverses-its-policy-on-withholding-transcripts-over-unpaid-bills/>).

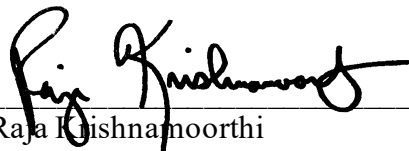
⁶ *States Step in to Stop Colleges Holding Transcripts Ransom for Unpaid Bills*, National Public Radio (Apr. 8, 2021) (online at www.npr.org/2021/04/03/982676353/states-step-in-to-stop-colleges-holding-transcripts-ransom-for-unpaid-bills); Julia Karon and James Dean Ward, *A State-by-State Snapshot of Stranded Credits Data and Policy*, Ithaka S+R (May 4, 2021) (online at <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/a-state-by-state-snapshot-of-stranded-credits-data-and-policy/>).

3. All communications, including emails and other correspondence, to or from (a) employees of the Pennsylvania State Department of Education or (b) employees of any IHE related to the development and implementation of any policy or practice produced or described in response to Request 2.

If any of the documents or information responsive to Requests 1–3 are not in your possession, custody, or control, please identify, by October 19, 2021, any entity or entities with access to the relevant documents or information.

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. An attachment to this letter provides additional instructions for responding to the Committee’s requests. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Subcommittee staff at (202) 225-5051.

Sincerely,



Raja Krishnamoorthi
Chairman

Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy

Enclosure

cc: The Honorable Michael Cloud, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy

Responding to Oversight Committee Document Requests

1. In complying with this request, produce all responsive documents that are in your possession, custody, or control, whether held by you or your past or present agents, employees, and representatives acting on your behalf. Produce all documents that you have a legal right to obtain, that you have a right to copy, or to which you have access, as well as documents that you have placed in the temporary possession, custody, or control of any third party.
2. Requested documents, and all documents reasonably related to the requested documents, should not be destroyed, altered, removed, transferred, or otherwise made inaccessible to the Committee.
3. In the event that any entity, organization, or individual denoted in this request is or has been known by any name other than that herein denoted, the request shall be read also to include that alternative identification.
4. The Committee's preference is to receive documents in electronic form (i.e., CD, memory stick, thumb drive, or secure file transfer) in lieu of paper productions.
5. Documents produced in electronic format should be organized, identified, and indexed electronically.
6. Electronic document productions should be prepared according to the following standards:
 - a. The production should consist of single page Tagged Image File ("TIF"), files accompanied by a Concordance-format load file, an Opticon reference file, and a file defining the fields and character lengths of the load file.
 - b. Document numbers in the load file should match document Bates numbers and TIF file names.
 - c. If the production is completed through a series of multiple partial productions, field names and file order in all load files should match.
 - d. All electronic documents produced to the Committee should include the following fields of metadata specific to each document, and no modifications should be made to the original metadata:

BEGDOC, ENDDOC, TEXT, BEGATTACH, ENDATTACH, PAGECOUNT, CUSTODIAN, RECORDTYPE, DATE, TIME, SENTDATE, SENTTIME, BEGINDATE, BEGINTIME, ENDDATE, ENDTIME, AUTHOR, FROM, CC, TO, BCC, SUBJECT, TITLE, FILENAME, FILEEXT, FILESIZE, DATECREATED, TIMECREATED, DATELASTMOD, TIMELASTMOD,

INTMSGID, INTMSGHEADER, NATIVELINK, INTFILPATH, EXCEPTION,
BEGATTACH.

7. Documents produced to the Committee should include an index describing the contents of the production. To the extent more than one CD, hard drive, memory stick, thumb drive, zip file, box, or folder is produced, each should contain an index describing its contents.
8. Documents produced in response to this request shall be produced together with copies of file labels, dividers, or identifying markers with which they were associated when the request was served.
9. When you produce documents, you should identify the paragraph(s) or request(s) in the Committee's letter to which the documents respond.
10. The fact that any other person or entity also possesses non-identical or identical copies of the same documents shall not be a basis to withhold any information.
11. The pendency of or potential for litigation shall not be a basis to withhold any information.
12. In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(d), the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and any statutory exemptions to FOIA shall not be a basis for withholding any information.
13. Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552a(b)(9), the Privacy Act shall not be a basis for withholding information.
14. If compliance with the request cannot be made in full by the specified return date, compliance shall be made to the extent possible by that date. An explanation of why full compliance is not possible shall be provided along with any partial production.
15. In the event that a document is withheld on the basis of privilege, provide a privilege log containing the following information concerning any such document: (a) every privilege asserted; (b) the type of document; (c) the general subject matter; (d) the date, author, addressee, and any other recipient(s); (e) the relationship of the author and addressee to each other; and (f) the basis for the privilege(s) asserted.
16. If any document responsive to this request was, but no longer is, in your possession, custody, or control, identify the document (by date, author, subject, and recipients), and explain the circumstances under which the document ceased to be in your possession, custody, or control.
17. If a date or other descriptive detail set forth in this request referring to a document is inaccurate, but the actual date or other descriptive detail is known to you or is otherwise apparent from the context of the request, produce all documents that would be responsive as if the date or other descriptive detail were correct.

18. This request is continuing in nature and applies to any newly-discovered information. Any record, document, compilation of data, or information not produced because it has not been located or discovered by the return date shall be produced immediately upon subsequent location or discovery.
19. All documents shall be Bates-stamped sequentially and produced sequentially.
20. Two sets of each production shall be delivered, one set to the Majority Staff and one set to the Minority Staff. When documents are produced to the Committee, production sets shall be delivered to the Majority Staff in Room 2157 of the Rayburn House Office Building and the Minority Staff in Room 2105 of the Rayburn House Office Building.
21. Upon completion of the production, submit a written certification, signed by you or your counsel, stating that: (1) a diligent search has been completed of all documents in your possession, custody, or control that reasonably could contain responsive documents; and (2) all documents located during the search that are responsive have been produced to the Committee.

Definitions

1. The term “document” means any written, recorded, or graphic matter of any nature whatsoever, regardless of how recorded, and whether original or copy, including, but not limited to, the following: memoranda, reports, expense reports, books, manuals, instructions, financial reports, data, working papers, records, notes, letters, notices, confirmations, telegrams, receipts, appraisals, pamphlets, magazines, newspapers, prospectuses, communications, electronic mail (email), contracts, cables, notations of any type of conversation, telephone call, meeting or other inter-office or intra-office communication, bulletins, printed matter, computer printouts, teletypes, invoices, transcripts, diaries, analyses, returns, summaries, minutes, bills, accounts, estimates, projections, comparisons, messages, correspondence, press releases, circulars, financial statements, reviews, opinions, offers, studies and investigations, questionnaires and surveys, and work sheets (and all drafts, preliminary versions, alterations, modifications, revisions, changes, and amendments of any of the foregoing, as well as any attachments or appendices thereto), and graphic or oral records or representations of any kind (including without limitation, photographs, charts, graphs, microfiche, microfilm, videotape, recordings and motion pictures), and electronic, mechanical, and electric records or representations of any kind (including, without limitation, tapes, cassettes, disks, and recordings) and other written, printed, typed, or other graphic or recorded matter of any kind or nature, however produced or reproduced, and whether preserved in writing, film, tape, disk, videotape, or otherwise. A document bearing any notation not a part of the original text is to be considered a separate document. A draft or non-identical copy is a separate document within the meaning of this term.
2. The term “communication” means each manner or means of disclosure or exchange of information, regardless of means utilized, whether oral, electronic, by document or otherwise, and whether in a meeting, by telephone, facsimile, mail, releases, electronic

message including email (desktop or mobile device), text message, instant message, MMS or SMS message, message application, or otherwise.

3. The terms “and” and “or” shall be construed broadly and either conjunctively or disjunctively to bring within the scope of this request any information that might otherwise be construed to be outside its scope. The singular includes plural number, and vice versa. The masculine includes the feminine and neutral genders.
4. The term “including” shall be construed broadly to mean “including, but not limited to.”
5. The term “Company” means the named legal entity as well as any units, firms, partnerships, associations, corporations, limited liability companies, trusts, subsidiaries, affiliates, divisions, departments, branches, joint ventures, proprietorships, syndicates, or other legal, business or government entities over which the named legal entity exercises control or in which the named entity has any ownership whatsoever.
6. The term “identify,” when used in a question about individuals, means to provide the following information: (a) the individual’s complete name and title; (b) the individual’s business or personal address and phone number; and (c) any and all known aliases.
7. The term “related to” or “referring or relating to,” with respect to any given subject, means anything that constitutes, contains, embodies, reflects, identifies, states, refers to, deals with, or is pertinent to that subject in any manner whatsoever.
8. The term “employee” means any past or present agent, borrowed employee, casual employee, consultant, contractor, de facto employee, detailee, fellow, independent contractor, intern, joint adventurer, loaned employee, officer, part-time employee, permanent employee, provisional employee, special government employee, subcontractor, or any other type of service provider.
9. The term “individual” means all natural persons and all persons or entities acting on their behalf.