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By: Rep. Joe Courtney

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In the midst of the most desperate threat to our nation, President Abraham Lincoln looked beyond the dire present of the Civil War and signed a groundbreaking national commitment to higher education. On July 2, 1862, the Morrill Act created the land-grant system for state educational institutions to foster engineering and agricultural science.

From coast to coast — from the University of Florida to the University of Alaska — every state has benefited from Lincoln's foresight and a supportive, bipartisan group of legislators. For generations, that was how Washington looked on higher education.

Federal investment in higher education was always supported by bipartisan agreements. In fact, the two workhorses of higher education funding — the Pell Grant program and Stafford student loan program, which helps middle-class families pay for college — are named after a Democrat and Republican, respectively. In the 150 years since Lincoln signed the Morrill Act, our leaders understood that investing in young people is the real secret to U.S. success. More than our military might, financial wealth or natural resources, American innovation and creativity have sparked this country's fire.

The day before the Morrill Act turns 150, however, the bipartisan legacy Lincoln established could retreat. Without congressional action, on July 1, the interest rate on subsidized Stafford student loans is due to double from 3.4 percent to 6.8 percent. Against the backdrop of a tough economy and spiraling college costs, the rate was lowered to 3.4 percent in 2007, when President George W. Bush signed into law the College Cost Reduction and Access Act, which passed the House with the support of more than 200 Democrats and 77 Republicans.

President Barack Obama in his State of the Union address called on Congress to protect those lower rates. With college tuition skyrocketing and the purchasing power of federal financial aid receding, students already have serious difficulties financing higher education.

Young Americans are taking on dangerously high levels of student debt. Student loan debt now exceeds credit card debt and auto loan debt, according to the Federal Reserve, and surpassed \$1 trillion. Americans took out more than \$100 billion in student loans last year, for the first time in our history.

This trajectory of borrowing is unsustainable. And it will only get worse if subsidized Stafford student loan rates double on July 1. If Congress does nothing, according to the nonpartisan U.S. Public Interest Research Groups, borrowers taking out the maximum \$23,000 in subsidized student loans will see their debt burden increase by an estimated \$5,000 over a 10-year repayment period and \$11,000 over a 20-year repayment period.

Despite the long history of bipartisan cooperation on higher education, during the three months since the president called for action, Republican leaders repeatedly dismissed this issue. They did not schedule one hearing or markup — or engage in any dialogue with the minority to fix this problem.

My bill to prevent rates from doubling racked up 150 co-sponsors. But it did not win support from a single Republican until April 25.

The strong support for addressing the student loan problem has finally shaken loose the House Republican leadership. Speaker John Boehner's abrupt turnaround on April 26 to support student loans follows months of GOP intransigence.

Of course, the GOP "plan" to pay for it by defunding women and children's health services is hardly a responsible solution. But at least they have conceded the need to act.

With just weeks to act before student loan rates will double, I urge the party of Lincoln to follow the example of its founder — and make a bipartisan investment in higher education a priority again.

Rep. Joe Courtney (D-Conn.) served on the former House Education and Labor Committee, now the Education and the Workforce Committee, until January 2011. He introduced the Student Loan Affordability Act, which would cap subsidized Stafford loan rates, on Jan. 25.

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