



2026 Policy and Talent Development Summit

Preliminary Program Agenda

(As of January 28, 2026. Schedule subject to change.)

Wednesday, February 11, 2026

(Pre-Meeting Activities)

9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

NCHER Members Visit Capitol Hill and Agencies

NCHER members are encouraged to make appointments with their Congressional delegations, especially those on the authorization, appropriations, and tax committees, to talk about our shared advocacy priorities. The NCHER team can help members make appointments with House and Senate offices.

1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Registration Open

2:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

NCHER Board of Directors Meeting

The NCHER Board will meet to discuss the trade association's finances, strategic direction, and plans to expand its sphere of influence in 2026. *The meeting is open to all NCHER members.*

Thursday, February 12, 2026

(General Sessions)

7:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Registration Open

7:30 a.m. – 8:30 a.m.

Continental Breakfast

8:30 a.m. – 8:45 a.m.

Welcome

The NCHER leadership will welcome members to the Summit.

8:45 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.

Generational Attitudes on Postsecondary Education, Debt, and Career Earnings

What value do Americans place on education after high school? Are students concerned about costs and student debt? What makes students drop out or delay enrollment? In this session, a panel of experts will relay what we know and don't know about generational perceptions about the value of formal education after high school.

Moderator

Alex Ricci, President, NCHER

Speakers

Rachel Fishman, Director, Higher Education, New America

Jack Wallace, Director of Lender and Government Relations, Yrefy

9:30 a.m. – 10:20 a.m.

Congressional Staff Panel

Republican and Democratic Congressional staff will discuss their approach to further *Higher Education Act* reform following passage of H.R. 1, the *One Big Beautiful Bill Act*. Attendees will hear how H.R. 1 shifted their bosses' higher education priorities for the rest of the Congress and whether they anticipate further HEA reforms this year.

Moderator

Alex Ricci, President, NCHER

Speakers

Isaiah Knox, Policy Advisor, House Committee on Education and Workforce

Amaris Benavides, Professional Staff Member, House Committee on Education and Workforce

Patrick Fox, Education Policy Advisor, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

Sara Garcia, Deputy Education Policy Director, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

10:20 a.m. – 10:35 a.m.

Break

10:35 a.m. – 11:30 p.m.

Leveraging Financial Networks to Preserve and Increase Student Access to Higher Education

The *One Big Beautiful Bill Act* institutes new loan limits for graduate students and parents borrowing on behalf of their dependent children. This change could lead to an unanticipated financial gap and hurt students' ability to access postsecondary education. Stakeholders are rising to the challenge and building new programs, partnerships, and collaborations to help keep the doors of education open to students of all backgrounds. Learn about several different approaches stakeholders are taking to navigate this transition.

Moderator

Nancy Conneely, Vice President, Policy, AccessLex Institute

Speakers

Jordan Matsudaira, Director, Postsecondary Education & Economics Research (PEER) Center, American University

Abigail Seldin, Chief Growth Officer, Scholarship America

Leah Young, Student Success Resources Lead & Financial Aid Partnerships, Juno

Sean Steinmarc, Chief Executive Officer, TFC Tuition Financing

11:30 p.m. – 12:00 p.m.

What Is Next for the Office of Federal Student Aid

Richard Lucas, Acting Chief Operating Officer at the Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) at the Department of Education will give an overview of FSA's actions over the past year and will preview FSAs priorities and what to expect in 2026 and beyond.

12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Lunch Break

1:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Keynote Address – The New Science of Creativity

Sarah Lagrotteria, Head Educator, Just Bloom School and
Director of Operation: Human

Keynote Sponsor



In 2021, the US Army brought us in to train their Special operations leaders — to help their best leaders get better. Special Ops worked with our lab to develop new neuroscience-backed leadership training for which they awarded us a Public Commendation Medal in 2023. In this interactive keynote, Just Bloom School co-founder Sarah Lagrotteria shares how this new science of creative leadership works across industries, helping Green Berets innovate in the field; business executives combat burnout; and school children retain and continue to grow their creativity and resilience past the age where both traditionally begin to decline. The secret? Developing the part of your brain that AI cannot replicate.

2:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.

Refreshment Break

2:30 p.m. – 3:15 p.m.

Strengthening College Affordability with Workforce Partnerships

H.R. 1 made it clear that Congress expects employers to play a larger role in helping students access and afford postsecondary education. What might that look like? How have states, employers, and institutions laid the foundation to keep college affordable for students from all backgrounds? This panel conversation attempts to answer some of these questions and suggest models and solutions that can alleviate the pressure of college costs.

Moderator/Presenter

Bryan Ashton, Chief Strategy and Growth Officer, Trellis Company

Speakers

David Kafafian, Chief Operating Officer, Clasp

Michele Joo Shank, VP Impact and Senior Counsel, Ascent

Dr. Annie Straka, Associate Dean and Associate Professor, College of Cooperative Education and Professional Studies, University of Cincinnati

3:15 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Update on Implementation of H.R. 1, the *One Big Beautiful Bill Act*

It's been seven months since President Trump signed H.R. 1 into law and overhauled the federal student aid programs. A group of practitioners are here to give the latest update on how they are adapting to the changing policy conditions and working to make sure reforms are operable by July 1, 2026.

Moderator

Alex Ricci, President, NCHER

Speakers

Scott Buchanan, Executive Director, Student Loan Servicing Alliance

Karen McCarthy, Vice President of Public Policy and Federal Relations, National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators

Tim Carlton, Legislative Director, National Governors Association

4:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

The Future of Learning and Work

A global economy and a new age of Artificial Intelligence require innovation and forward-thinking. Hear from leaders ushering in the future of education and work.

Moderator

Alex Ricci, President, NCHER

Speakers

Carlo Salerno, Managing Director of Education Insights, The Burning Glass Institute

Heather McKay, Senior Vice President of Employer Engagement, Executive Director of the Strada Institute for the Future of Work, Strada Education Foundation

Rosemary Lahasky, Vice President of U.S. Government Relations, Pearson

5:00 p.m.

Summit Wrap-Up and Closing Remarks

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