

Chairman Lamar Alexander – Opening Statement
Time to Finish Fixing the FAFSA
U.S. Senate HELP Committee – Thursday, September 17, 2020

I'd like to begin today by thanking Senator Murray for her kind words at our hearing on Tuesday.

Four years ago, Senator Murray and I received the Friend of Education award from the National Education Association for our work together to pass the law fixing No Child Left Behind. It was the first time in 30 years the NEA had given the award to a Republican. It was the second time in 4 years they'd given the award to Senator Murray.

We may seem like an unlikely pair, but Senator Murray was a preschool teacher and I was raised by a kindergarten teacher, and we have found a lot of common ground because we both learned that early childhood lesson: Play well together.

An indispensable part of our success is that her staff director Evan Schatz, and David Cleary, my staff director, as well as other members of our staff, have also learned to work well together and made it easier for us to succeed.

The laws that we have passed in this committee over the past 6 years would not have happened without Senator Murray, whose leadership and effectiveness helped yield:

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, which President Obama called “a Christmas miracle” and which affects 100,000 schools and 50 million children

The 21st Century Cures Act of 2016, which Senator McConnell said was the “most important act” of that Congress—because it will speed up lifesaving cures for diseases from Alzheimers to cancer to the flu and has been helpful in driving research on COVID-19

The Opioid Crisis Response Act of 2018

And the FUTURE Act last year, which began the process of simplifying the dreaded FAFSA forms filled out by 20 million American families each year – work that we are discussing today and I hope we can complete this year – and also made permanent funding for the historically black colleges and universities so they had a reliable source of funding year after year, permanently.

Senator Murray has been extraordinarily effective. She commands respect on her side of the aisle and is able to create an environment in which bills can become laws.

When she and I first began the process of writing the legislation to fix No Child Left Behind, she came and suggested that we start by working together to write a bill. That hadn't been my plan, but I took her advice, we wrote it together, and it turned out to be good advice.

That bill had many complicated and contentious issues – there were crocodiles at every corner – but Senator Murray helped find creative ways to conquer those challenges and proceed to the finish.

One of the most special times for me in my 18 years in the senate was on April 16, 2015, when we called the roll in this committee on the bill fixing No Child Left Behind and – in a committee of so many different points of view – every single senator voted yes to recommend that bill to the full senate.

That type of bipartisan support could not have happened without the leadership and support of Senator Murray and her staff.

We have had some disappointments too, and certainly differences of opinion, but Senator Murray has always been willing to sit down and hash out a path forward, even on the most contentious issues.

I often say that it's hard to get to the United States Senate and it's even harder to stay here, so you might as well get something done while you're here.

Senator Murray is that kind of senator – the kind who's here to get something done. And Americans are fortunate that the result is new laws to tackle the opioid crisis, spur new cures for diseases, make it easier to attend and afford college, and help 50 million children in 100,000 public schools.

I thank her for her partnership and her leadership on some of the most important issues of our time.

Introduction:

20 million students and their families are in the middle of what is likely the strangest first semester of college in a century.

Almost everything has changed for students – except for one thing –students still have to answer 108 questions on the dreaded FAFSA form.

For years now, I've carted around the FAFSA as a prop to make the case for simplifying it – but it's no joke, especially this year.

Many students are questioning their investment in a college education at a time when many classes are only offered online. Many of the low-income students who would benefit most economically from college long term are putting it off all together.

There was already an 8% drop in the number of black undergraduate students enrolled in summer sessions, compared with last summer's enrollment, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

The president of Southwest Tennessee Community College in Memphis told me years ago that he loses 1,500 students a semester because of the complexity of the FAFSA.

Imagine how much less motivated anyone is to fill out those 108 FAFSA questions this year.

This is a form that is especially difficult for students who are homeless, in foster care, or living with grandparents to complete.

Homeless students have to prove they are homeless. Foster care students may not have access to all of the information required to complete the FAFSA and students living with their grandparents often are still dependents of their parents and obtaining information from their parents may be difficult.

These are the very students federal aid is meant to help, and this is exactly the kind of economy in which a college education proves its value.

History of Efforts to Fix the FAFSA:

It's not that Senator Murray and I haven't been trying to help fix the FAFSA.

When four of today's witnesses appeared before this committee almost seven years ago, they universally agreed that the FAFSA was an obstacle to students attending college. They said we could award Pell Grants using just two simple variables – family size and income.

Senator Bennet and I then had the same reaction: If there is that much agreement on how to make it easier for nearly 20 million families to apply for federal aid, why don't we actually do it?

So, Senator Bennet and I set about to turn the lengthy FAFSA into a postcard. The result was the FAST Act.

Senator Murray and I worked with the Obama Administration to allow students to fill out the FAFSA using their tax information from two years before they enroll in college, instead of one, so they could file in the fall, rather than having to wait until spring.

The Trump Administration created an app so students and families can file the FAFSA on their cell phones or tablets.

The FUTURE Act, which Senator Murray and I sponsored and became law last year, reduced the FAFSA by up to 22 questions and eliminated the bureaucratic nightmare created by requiring students to give the federal government the same information twice.

Stopping the federal government from asking for your tax information twice—once for the IRS then once for the Department of Education—also helps prevent most applicants from being selected by the Department of Education for income verification caused by mistakes, which many parents and counselors have told me is a bigger burden than filling out the 108 questions in the first place.

So today we've got a piece of legislation that would finish the job. It has broad bipartisan support and is based on recommendations that 4 of today's witnesses gave us nearly seven years ago.

Time to Finish Fixing the FAFSA:

Here's what I mean when I say it's time to finish fixing the FAFSA:

The bipartisan legislation Senator Jones and I have proposed would:

1. Reduce total questions on the FAFSA from 108 questions to a maximum of 33 questions
2. End the Department of Education's lengthy financial data verification process by removing unnecessary financial questions and instead using only the financial data that will come directly from the IRS starting in 2023-2024 school year, a change Congress made in the FUTURE Act, which passed last year.
3. Continue to collect and provide states and colleges with the information they need to determine State and Institutional aid.
4. Create a simple Pell Grant eligibility formula so that middle and high school students (and anyone interested in applying for aid) will know how much Pell Grant money they have to go to college.
5. And it does something else that Sen Murray has been working on for 20 years—makes it easier for students who are homeless, in the foster system or not in touch with their parents. Our bill allows these students to apply for aid as independent students, making the application process for them much simpler.

As a result of these changes, Congress would immediately enable more students to receive Pell grants and many more to receive the maximum Pell Grant:

An additional 420,000 students would qualify for Pell Grants each year, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

An additional 1.6 million students would qualify to receive the maximum Pell Grant award each year

Students from single parent families would benefit more from Pell grants because the formula would account for the greater needs of these families

In addition to Senator Murray – much of this work has been done by Senator Bennett and Senator Jones, and others who have helped with this work including Senator Booker (D-N.J.), Senator Burr (R-N.C.), Senator Collins (R-Maine), Senator King (I-Maine) and former Senator Isakson (R-Ga.).

During these last several years, we've worked carefully with various organizations to make sure our proposals don't cause any unexpected problems and, as a result, we have the support of:

- National Association for Student Aid Administrators
- National College Attainment Network
- State Higher Education Executive Officers Organization
- School House Connections
- National Association of State Student Grant Aid Programs
- Each of the regional higher education compacts

Conclusion:

After nearly 7 years of work on these issues, it all boils down to this: it makes no sense to make it this complicated to apply for federal aid for college.

It makes no sense to discourage the very students Congress wants to encourage to attend college and benefit from federal financial aid.

In Tennessee, former Governor Bill Haslam created the Tennessee PROMISE and Tennessee Reconnect programs to provide 2 years of free community college to any Tennessean without a degree—they just have to fill out a FAFSA.

Governor Haslam told me that the FAFSA was the single biggest barrier to helping more Tennesseans take advantage of the opportunity for two free years of higher education pursue

The right time to finish this job is now – a time when college students and their families are under so much pressure and facing so much uncertainty, especially homeless students, students in foster care, and those living with grandparents.

I hope we can pass bipartisan legislation to do so by the end of this year.