

Statement of Senator Dean Heller
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee
Hearing on Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act: Combating Campus Sexual Assault
July 29, 2015—9:00am

Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Murray, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Campus Accountability and Safety Act. I am grateful for the committee's attention to the important issue of combating sexual assault on our nation's college and university campuses.

I am proud to have worked alongside Senators McCaskill, Gillibrand, Ayotte, Grassley, Blumenthal, Rubio, and Warner to introduce our legislation that will address the shortcomings of current law and ensure all students working towards a college degree are able to focus on their studies instead of worrying about the threat of being sexually assaulted.

When we first started working on this legislation, it was important for me to sit down with stakeholders in Nevada to build a workable proposal. This is why last June, I held a roundtable in Las Vegas to receive input from Title IX coordinators, police officers, and victim's advocacy groups on ways to prevent sexual assault and assist student survivors. I brought their ideas back to Washington and much of their feedback helped us craft our first bill. And this is only one example of our outreach.

Since the first introduction of our bill, our bipartisan working group continued to meet with stakeholders across the nation, including survivor groups, students, colleges and universities, law enforcement, and others who helped strengthen and improve our new bill that we introduced earlier this year.

From the beginning, we have also worked diligently with your committee to ensure our final bill incorporated comments from experts on our nation's education system. Our working group strongly believes we have put together a comprehensive product that will provide our schools with the tools they need to make our campuses safer.

I know for me, and for many parents, watching your children go off to college is one of the proudest moments in your life. But parents want to be confident that their sons and daughters will be safe and have access to the resources they need from their schools. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

Today, there are over 100 colleges and universities under investigation for violations of Title IX in their handling of campus sexual violence. And while we have all seen news story after news story about these tragic events, the reality is there are many more survivor stories that have not been heard.

Sexual assault is a crime that more often than not goes unreported, which is one of the reasons why data provided by our nation's institutions simply do not reflect the prevalence of this crime. In fact, there are many colleges and universities that have reported zero incidences of sexual offenses to the federal government.

I strongly believe one of the most important provisions of our bill is the campus climate survey. This survey will improve access to accurate, campus-level data by allowing students to anonymously share their experiences related to sexual assault.

Under our bill, schools will give their students an anonymous, online survey to gauge the scope of sexual assault on campus and the effectiveness of current institutional policies on this issue. The Department of Education will be responsible for developing this survey, as well as picking up its cost. Schools just need to ensure an adequate, random, and representative sample of students take the survey.

The survey results will be reported to Congress and published on the Department of Education's website. Because this survey will be standardized, the American public will be able to compare the campus climate of all schools.

As a father of four children, I wish I had access to this kind of information when my kids were preparing to attend college. And, now as a grandfather of two, my hope is that when they grow up and go off to school, our nation's campuses will be safer than ever before.

The campus climate survey will be a useful, educational tool for both students and parents, as well as an invaluable resource for institutions to help create or enhance efforts to prevent sexual assault, assist survivors of this crime, and improve campus safety overall.

This provision is just one example of how Congress can act today and make ending this crime a priority. While Congress cannot legislate away sexual assault, and no bill is perfect, I believe the Campus Accountability and Safety Act is a step in the right direction towards combating this heinous crime and guaranteeing survivors have access to the resources they need and deserve.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to continuing our work together to address the issue of campus sexual assault as part of reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.