

Draft Floor Speech

Introduction of the Student Aid Improvement Act

September 26, 2019

Introduction:

- For the last five years, Senator Murray, the Ranking Member on our Senate education committee and I have been working on a bipartisan reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.
- We have held 30 hearings on everything from holding colleges accountable to campus safety to simplifying the student aid process.
- We have yet to reach an agreement on some issues, but on several important issues, these hearings have resulted in a number of bipartisan proposals to make college more affordable and worth students' time and money.
- I am committed to continuing to work with Senator Murray to develop a larger, more comprehensive bipartisan bill, but right now, we have an opportunity to enact a package including several of the bipartisan proposals that have come from our process.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities:

- At the end of the month, the legislation providing the funding for Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other Minority Serving Institutions expires.
- Everyone wants to ensure that our Historically Black College and Universities and other Minority Serving Institutions continue to receive federal funding.
- The House of Representatives has passed legislation temporarily funding these colleges and universities for two years.
- But instead of a short-term patch we should pass a long-term solution to give certainty to college presidents and their students.
- Congress has the time to do this.
- While the legislation expires at the end of September, the U.S. Department of Education has sent a letter assuring Congress that there is enough funding for the program to continue through the next fiscal year.
- In the meantime, Congress should reach a long-term solution to support these important programs.

The Student Aid Improvement Act:

- That is why I am today introducing a long-term solution to permanently provide funding for Minority Serving Institutions, including the six Historically Black Colleges and Universities in Tennessee.
- This solution would be part of a package of eight bipartisan higher education bills drafted by 35 Senators—20 Democrat, 15 Republican.
- This package of bills will make it easier for millions of students to get a college education by simplifying the Federal Application for Student Aid, providing Pell grants to parole-eligible prisoners, allowing Pell grants to be used for short-term programs, and increasing the maximum Pell grant award.
- Here are eight bipartisan provisions that I believe should be included in this package:
 - **One** –Provides permanent mandatory funding, \$255 million each year, for Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other Minority Serving Institutions.
 - **Two – FAFSA simplification:** Reduces the number of questions on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid from 108 to 17-30, as Senators **Jones and I** have proposed. This also means that 250,000 students will now be eligible for a Pell grant – and an additional 1.3 million students will be eligible for the maximum Pell grant award.
 - **Three – Pell grants for prisoners:** Allows incarcerated individuals who are eligible for parole to use a Pell grant for prison-education programs – this is something a number of senators want to do, including Senators **Schatz, Lee and Durbin;**
 - **Four – Short-Term Pell:** A proposal by Senators **Portman, Kaine, Cardin, Gillibrand, Hassan, Klobuchar, Stabenow, Baldwin, Brown, Capito, Coons, Ernst, Jones, Moran, Shaheen, Sinema, Smith, Wicker and Braun** to allow students to use their Pell grants at high-quality short-term skills and job training programs that lead to credentialing and employment in high-demand fields like health care or cybersecurity;
 - **Five – Simplify aid letters:** Ensures students can understand their financial aid offers, a proposal from Senators **Grassley, Smith, Cassidy, Ernst, Hassan, Jones, Klobuchar, Manchin, and Rubio.**
 - **Six –Increases the maximum Pell grant award.**

- **Seven** – To pay for this package, we have a bipartisan proposal that both President Obama and President Trump have supported, which is to ensure that students who opt to pay back their loans under the income driven repayment plan pay the full 10 percent of their discretionary income as the law intended.
- **And eight:** A proposal by Senator **Murray and me**, along with Senators **Collins, Cornyn, Gardner, Hassan, King, Stabenow, Tillis and Whitehouse** to allow students to answer up to 22 questions on the current FAFSA with one click by using data the government already has from the IRS. This would also reduce the burdensome verification process. The Senate has already passed this once.
 - This provision is within the jurisdiction of the Senate Finance Committee, and will be included once the package is ready for consideration on the Senate floor.
- **In addition**, there are at least three other bipartisan provisions that, with a little more discussion and work, I believe should be included in this package.
- These three provisions have the support of 30 Senators from both sides of the aisle:
 - **The College Transparency Act**, which creates a **Student unit record system** to help students and families compare how students performed at specific colleges and universities, from Senators **Warren, Cassidy, Baldwin, Brown, Casey, Cornyn, Duckworth, Ernst, Gardner, Graham, Grassley, Hassan, Hyde-Smith, Jones, Kaine, Klobuchar, Murphy, Perdue, Roberts, Romney, Scott, Sinema, Smith, Sullivan, Tillis, Toomey, and Whitehouse**.
 - I am for it and there's substantial bipartisan support for it in both the House and the Senate. And we will work to include it as we move forward.
 - **The Education of the Deaf Act**, which simply reauthorizes Gallaudet University here in Washington, D.C. and has a long history of bipartisan support.
 - **And the Educational Opportunity and Success Act** which reauthorizes the TRIO program which helps low income, first generation, and other disadvantaged students enroll and succeed in a college or university program and has the support of Senators **Collins, Baldwin, Capito, and Tester**.

Conclusion:

- To continue funding for Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other Minority Serving Institutions, the House of Representatives took a shortcut and rushed a bill to the floor that has serious problems.
 - First, it's not a bill that can pass the Senate.
 - Second, it only funds HBCUs and other Minority Serving Institutions for two years – setting up yet another artificial cliff in two years.
 - And finally, it uses a budget gimmick to pay for it.

- This presents Congress with an opportunity to give certainty to HBCUs and other Minority Serving Institutions and to make it easier for millions of students to receive a college education.

- This package I am proposing – the eight bills I am introducing today and the three bills I hope to include later – have been drafted by 48 senators – 25 Democrats, 23 Republicans.

- Working together on a bipartisan bill that can pass the Senate is the best strategy to give permanent funding to HBCUs and other Minority Serving Institutions, simplify the Federal Application for Student Aid, provide Pell grants to parole-eligible prisoners, allow Pell grants to be used for short-term programs, and increase the maximum Pell grant award.