

October 11, 2019

The Honorable Lamar Alexander  
Chairman  
Senate HELP Committee  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Ranking Member  
Senate HELP Committee  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

We are writing as members of the College Affordability Coalition, a group of organizations representing the voices of students and families, consumers, institutions, and civil rights groups, in opposition to the piecemeal approach to higher education reform proposed on September 26 by Chairman Alexander.

The Chairman's approach comes at the expense of a comprehensive Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization that would make the critical new investments students need to restore college affordability, close disparities in college access and degree attainment, and better meet the needs of the over 42 million Americans carrying student debt. We also are disappointed that Chairman Alexander blocked important funding for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and other Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) to push this package.

Students and families across the country face serious challenges in accessing and affording college and in repaying the debt they have taken on to attend school. As outlined in our [principles](#), any proposal to reform the nation's higher education system must include provisions to strengthen the Pell Grant program, create a renewed federal-state funding partnership, and reform the federal student loan program to ensure it's centered on the needs of borrowers.

The Pell Grant is the cornerstone of the federal financial aid program, but its purchasing power has declined significantly since its peak, when it covered three-quarters of the cost of attending a four-year public college. Today, it covers less than one-third of these costs. To restore the promise of the Pell Grant, policymakers should look to double the maximum award to cover at least half the cost of attendance at public universities. We also urge Congress to protect Pell from the annual budget cycle through mandatory funding, to restore the automatic adjustment for inflation, and to make Pell funds available to certain eligible undocumented students, including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) beneficiaries and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) beneficiaries. Pell Grants should also be fully restored for students who are incarcerated and the FAFSA should no longer seek information about drug convictions. We also urge that any expansion of Pell funds to short-term programs be undertaken with extreme caution.

In addition to securing and strengthening the Pell Grant, policymakers must commit to a renewed federal-state funding partnership that turns the tide of state disinvestment, protects against the devastating funding cuts often made during economic downturns, creates significant affordability guarantees for students, and addresses existing equity gaps that separate low-income students and students of color from their peers.

Policymakers must also take meaningful action on behalf of the over 42 million Americans who currently hold student debt. Congress should improve borrowers' repayment options and funnel any savings generated into additional benefits for low- and moderate- income borrowers, streamline borrowers' pathways out of debt, provide automatic discharge when possible, reduce the overly punitive consequences of default, and improve oversight and transparency in the loan program.

We call on Congress to reject a piecemeal approach to higher education reform. Instead, we urge lawmakers to immediately and separately pass the FUTURE Act and then work to pass a comprehensive HEA reauthorization that makes major strides in increasing college affordability, reduces the burden of student debt, and closes racial and economic equity gaps in college access and attainment.

Sincerely,

Americans for Financial Reform  
Center for American Progress  
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)  
Consumer Action  
Demos  
Education Reform Now Advocacy  
Generation Progress  
Impact Equitable Justice Inc.  
Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)  
Jen Mishory, Senior Fellow, The Century Foundation  
National Association for College Admission Counseling  
National Campus Leadership Council  
National Council on Independent Living (NCIL)  
Root & Rebound  
The Education Trust  
The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS)  
UnidosUS  
Young Invincibles