IHEP Urges Congress to Deliver Its Best for the Sake of Today’s Students and the Future of the U.S. Higher Education System

Washington, DC (September 27, 2019) – Yesterday, Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions (HELP) introduced the Student Aid Improvement Act of 2019, a package of higher education bills. In response to the introduction of the bill, Michelle Asha Cooper, Ph.D., President of the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), issued the following statement:

"Students and families across the United States - especially low-income students and student of color - deserve a higher education bill that addresses longstanding barriers to college access and success. While the set of provisions proposed yesterday would make some improvements, Congress can - and must - deliver a Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization that thoroughly addresses college transparency, affordability, and equitable opportunity.

"There are several important provisions in Sen. Alexander's proposal, including expanded college access for some students who are incarcerated and standardizing financial aid award letters. Yet, the proposal denies opportunity to other incarcerated students, and should do more to tackle the totality of challenges faced by today's students, many of whom are struggling mightily to afford college and make informed college choices with limited data.

"We appreciate Senator Alexander's cosponsorship of the College Transparency Act (CTA), and look forward to working with him to continue to build support for this critical policy, while would provide students, policymakers, institutions, and the business community with better information. The bipartisan, bicameral bill establishing a secure, privacy-protected student-level data network has the support of 170 organizations, more than a quarter of the Senate, 80 members of the House from both parties, and now - with Senator Alexander's cosponsorship - the Chairman of the Senate HELP Committee. Given the bill's strong bipartisan support and the urgent need for students to have access to quality information when making postsecondary choices, CTA should be including in any higher education legislation.

"This proposal does not sufficiently capitalize on the opportunity to secure the promise of an affordable college education for millions of current and future students by strengthening the Pell Grant. The Pell Grant is the cornerstone of our federal financial aid system, which provides critical support to low- and moderate-income students, many of whom are students of color. Yet, as college tuition increases, the Pell Grant's purchasing power has been depleted, creating a prohibitive financial burden for students. We call on members of Congress to reaffirm the commitment to our nation's students by substantially increasing the maximum Pell Grant, permanently indexing it to inflation, and making Pell funding fully mandatory.

"Recognizing the transformative potential of higher education programs in prison by lifting the ban on Pell Grants for students who are currently incarcerated is critical. Such programs disrupt
cycles of mass incarceration and lead to increased employment and civic engagement. Restoring Pell Grant eligibility is a necessary step toward reinstating educational opportunities for students who have historically been underserved by our postsecondary system.

"However, we strongly disapprove of eligibility requirements that exclude motivated students from higher education in prison programs. More than 50 organizations and professionals representing higher education, criminal justice, corrections, the business community, the faith community, and academic sectors, recently called on federal lawmakers to reinstate Pell Grant eligibility for all incarcerated students, consistent with widely-supported bipartisan and bicameral bills.

"While Senator Alexander's proposal and floor remarks - take some important steps to improve higher education for today's students, we urge Congress to continue working on a bipartisan basis to address the breadth of challenges facing today's students, particularly low-income students and students of color.

"Just as we ask students to do their best for the sake of their own future, we ask members of Congress to deliver their best for the sake of our country's future."