



June 25, 2020

Dear Louisiana Congressional Delegation,

As we navigate the uncertain times prompted by COVID-19, your support has been essential and greatly appreciated. Colleges and universities have stepped up in unprecedented ways during this pandemic. We continue that work looking forward to a fall semester where our students can return to campuses safely.

While the transition to online delivery of coursework for both the Spring and Summer semesters was nothing short of herculean, it has revealed a significant digital divide in our state that must be addressed.

Your backing of the Supporting Connectivity for Higher Education Students in Need Act and Emergency Broadband Connections Act of 2020 and other key legislation designed to expand broadband and erase the digital divide is critical in helping higher education continue to play a pivotal role in the state's and the nation's economic recovery and revitalization. Digital inclusion is no longer a luxury: It is a necessity. Now more than ever, education, training, research and innovation are crucial. Acquiring such assets and ensuring equity of opportunity demands equitable access to technology.

Higher Education's Immediate Response

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Louisiana's institutions of higher education rose to the occasion, meeting the immediate needs of the students, communities and state we serve. The need for healthcare workers prompted accelerated graduation and licensure of nearly 5,000 students who headed straight to the medical frontline. Professors and scientists answered the demand for testing, data collection and epidemiological expertise, ready to conduct research and apply academic strategy in real time. Students and volunteers energized their campuses to answer the urgent need for personal protective equipment and supplies by collecting and creating sanitizer, producing masks and gowns, and donating food for students who remained on campus. Professors, instructors and staff conducted a wholesale transformation of campus learning to bring classroom instruction into living rooms, bedrooms and dining rooms across the state.

Higher Education's Long-term Contributions

While there is no doubt higher education has the potential to help parlay this crisis into an economic renaissance, the one prerequisite that higher education alone cannot fulfill is digital access for all students.

As you and your colleagues consider proposals to address immediate problems with broadband access and infrastructure across the nation, we urge you to keep in mind the vital role that high-speed networks play in helping higher education's students and researchers succeed.

Our near-overnight transformation to remote learning was monumental. However, it is not nearly complete. While campuses plan to safely welcome students back to campus this fall, there will be even more need to provide robust and media-rich instruction via digital means. Researchers must be able to collaborate safely both within the same building and across long distances to pursue critical research endeavors.

Glaring Disparity

COVID-19 exposed the disparity and laid bare the differences between those who have digital access and those who do not. While many of us take access to the internet for granted, research published in the August 2018 *Communication Research* reports that nearly 20 percent of college students lack a reliable device and/or service to get online. Survey data for this current summer semester in Louisiana alone found that students and faculty statewide lacked nearly 11,000 computers, laptops and webcams needed to complete classroom exercises and coursework from home. A recent survey conducted by Higher Learning Advocates revealed that 30 percent of students who do have internet at home reported that they had trouble accessing course content. Broadband access with unreliable network connections disproportionately affects low-income communities and rural populations, making it difficult to access necessary resources and download materials for coursework and class lectures. One Louisiana campus explained that, “57 percent of our students utilize smartphones to complete assignments. Of the respondents, 23 percent of those who use the smartphones for instruction do not have unlimited data plans.”

Digital Inclusion

The Supporting Connectivity for Higher Education Students in Need Act would enable the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to award \$1 billion in grants to colleges and universities in an effort to meet the needs of economically distressed students by providing access to appropriate broadband service and related computing and network devices. This legislation is among many that will no doubt be considered. We are confident that you can help accomplish legislation that will address this explicit need to support our students.

The higher education community looks forward to working with you and our K-12, library, and network partners to identify where the innovative efforts of our institutions to address the broadband access needs of our most vulnerable students can work in tandem with the efforts and proposals to meet the pressing needs of unserved and underserved populations. In conjunction with the other efforts that Congress may pursue to bridge the digital divide during the pandemic, this legislation would provide a firm foundation for underserved college students at a time when they must have consistent, high-quality broadband access to maintain progress toward their degree, credential or training goal.

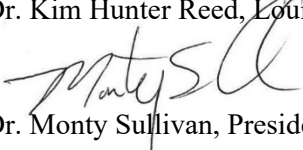
While Congress did much in the CARES Act to help institutions with emergency funding that they can use to defray technology expenses and other costs, additional support should be made available to expand institutional networking and technological capacities. Doing so will improve educational outcomes for millions of students while simultaneously helping colleges and universities achieve the nation’s research, education and economic goals. With that in mind, please ensure that the needs of college students and their higher education institutions are addressed in future supplemental legislation.

We are extremely appreciative of the Louisiana Congressional Delegation's national leadership, as well as your support for our students and institutions during this unprecedented public health crisis. Please do not hesitate to let us know if we can provide additional information or resources.

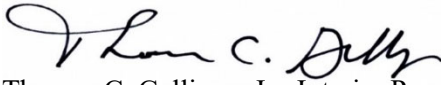
Sincerely,



Dr. Kim Hunter Reed, Louisiana Commissioner of Higher Education



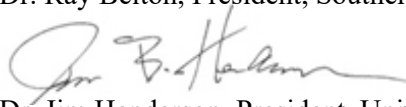
Dr. Monty Sullivan, President, Louisiana Community and Technical College System



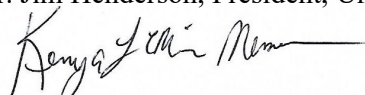
Thomas C. Galligan, Jr., Interim President, Louisiana State University System



Dr. Ray Belton, President, Southern University System



Dr. Jim Henderson, President, University of Louisiana System



Dr. Kenya Messer, President, Louisiana Association of Independent Colleges and Universities

Signing on behalf of:

Baton Rouge Community College | Bossier Parish Community College | Central Louisiana Technical Community College

Delgado Community College | L.E. Fletcher Technical Community College | Louisiana Delta Community College

Northshore Technical Community College | Nunez Community College | Northwest LA Technical Community College

River Parishes Community College | South Louisiana Community College | SOWELA Technical Community College

Louisiana State University | Louisiana State University at Eunice | Louisiana State University of Alexandria

Louisiana State University Shreveport | LSU Health Sciences Center New Orleans

LSU Health Sciences Center Shreveport | Paul M. Hebert Law Center

Southern University | Southern University at New Orleans | Southern University at Shreveport | Southern University Law Center

Grambling State University | Louisiana Tech University | McNeese State University | Nicholls State University

Northwestern State University | Southeastern Louisiana University | University of Louisiana at Lafayette

University of Louisiana at Monroe | The University of New Orleans

Centenary College of Louisiana | Dillard University | Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady University

Louisiana College | Loyola University New Orleans | New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

Saint Joseph Seminary College | Tulane University | University of Holy Cross | Xavier University of Louisiana