

June 5, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-230, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Republican Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Democratic Leader
U.S. Senate
S-221, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McConnell, Leader McCarthy, and Leader Schumer:

As you and your colleagues consider proposals to address immediate problems with student broadband access as well as to advance and extend the nation's broadband infrastructure, EDUCAUSE and the undersigned associations, representing the broad array of colleges and universities nationwide, urge you to consider the needs of postsecondary students and the institutions that serve them.

Colleges and universities must depend on high-speed networks as never before to help our students and researchers succeed. For us, supporting student progress now means using the broadband connections supplied by research and education (R&E) networks to deliver remote learning opportunities. As physical distancing continues for now and likely recurs in the future, higher education institutions will no doubt move to more and more media-rich, interactive forms of learning, further increasing our institutions' already heightened requirements for broadband speed and capacity. Physical distancing also means that the academic research community must rely more than ever on the advanced capabilities of R&E networks to sustain the collaborations necessary to overcome pandemic-related challenges and pursue other critical research endeavors.

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While the closure of physical campuses has undoubtedly helped to save lives and slow the spread of the coronavirus, the related emergency transition to remote learning and services has highlighted the significant digital divide that exists between students from low-income and/or rural areas and their peers. While many of us take access to the internet for granted, research shows that nearly 20% of college students lack either a reliable device and/or service to get online.¹ Given campus closures, these problems have only been exacerbated. Students without internet access cannot continue their studies, and low-income and rural students are the most vulnerable.

As stay-at-home orders across states and localities have exposed the pervasiveness of unserved and underserved populations, many proposals have emerged to build on existing federal efforts, such as the E-Rate program for schools and libraries, the Lifeline program for low-income populations, and the recent CARES Act funding to expand the reach of Rural Utilities Service broadband programs, to bridge internet access gaps to the extent currently possible. The higher education community looks forward to working with you and our K-12, library, and R&E network partners to identify where the innovative efforts of our institutions and organizations to address the broadband access needs of economically distressed college students can work in tandem with the efforts and proposals to meet the pressing needs of unserved and underserved populations generally. To the extent that Congress appropriates funds to make clearly essential broadband access available to such populations, it should take care to recognize in any relevant legislation that many college students fall into those categories and should be able to utilize any options made available to unserved and underserved populations.

For example, if the E-Rate program serves as a vehicle for extending wireless broadband access beyond the physical facilities of libraries and schools, college students lacking the access to broadband that they need to continue their academic progress and utilize institutional and public services should be able to take advantage of those federally funded wireless connections alongside other affected members of their communities. Likewise, if Congress chooses to increase the volume and level of subsidies via the Lifeline program so low-income persons and families can acquire service from commercial providers, it should add Pell Grant eligibility or other appropriate indicators of student financial need to the factors that allow one to qualify for Lifeline. It should also temporarily suspend the limitation that households may receive only one service through the Lifeline program given the number of members of any given household that may need broadband access for legitimate educational, health, and other needs.

Congress could directly ensure that postsecondary students in need can get online effectively from the homes and communities where they now reside by passing the *Supporting*

¹ Amy L. Gonzales, Jessica McCrory Calarco, and Teresa K. Lynch, "Technology Problems and Student Achievement Gaps: A Validation and Extension of the Technology Maintenance Construct," *Communication Research*, August 31, 2018 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218796366>).

Connectivity for Higher Education Students in Need Act (H.R.6814/S.3701). This legislation would enable the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to award \$1 billion in grants to colleges and universities so that they can meet the needs of economically distressed students for appropriate broadband service and related computing and network devices. In conjunction with the other efforts that Congress may pursue to bridge the digital divide during the pandemic, the *Supporting Connectivity for Higher Education Students in Need Act* would provide a firm foundation for unserved and underserved college students at a time when they must have consistent, high-quality broadband access to maintain progress toward their degree or other academic goals. Please consider working with the bill's primary sponsors, Representative Eshoo and Senator Klobuchar, to advance the bill either independently or as part of vital emergency supplemental legislation.

Support for economically distressed students must be matched by investments in the institutions that students are connecting with. Colleges have been aggressive in trying to push out wireless access to their students, faculty, and staff. Campuses have reoriented parts of their networks and added hotspots to serve their communities, expanding coverage into parking lots and other areas where students may feel safe accessing the campus network. Institutions are also working together and with schools, libraries, and R&E networks to aggregate and distribute information about where college students can go to get wireless access and what they will find at a given location. Unfortunately, the ability to sustain this work is constrained by the vast needs with which institutions and related organizations must now contend. The sudden move of most operations and activities to an online environment has inevitably strained even the best-resourced institutions, limiting the time and money available for other efforts. At the same time as emergency-related expenses increase, pandemic-related declines in revenue are sapping the ability of colleges and universities, individually and collectively, to sustain progress, much less to advance it as we know we must. While Congress did much in the CARES Act to help institutions with emergency funding that they can use to defray technology expenses among other costs, additional support should be made available in the next supplemental to expand institutional networking and technological capacities as well as higher education community efforts to leverage them for maximum effect.

Finally, Congress should strengthen the existing American R&E networks, which collectively fulfill a number of unique roles within the country's broadband infrastructure. They enable advanced scientific and medical research by linking our major research universities, academic medical centers, federal research agencies, and national laboratories via research-quality, ultra-high speed network connections; they support colleges and universities of all types in fulfilling their learning and service missions by providing advanced broadband services; and they extend their advanced broadband connections to tens of thousands of community anchor institutions—encompassing K-12 schools, public libraries, state and local government agencies, and tribal lands—allowing those institutions to meet the needs of their communities in ways that otherwise would not be possible. As mission-based, non-profit organizations, R&E networks ensure that these public sector entities have the broadband they require to address

the public sector challenges of the 21st century. Federal support is needed for R&E networks to extend backbone and middle-mile networks in unserved and underserved areas; increase pandemic research connectivity; expand educational wireless systems and wireless services; and meet equipment and capacity needs. I refer you to the letter shared with you and key committees by the nation's leading R&E network organizations, Internet2 and The Quilt, on April 17, 2020 (attached) for more details, noting the support of EDUCAUSE and the undersigned associations for the proposals they raise.

Taking the steps discussed above will improve educational outcomes for millions of students while simultaneously helping colleges and universities to achieve the nation's research and education goals. With that in mind, please ensure that the needs of college students, higher education institutions, and R&E networks are addressed in future supplemental legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John O'Brien", with a stylized, cursive script.

John O'Brien
President and CEO
EDUCAUSE

On behalf of:

Achieving the Dream
ACPA—College Student Educators International
American Association of Colleges of Nursing
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers
American College Health Association
American Council on Education
American Dental Education Association
APPA—Leadership in Educational Facilities
Association of American Universities
Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities
Association of Community College Trustees
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges
Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities
Association of Research Libraries

Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities
The College Board
Council of Graduate Schools
Council of Independent Colleges
Council for Opportunity in Education
CUPA-HR: College and University Professional Association for Human Resources
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
National Association for College Admission Counseling
National Association of College and University Business Officers
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
State Higher Education Executive Officers Association
UNCF (United Negro College Fund, Inc.)
University Professional and Continuing Education Association

Cc: The Honorable Frank Pallone, Chairman, and the Honorable Greg Walden, Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce, U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Eddie Bernice Johnson, Chairwoman, and the Honorable Frank Lucas, Ranking Member, Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Bobby Scott, Chairman, and the Honorable Virginia Foxx, Ranking Member, Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable José Serrano, Chairman, and the Honorable Robert Aderholt, Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations—Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies, U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro, Chairwoman, and the Honorable Tom Cole, Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations—Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Roger Wicker, Chairman, and the Honorable Maria Cantwell, Ranking Member, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

The Honorable Lamar Alexander, Chairman, and the Honorable Patty Murray, Ranking Member, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, U.S. Senate

The Honorable Jerry Moran, Chairman, and the Honorable Jeanne Shaheen, Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations—Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies, U.S. Senate

The Honorable Roy Blunt, Chairman, and the Honorable Patty Murray, Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations—Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, U.S. Senate

Attachments:

Letter to the Honorable Nancy Pelosi and the Honorable Kevin McCarthy, U.S. House of Representatives, from Internet2 and The Quilt, April 17, 2020

Letter to the Honorable Mitch McConnell and the Honorable Charles Schumer, U.S. Senate, from Internet2 and The Quilt, April 17, 2020