



July 8, 2021

The Honorable Frank Pallone
Chair
House Energy and Commerce Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Ranking Member
House Energy and Commerce Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
2322 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Chair
Senate Commerce, Science and
Transportation Committee
United States Senate
420-A Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Senate Commerce, Science and
Transportation Committee
United States Senate
420-A Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairs Pallone and Cantwell and Ranking Members McMorris Rodgers and Wicker,

We write to ask that you, and the members of your committees, include dedicated investments in broadband infrastructure for postsecondary students and institutions in any infrastructure package under consideration.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, students, educators and communities across the country have struggled to ensure that the suspension of in-person learning would not mean the end of quality education and scientific research. While colleges and universities quickly pivoted to online operations, the ability of students to access their courses was uneven at best. The pandemic exacerbated the preexisting digital divide in students' access to fundamental tools such as reliable internet connections and devices capable of managing distance learning. Compounding the problem, many institutions, and particularly those serving the largest numbers of low-income students, experienced an institutional digital divide, lacking the resources to fill students' gaps and struggling to manage aspects of transitioning their operations online.

Addressing these gaps has benefits far beyond the students and schools immediately impacted. In many communities that currently lack reliable internet access, local institutions function as the anchors of access, serving not just their students and staff, but their neighbors as well. This is particularly true in rural and/or tribal areas, as well as in

unserved and underserved urban communities. Congress took steps to help institutions and students in the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, providing subsidies for broadband service and devices for households with Pell Grant recipients through the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) Program and directing additional funding to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) through the Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program, which will allow them to build out their capacities as community anchor institutions.

However, these are limited measures that will expire in the near future, and they do not adequately address the underlying need that all higher education institutions have for high-quality broadband connections that will truly support learning and research, both now and into the future. The Administration, building on a history of bipartisan support, recognized the importance of this challenge in the American Jobs Plan proposal released in March when it proposed an investment of \$100 billion in broadband infrastructure, with a priority for nonprofit providers. Since then, Congressional discussions on an infrastructure package have consistently maintained investments in broadband infrastructure as a core element.

Recent analysis has shown that a comprehensive expansion of and upgrade to our nation's research and education networks will provide significant benefits not just to institutions, students, and researchers, but also to their surrounding communities as well. The Minds We Need (mindsweneed.org and attached), a paper released in May by an extensive group of experts in this area, identifies a path to connecting all institutions of higher education to advanced, research-quality broadband at a cost of less than \$5 billion. Such an investment represents only a small portion of the overall funding currently proposed for broadband infrastructure, and it will deliver disproportionately large benefits.

It will ensure, for example, that all colleges and universities—including community colleges; HBCUs, MSIs, and TCUs; and university-related research facilities—in every state will have the connectivity necessary to provide multi-media rich, bandwidth-intensive courses, programs, and learning resources. Moreover, it will open the door for students at all levels of postsecondary education to participate in academic research that otherwise would largely be unavailable outside traditional research settings. The proposed investment will greatly expand the range of learning opportunities available to students while allowing the nation as a whole to finally leverage all of “the minds we need” to innovate and compete in the 21st century.

Connecting all communities and institutions to research-quality broadband will not help those students who lack the resources to obtain a reliable internet connection and the device needed to access it. Making the EBB Program permanent and expanding the benefit will allow students to truly receive the benefits provided by an infrastructure investment. In addition, with approximately 20% of students lacking an internet-capable device (and larger numbers lacking devices that fully meet the demands of online learning), any comprehensive approach should provide resources to students and institutions to meet this

need. Legislation such as the Supporting Connectivity for Higher Education Students in Need Act offers solutions to this problem that Congress can draw on as they prepare an infrastructure bill. For these reasons, we urge Congress to pair any broadband infrastructure proposal with measures to ensure that all students and institutions see the full benefit of these investments.

Beyond the need for additional resources, solving these problems could require additional attention from the federal government. Currently, some states prohibit public or government-owned networks or prohibit these public networks from owning or leasing fiber optic assets. Such prohibitions may inadvertently limit institutions of higher education in those states from participating in the type of state and regional research and education networks that exist in many other parts of the country (and which typically obtain fiber optic assets and wholesale network capacity from the commercial sector). Congress should consider whether such state prohibitions potentially impact public education and research networks and whether to expressly exclude them from any state prohibitions on public or government-owned networks.

The members of our organizations represent educators, researchers, information and network professionals and college leaders. They have experienced first-hand how transformative access to reliable internet is for students, and just how damaging the lack of such access can be as well. This is a problem Congress can solve. That is why we are asking for a modest investment that will provide overwhelming returns to our nations' educational, scientific and economic vitality.

Sincerely,



Ted Mitchell
President

On behalf of:

American Association of Community Colleges
American Association of State Colleges and Universities
American Council on Education
American Indian Higher Education Consortium
Association of American Universities
Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges
Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities

Higher Education Broadband Infrastructure Letter
July 8, 2021

Council for Christian Colleges & Universities
Council for Higher Education Accreditation
Council for Opportunity in Education
Council of Graduate Schools
EDUCAUSE
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
Internet2
NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
National Association For Equal Opportunity In Higher Education
National Association of College and University Business Officers
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators
State Higher Education Executive Officers Association