

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 21, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

As the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic spreads across our Nation, our higher education system is facing unprecedented disruption. Campuses across our Nation have closed their campuses and sought to move to remote instruction. These closures cause enormous disruptions for the students, communities and institutions themselves. We have heard from institutions of higher education throughout Pennsylvania and Virginia, and would like to relay their concerns to you, and encourage you to address them as you work on the third Covid-19 stimulus package.

Campus closures and transitioning to online instruction requires a significant adjustment for both students and professors. Some students may lack appropriate technology or live in areas or homes without access to internet, complicating their ability to utilize online instruction. Providing assistance to both students and institutions to help ensure they can continue their education is imperative, and we strongly urge you to ensure funds are made available to ensure that institutions have the capacity to provide remote instruction, and that students have access to it.

For low-income students, food-insecure students or those without stable housing, campus closures are particularly disruptive. Many institutions throughout Pennsylvania and Virginia have already worked to provide accommodations to students on a case-by-case basis who may be unable to leave campus. We urge you to consider providing funding to ensure all institutions can provide such accommodations, as well as the increased cost of necessary services to keep residents halls sanitary, safe and operational. Students faced with disruptions from campus closures or to their financial situation also need access to emergency funds to help address basic needs including food, transportation, child care, housing and relocation. This emergency aid should come in the form of grants, rather than loans. It is critical that we meet the needs of students during this time.

Campus closures also have a significant financial impact on institutions of higher education. Many institutions are losing significant revenue streams, which could only grow if they face further disruptions in enrollment, state funding, endowment income and research grants. According to Moody's, which has downgraded the higher education sector from stable to negative, about 30 percent of colleges already have weak operating performances, and may struggle to adapt to disruptions caused by Covid-19 and the new recession. The ability for institutions to weather this storm varies considerably. If institutions become insolvent and are forced to close, there will be significant disruptions to students who may be unable to complete their degrees.

Higher education also has a significant impact on the economy. In many parts of the Nation, institutions of higher education are the biggest employers in their region and have a considerable economic impact. In many regions, students, faculty and staff are the life blood for communities and surrounding small businesses. As you consider a stimulus package, we encourage you to consider the economic impact of higher education, and provide funding to non-profit and public post-secondary institutions, particularly those that are under-resourced and serve high percentages of low-income students, to ensure they can weather economic disruptions and continue serving students and their communities.

Institutions of higher education also drive innovation and research in our country. Many institutions receive federal grants to conduct research related on health, science, defense and other critical sectors. Unfortunately, Covid-19 may force labs to close or research to be delayed. Guidance should be provided to federal grantees, extensions should be provided where necessary and funds should be made available to ensure that research can continue or resume operations safely.

Finally, we have heard from many institutions of higher education in Pennsylvania and Virginia who are concerned about compliance with certain regulations, many of which pertain to financial aid and could significantly impact students. Temporary relaxing of certain requirements, such as return to title IV and satisfactory academic progress could help to ensure students who are forced to leave school due to Covid-19 are not put in a precarious financial position. Similarly, many private universities have expressed concern about federal financial responsibility ratios given significant revenue declines. We encourage you to consider where extensions or waivers of certain requirements may be appropriate and in the best interest of all students in the immediate and long term.

As you continue to make decisions regarding the third Covid-19 stimulus package, we ask that you consider the needs of students, institutions of higher education and the communities that depend on them.

Sincerely,

U.S. Senator Robert P. Casey

U.S. Senator Tim Kaine