

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 5, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington D.C., 20510

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Senate Minority Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington D.C., 20510

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Room S-128, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Room S-128, The Capitol
Washington, D.C., 20510

Dear Leader McConnell, Leader Schumer, Chairman Shelby, and Vice Chairman Leahy,

As the Senate anticipates consideration of a fourth supplemental appropriations package in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we respectfully request that specific provisions and funds are added to support our nation's Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) under Title III, Part A and B, Title V, and Title VII of the *Higher Education Act*.

The \$1.046 billion designated for MSIs, including HBCUs and TCUs, and the institutional and emergency financial aid funds, included in the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund of the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act*, were important first steps in providing these institutions with the resources necessary to respond to the unanticipated costs and challenges of COVID-19. However, as MSIs enroll a high number of low-income, first-generation college students and are consistently under-resourced due to smaller endowments and lower levels of federal and state investment, they need additional support to continue to respond and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the research has shown, the COVID-19 pandemic is disproportionately affecting the African American and Latino communities.¹ This disease has exposed persistent disparities in our society, and requires Congress to have a robust response. MSIs,

¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/04/09/why-are-blacks-dying-at-higher-rates-from-covid-19/>

<https://www.aarp.org/health/conditions-treatments/info-2020/minority-communities-covid-19.html>

United States Senate

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including HBCUs and TCUs, are already starting to feel the strain of preparing for the fall semester as their students are faced with the choice of withdrawing from college to support their families economically in light of the pandemic or never enrolling in the first place. We are asking you to include the following provisions and funding in the fourth stimulus package to support these institutions that continue to do the transformative work of educating the underserved:

1. Increase the Maximum Pell Grant Award and provide substantial new investments in need-based financial aid

The federal Pell Grant program is the primary form of financial assistance for low- and moderate-income families. However, today the Pell Grant covers only around 30 percent of the average costs of tuition, fees, room, and board at public four-year colleges, which is far below the 79 percent it covered over 40 years ago. HBCUs serve a high percentage of Pell Grant recipients. Increasing the maximum Pell Grant award by at least inflationary levels would boost college enrollment, reduce drop-out rates, and improve student outcomes for students who rely on the program to receive a postsecondary degree. Additionally, the Pell Grant should be placed on a path to double over the next 10 years.

It is also important to provide substantial new investments in need-based financial aid, like the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (SEOG), to help students meet basic needs and navigate the new costs they are facing during COVID-19 with uncertain access to campus housing and meal plans, laptops and internet connections at home, and health insurance and health care for themselves and their families. Additional funding for SEOG would help to provide larger awards to each of the current 1.7 million recipients and also increase the total number students that MSIs, including HBCUs and TCUs, can assist with these funds. While SEOG prioritizes supplemental assistance to Pell Grant recipients, it can be flexibly awarded by colleges to both undergraduate and graduate students. SEOG can be awarded according to the student's specific needs by taking other factors beyond the federal formula and "expected family contribution" into consideration—such as students who are providing for their children or family members who are unable to work.

2. Invest an additional \$1 billion in emergency funding for HBCUs, TCUs, HSIs, and other Minority Serving Institutions and \$ 25 million for Howard University, and strengthen protections against any state or local cuts to these institutions.

Given the ongoing uncertainty around the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impacts this situation will have on institutions of higher education and their students, we respectfully request that an additional \$1 billion be invested in these vital institutions under the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund. These additional funds will allow MSIs and HBCUs to access the resources necessary to continue to provide quality academic instruction and learning experiences to their students, in light of these challenging circumstances. These institutions anticipate that the negative side effects of the health emergency, such as declines in enrollment and auxiliary revenues, will

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

continue to impact them long after it has been resolved, decreasing their ability to provide their students with the support and resources they need. In effect, we are asking that \$1 billion be appropriated to continue to aid these institutions in their response to COVID-19.

It is also important to ensure that MSIs, including HBCUs and TCUs, and the students they serve, are not targeted for cuts as a result of a decline in state and local revenues. The next package should strengthen the “maintenance of effort” (MOE) provisions of the CARES Act. A strong MOE is essential for low-income and first-generation students, as state and local funding cuts to higher education, including state-based financial aid programs that serve both public and non-profit institutions, have historically had a disproportionate impact on the students and families with the greatest financial need. The next package should lengthen the MOE requirement through FY 2023 and narrow any waiver authority to those states with extreme and unique financial exigency who commit not to cut education funding disproportionately or reduce available tax revenues to support education.

3. Provide an MSI investment of at least \$6.5 billion in research, teaching, extension and development funding.

Academic research is the cornerstone for the advancement of our nation’s economy and stability. In light of the current crisis, it is imperative that we have leading academics and practitioners at the front lines conducting the needed research to combat future pandemics and solve for other potential health crises. For example, Howard University located in Washington D.C. owns a hospital that serves as a COVID response hospital for the nation’s capital. It is a premier institution capable of managing the type of research that will be needed to fight coronavirus and future pandemics.

The current pandemic has laid bare the glaring health care disparities in communities of color. There are a number of MSIs that have baccalaureate and graduate degree programs in the health professions, many of which receive financial support from the Higher Education Act in Titles III Part A and B, Title V, and Title VII and other federal programs. These programs in nursing, physician assistants and health care technicians are addressing staffing shortages. However, a major federal investment to provide greater support to these programs will be beneficial to the country. And, as we plan for the future, utilizing the current regional University partnerships among some MSIs and the current HBCU medical schools and hospitals to include starting new programs in medicine, dental, nursing, and other health care fields should be top national priorities.

Further, according to the most recent data, all institutions of higher education received a funding total of \$79.436 billion dollars of research and development (R&D) funding in 2018 with \$42.018 billion coming from the federal government. Of these institutions, MSIs received significantly less funding. For instance, HBCUs received a total of \$534.045 million dollars in overall R&D funding with \$400.349 million coming from the federal government, equating to only 0.67 percent of total funding. TCUs received \$13.8 million of overall funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF), or less than one-

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

quarter of one percent, compared to \$5.558 billion awarded by NSF in research and education funding to the nation's higher education institutions. We ask for a specific new investment of \$6.5 billion total for MSIs in federal agencies and institutes such as NSF and the National Institutes of Health, including but not limited to the National Institute of Minority Health Disparities, to support groundbreaking research into COVID-related health disparities for minority communities, and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Title VII health professions training programs, which help produce the diverse health professionals our country sorely needs.

4. Include a waiver of the allowable uses in the Minority Science Engineering and Improvement Program (MSEIP).

While the CARES Act allows the Secretary of Education to waive allowable uses for grants awarded under Part A or B of Title III, Chapter I or II of Subpart 2 of Part A of Title IV, Title V, or Subpart 4 of Part A of Title VII of the HEA, the MSEIP is crucial in allowing MSIs to increase the participation of underrepresented students in fields that will drive economic mobility and crucial progress and health research. In order to grant maximum flexibility to respond to the ever-changing circumstances of this pandemic, a waiver in the MSEIP is essential.

5. Include a technology fund to allow students to access broadband.

In the CARES Act, MSIs were given the ability to utilize resources to purchase technological equipment for their students to complete their assignments online; participate in virtual counseling; receive virtual mentoring and tutoring services; and complete other required tasks in relation to their academic program through distance education. While access to equipment is important, so is access to broadband. According to an article released by the Pew Research Center, "roughly three-in-ten adults with household incomes below \$30,000 a year (29%) don't own a smartphone... and [m]ore than four-in-ten [adults] don't have home broadband services (44%) or a traditional computer (46%)."² As the ongoing uncertainty of COVID-19 disrupts in-class learning, it is imperative that MSI students have the ability to access broadband to allow them to continue their academic program and complete their education.

Thank you for your consideration of this request and your continued attention to this important priority.

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/07/digital-divide-persists-even-as-lower-income-americans-make-gains-in-tech-adoption/>

United States Senate

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Sincerely,



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Doug Jones
United States Senator



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Jacky Rosen
United States Senator

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

Tim Kaine
United States Senator

Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

Tom Carper
United States Senator

Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator

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United States Senator

Mark R. Warner
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United States Senator

Benjamin L. Cardin
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