



Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR

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The Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Chairman

Opening Statement of Chairwoman Susan Davis (CA-53)

Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment Hearing

A Major Test: Examining the Impact of COVID-19 on the Future of Higher Education

Webex

Tuesday, July 7, 2020 | 12:00 p.m.

Today, we are examining how the COVID-19 pandemic is straining our higher education system and discussing what Congress must do to support students and institutions through this difficult time.

Across the country, the rush to suspend on-campus activities and switch to online learning has exacerbated pre-existing systemic inequities in higher education. For example, the on-campus resources that many students from low-SES backgrounds normally rely on – like computer labs and reliable internet – are now unavailable. The suspension of on-campus activities is also threatening many students' access to basic essentials like food and housing. For these students, going to school had been their primary way of meeting these needs.

A survey from earlier this year found students of color are disproportionately suffering high rates of food and housing insecurity due to the temporary physical closure of campuses. Research also indicates how most students do not perform as well in online classes. Now imagine how students who already started off with fewer resources are more likely to struggle and face greater obstacles under these new educational conditions.

To address these disparities, Congress secured \$14 billion in emergency relief funding for higher education in the bipartisan *CARES Act*. Half of this funding was allocated specifically for direct student emergency aid.

Additionally, Congress provided immediate relief to student loan borrowers by suspending student loan payments and freezing interest on all direct and federally held student loans.

Unfortunately, instead of quickly disbursing these urgent relief funds to students, *according to the law we passed back in March*, Secretary DeVos created arbitrary eligibility requirements for students trying to access this support.

These restrictions not only prevent relief funding from quickly reaching students, they exclude several underserved groups of students who cannot apply for Title IV aid, such as undocumented students.

In response, the state of Washington and the California Community College system, which includes the San Diego Community College District, sued Secretary DeVos.

Thankfully, these lawsuits have temporarily stopped the Department from denying California community college students and students across Washington access to the emergency student aid that Congress secured.

But, setting aside the delays and unnecessary restrictions created by the Department, we also must address how the *CARES Act* simply did not go far enough to prepare our institutions for this looming economic recession.

Due to the pandemic, institutions are facing unprecedented state and local budget shortfalls that will trigger drastic funding cuts for higher education. They are facing massive revenue losses due to decreased enrollment and suspended activities. On top of all of this, institutions are still dealing with the residual effects of state funding cuts during the Great Recession.

For many educational institutions in America, these cuts and revenue losses mean severe reductions in services and programs that many vulnerable students need to complete their degrees and find fulfilling careers.

We know the worst of these consequences will fall on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Minority Serving Institutions, and community colleges, which have the fewest resources despite serving most of our country's low-income students and students of color.

The impending budget shortfalls are also putting many institutions under pressure to prematurely reopen their campuses, even at the risk of exposing students, educators, and communities to COVID-19.

The evidence is overwhelmingly clear. Congress must do more to support our students and institutions.

The *Heroes Act* would take a critical step in the right direction. It provides nearly \$1 trillion to help state and local governments avert massive budget shortfalls and cuts to education. It also provides over \$35 billion in direct relief funds for public institutions and other institutions that have suffered financially, including almost \$2 billion for H-B-C-Us, T-C-Us, and M-S-Is.

Beyond extra funds, Congress must also protect students from predatory for-profit schools. These institutions have a record of using taxpayer dollars to target vulnerable students during economic downturns, often leaving them with worthless degrees and debt that they cannot repay.

Simply put, the COVID-19 pandemic is testing not only our students and institutions, but Congress's commitment to ensuring all students have access to safe, affordable, and quality education.

Today, with the help of our witnesses, we will discuss whether we can live up to that commitment. I now yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. Smucker, for an opening statement.