



University of California Student Association
1020 12th St., Suite #232
Sacramento, CA 95814
510-834-8272 | www.ucsa.org

CALIFORNIA CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION

March 23, 2020

Dear Members of Congress:

With the novel coronavirus continuing to spread throughout the country and several states such as California issuing shelter-at-home orders, the economic impact of this pandemic is quickly proving itself to be just as viable a threat to our communities as is its health impact. While the \$8.3 billion emergency supplemental legislation which Congress approved earlier this month has been a step in the right direction to contain and prevent COVID-19, many communities are still left without any relief or support in the wake of the economic impacts that these closures and containment efforts have been and will be resulting in.

One of the areas uniquely affected by the economic impact of COVID-19 is educational entities and the students attending these institutions of higher learning. At the University of California, over 285,000 students have been impacted by campus facilities closures, restricted functions, and the academic curriculum moving remote. Furthermore, loss of student aid, either due to inflexibility in federal financial aid requirements or difficulty in seeking financial support services remotely, has placed thousands of students into financial stress. Coupled with lay-offs, reduced hours, and leaves of absences for student workers, as well as costs resulting from housing disruptions due to the pandemic and its financial impact on the students' own families, this crisis has become even more severely felt by our low-income and working class students.

The University of California Student Association (UCSA) has been working with our campuses to identify the various critical issue areas facing our students, and, earlier this week, released a letter to the UC Board of Regents to request support in addressing them. However, as we work with our campuses on the ground to provide relief to our students in the wake of arguably the worst pandemic of our lifetimes, we cannot do this alone; students need Congress to act and provide relief to our educational institutions; we need Congress to prioritize students and the institutions of higher education they attend over bailouts for corporations. We have identified key areas where we view support for students and institutions during this time as critical:

Student Aid

The first priority area that UCSA has identified is much-needed emergency student aid reform provisions in order to help mitigate the financial effects of this crisis on students:

- **Exempt any aid received during COVID-19 pandemic-related closures from counting towards Direct Loan and Pell Grant lifetime eligibility.** Students and administrators need clarity on how the suspension of classes will affect how many terms a student is eligible for Direct Loan and Pell Grant. Due to the shift to remote instruction and other difficulties students are experiencing during this time, the Direct Loan and Pell Grant Lifetime Eligibility Used should be waived for students so that they are able to achieve their degree despite these extenuating circumstances.



University of California Student Association
1020 12th St., Suite #232
Sacramento, CA 95814
510-834-8272 | www.ucsa.org

- **Extend the moratorium on student loan interest assessment.** While UCSA is grateful for the current 60-day moratorium on student loan interest, extending the moratorium allows students and their families to focus their finances on securing basic needs now, providing much-needed flexibility and time for these families to recover from COVID-19 economic consequences before paying back extended interest.
- **Waive federal Satisfactory Academic Progress requirements for financial aid.** Given an increase in remote instruction and ever-changing personal and academic environments for students in the wake of COVID-19, students' class and instructional time will likely experience severe impacts for the foreseeable future. It is important for Congress to waive all Satisfactory Academic Progress requirements for federal financial aid in order to allow more flexibility to students as they try to manage their finances and academics.
- **Exempt Spring Semesters and Quarters from Federal Financial Aid Audits.** Our campus financial aid professionals are often constrained from doing what is best for students affected by this crisis for fear that they will endanger the eligibility of the entire student body if they make a mistake in implementing federal regulations. We urge Congress to clearly communicate to the Department of Education that maximum flexibility should be allowed during this crisis and that schools should not have their spring terms reviewed during their annual financial aid audits.
- **Provide increased flexibility to account for students who had to withdraw from their institutions due to COVID-19** including granting relief on deadlines and timeframes on Return of Title IV Funds calculations. Students should be entitled to retain all Title IV aid including grants. During this time, students should not have to owe their university or the U.S. Department of Education money because of Return of Title IV Fund Funds calculations. Additionally, students should be exempt from having to use their one-time loan grace period if they withdraw from their institution at this time. Such students should not be reported to the National Student Loan Data System for Students.

Basic Needs Resources

Additionally, UCSA has identified both the immediate and long term effects of the COVID-19 crisis on students basic needs security as alarming, and we request immediate federal assistance in order to uplift students out of dangerous and critical situations:

- **Increased access to housing.** Recognizing the national emergency and numerous shelter-in-place orders given by states and localities, UCSA views student housing as a top-tier priority, especially given that it is the only viable housing option for many of the most vulnerable student communities such as formerly foster youth, international, system-impacted, undocumented, and economically disadvantaged students. UCSA and the Housing Now! Coalition call on Congress to use \$70 billion from the federal stimulus package to protect families from homelessness during the COVID-19 outbreak.



University of California Student Association
1020 12th St., Suite #232
Sacramento, CA 95814
510-834-8272 | www.ucsa.org

- **Financial resources to impacted student workers.** As campus operations shut down, the over 36,000 student workers at UC are at risk of not getting paid, even as their financial obligations remain the same or increase. The UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) indicates that students who work 20+ hours a week face housing and food insecurity at disproportionate rates. Currently, the UC has authorized 128 hours of paid leave for on-campus workers. UCSA is incredibly grateful for the visionary leadership UC has shown in this determination, but given uncertainty over the length of this crisis and its long-term effects, we believe that additional federal subsidies are needed to ensure that the paid leave can be extended as needed for on-campus workers. In addition, a large portion of student workers at the UC work off-campus and do not qualify for the paid-leave policy. Therefore, emergency, interest-free loans should be authorized for off-campus student workers who have lost their jobs or have had hours reduced.
- **Secure D-CalFRESH for Californians.** Disaster CalFresh (D-CalFresh), federally known as the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP), is a way to meet the temporary nutritional needs of disaster victims within a 30-day period, following a natural disaster. D-CalFresh is an effective way to streamline access to food and other critical supplies for people most impacted by national disasters. UCSA requests Congress's support in urging the federal government to declare the COVID-19 epidemic as a natural disaster, and authorize the State of California to begin implementation of D-CalFresh. This is particularly necessary given the economic situation in California, including lay-offs and commercial disruption of the food supply chain.
- **Expand childcare & early childhood support for student parents.** Across the UC system, student parents have had their access to childcare impacted by social distancing and shelter-in-place directives. Expanding childcare and early education resources ensures that student parents, many of whom still have to work and study, can receive much needed help in order to support and take care of their children without sacrificing academic progress. We appreciate Congress's attentiveness to this issue and urge the members to pass the appropriations that go towards addressing these needs.
- **Allow students to continue receiving their full Veterans Affairs (VA) Chapter 33 housing benefits** and continue participating in the program even if COVID-19 pandemic-related closures require them to shift their classroom instruction to remote instruction.

Relief for Students Academically Impacted by the Closures

UC students are enrolled in 171 programs of study across 40 countries. Due to the impacts that COVID-19 has had on international travel, and the widespread closure of overseas and domestic study programs, students are continually losing money, educational progress, and facing basic needs insecurity. Congress must act now to allow students more flexibility in this time of crisis, and mitigate the adverse effects of forced disenrollment in education programs:



University of California Student Association
1020 12th St., Suite #232
Sacramento, CA 95814
510-834-8272 | www.uksa.org

- **Allow greater distance education flexibility.** Currently, students who were not enrolled in the Fall of 2019 are not offered the distance learning flexibility as offered to students enrolled in Fall 2019 under the U.S. Education Department's March 5, 2020 Electronic Announcement. Due to COVID-19, there is a pressing need for students who were enrolled in other universities or education programs, or who are returning from a leave-of-absence to be eligible for distance learning program flexibility, as physical attendance at Universities is impossible. Furthermore, flexibility on distance learning program regulations and timelines is needed to allow more campuses to offer these programs in this time of crisis.
- **Allow colleges and universities greater flexibility in enrollment for students who had semester study-programs cut short.** Colleges and Universities have different academic calendars. At UC, some of our campuses are on the quarter system and some are on the semester system. In addition, UC students were studying abroad or in Washington DC through our UCDC program, all of which may have slightly different academic calendars. Particularly for federal financial aid recipients, we ask for maximum flexibility in allowing students to patch together academic experiences that help them complete their degree and still receive financial aid.
- **Online accessibility for students with disabilities.** As most classes and academic content transitioned remotely abruptly, students are concerned about the accessibility of online content for students with disabilities, especially those with visual or hearing disabilities. Many teachers are not used to teaching remotely through platforms like Zoom. During this period, funds should be made available so that all online courses at universities are ADA compliant and all faculty receive the necessary training to teach online courses. We look forward to partnership on addressing the disparate impacts of online-only education on differently-abled students.
- **Technology subsidies for students.** Students struggle to maintain the same levels of academic excellence that universities demand during remote instructional periods. This is only worsened by inadequate access to technology or connectivity issues. UCSA supports the technology provisions made in the Support Students in Response to Coronavirus Act, but sees areas of growth. All students should be guaranteed reliable internet connectivity for video-streaming classes, access to a laptop with adequate video, speakers, and camera features. Institutions have had to quickly adopt remote instruction capabilities and in order to meet the needs of the students, funds should be available so that both institutions and students can engage in academic coursework.

Telehealth Services

As other states join California in announcing shelter-in-place orders, it is becoming more and more evident that the traditional means of health provision will simply not be enough to support the growing needs for physical and mental health services. In that regard, one of the emerging methods of healthcare provision has been the approach of telehealth services to



University of California Student Association
1020 12th St., Suite #232
Sacramento, CA 95814
510-834-8272 | www.ucsa.org

allow patients to seek counseling and care through remote means. This approach is becoming an increasingly popular choice for our students who are in need of health services, especially mental health counseling. However, there still remains a need for Congress to act to streamline the roll-out of telehealth services, with one necessary and needed solution being preemption legislation to facilitate telehealth.

Passage of the Supporting Students in Response to Coronavirus Act.

We commend Congress for introducing the Supporting Students in Response to Coronavirus Act and urges Congress to approve this crucial appropriations package which would provide \$1.2 billion in mandatory funding for emergency grant aid to students in higher education to address the issues facing students in the wake of this crisis, including many of the aforementioned concerns listed above.

A Clean Relief Package For All

Finally, UCSA believes it is crucial for Congress to ensure that any legislative solution or appropriations package aimed at providing relief to students and institutions of higher education includes ALL students and the institutions they rely on to obtain the skills necessary to enter the workforce. Congress must not pass any measures that leave out undocumented immigrants or further criminalize their communities as a part of their package.

This is a time in which leadership from our representatives is most crucial. Standing up for students is no longer an option, but a necessity in the face of this crisis. Thank you for your consideration of our requests. If you have questions, please contact UCSA Governmental Relations Director Parshan Khosravi. He can be reached at (916) 442-8280 or by email at govrelations@ucsa.org.

Sincerely,

Varsha Sarveshwar
President, UC Student Association