



Maryland Independent College  
and University Association

**Written Support**

**Senate Education, Health, and  
Environmental Affairs Committee**

***Senate Bill 66 (Elfreth) Department of Housing and Community Development –  
Office of Digital Inclusion – Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)***

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On behalf of Maryland’s independent colleges and universities and the 65,600 students we serve, thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony in support of ***Senate Bill 66 (Elfreth) – Department of Housing and Community Development – Office of Digital Inclusion***. This bill establishes the Office of Digital Inclusion in the Department of Housing and Community Development “to ensure that every resident of the state is supported in the adoption of reliable, universal, high-quality broadband Internet service at an affordable price; and has the tools necessary to use the Internet and take advantage of Internet resources.” Our students, faculty members, and staff have been impacted by the COVID-19 public health emergency along with the rest of the world, and we believe that Senate Bill 66 is a step in the right direction to begin to address some of the technology-related obstacles that have been created by a reliance on, and implementation of, remote higher education.

Following Governor Hogan’s declaration of a State of Emergency, every MICUA institution took steps to transition to virtual instruction. By March 20, 2020, all of our institutions determined that remote instruction would continue for the rest of the spring semester. During the fall 2020 semester, eight of our schools offered only virtual instruction, while five of our schools offered a de-densified socially distant residential experience with a hybrid model of both face-to-face and virtual instruction. For the spring 2021 semester, ten of our schools are offering a hybrid model of both face-to-face and virtual instruction, one will phase in a hybrid model later in the semester, and two are offering only virtual instruction. Each institution has successfully balanced the best interests of its students, faculty, and staff.

However, the implementation of remote and hybrid work and learning environments has not been without challenge. For example, students who would have typically accessed on-campus computer/technology facilities to complete classroom requirements no longer had this option during the pandemic. To alleviate some of these barriers, the MICUA member institutions established:

- laptop loaner programs for both students and faculty with contactless checkout systems;
- the provision of additional equipment, such as webcams, and hotspots, as reliable Internet access is a major obstacle for many of our students;
- a common online communication platform (one school provided all faculty with Zoom licenses);
- expanded technology help desk hours covering evenings and weekends to support students in different time zones and on different schedules; and
- technology grants for students to purchase equipment and pay for high-speed internet.

The digital divide that existed pre-pandemic has been exacerbated by the new normal. Senate Bill 66 aims to improve connectivity issues for students, faculty, and staff, among others, who do not have access to the proper tools to participate in classroom instruction or complete their assignments.

We greatly appreciate this opportunity to comment on Senate Bill 66 and we applaud the sponsor for bringing this issue before the Legislature with a proposed solution that will be meaningful to so many Maryland residents.

***For all of these reasons, MICUA requests a favorable Committee report for Senate Bill 66.***