



HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

House Bill 531

Education - Remote Learning Accommodations - Established (College Disability Education Act)

February 18, 2025

Letter of Information

Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Chang and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on House Bill 531. The bill requires ***“all public institutions of higher education to establish remote learning accommodations for students with disabilities that impede regular, in-person attendance beginning in the 2026-2027 academic year;”*** and authorizes the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) to issue waivers from the requirement. House Bill 531 establishes a grant program to cover remote learning costs.

The University System of Maryland (USM) is comprised of twelve distinguished institutions and three regional centers. We award eight out of every ten bachelor’s degrees in the state. Each of USM’s institutions has a distinct and unique approach to the mission of educating students and promoting the economic, intellectual, and cultural growth of its surrounding community. These institutions are located throughout the state, from western Maryland to the Eastern Shore, with the flagship campus in the Washington suburbs. The USM includes three Historically Black Institutions, comprehensive institutions and research universities, and the country’s largest public online institution.

Disabilities can vary widely; some might be easily recognizable while many are invisible. USM celebrates each student and recognizes the distinct attributes and strengths woven into our community. USM recognizes also that remote learning options offer students with disabilities increased flexibility, allowing individuals to learn at their own pace, manage their specific needs, access educational materials in accessible formats, and often eliminate physical barriers that might prevent them from attending traditional in-person classes, promoting greater independence and inclusion in education.

Cost considerations aside, House Bill 531 would directly impact campus disability services staff and the process by which remote learning disability accommodations are developed. The bill disregards the interactive and collaborative process to ensure that a remote learning accommodation does not fundamentally alter a course or program for the student or faculty. The fiscal impact of House Bill 531 would be felt widely across the USM. One estimated fiscal impact to a campus is over \$10 million – with upfront cost of \$7 million to upgrade the software and hardware technology of relevant classrooms, including the enhanced real-time closed captioning for any live-streamed course to meet compliance standards. At today’s rates, according to one USM institution, this would cost approximately \$185.00 per hour per class, per student. Additionally, staffing would also be required to manage an increased volume of real-time captioning requests. The impact to another USM institution is estimated at \$14.3 million.

Compounding the challenge presented in House Bill 531 is the fact that program and accreditation requirements may not allow for remote options and such a change would have major financial implication for the USM institutions. Each academic program has different academic and accreditation requirements, objectives, and milestones. If a course is even eligible for remote learning, those determinations would be applied on a case-by-case basis, depending on the type of course (laboratory research, didactic, simulation, research courses, seminar, workshop, clinical rotations, field work, internship, etc.). Some accreditors may not allow virtual learning for its program or type of course and may impact the technical standards of programs.

Many of USM's professional students take board or licensure exams and remote learning could potentially impact their eligibility for these exams. Recording policies, technology, and accessibility varies per school and is changing every year. Some campuses may not have livestream capabilities and bandwidth in some cases where an accommodation is demanded. The current educational support and disability services functions would need to change, as well as the provision of faculty training, support, and preparation to teach livestream/virtual/hybrid/in person as required.

The USM knows you're well aware of the current budget climate as we all are. The recently proposed deductions to our budget of 5% equate to \$111 million. This is in addition to last year's cut and another mid-year cut to the FY25 budget which leaves the USM down over \$180 million cumulatively in FY25 and FY26.

The USM hopes to continue the conversation regarding the potential impact of House Bill 531.

