Supporting Broadband Is an Investment Postsecondary Students

Broadband access is essential for student success. The days of optional access to the internet for postsecondary students are over. Ninety-six percent of postsecondary students reported that they used the internet for schoolwork. These included both students who live and do school work on campus, and the 37% of postsecondary students who are adult learners, likely doing schoolwork at home. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to 97% of students switching to online education. Without high-speed broadband and the tools to effectively access the internet, entire swaths of students are at serious risk of falling behind in their education and losing out on eventual job opportunities.

Unfortunately, even before COVID-19, approximately 42 million Americans didn't have broadband at home, with nearly 20% of college students lacking either the broadband or devices they need to get online. During COVID-19, this number soared, with millions more struggling to afford broadband. Early results from a survey to understand COVID-19's impact on postsecondary students found that about 30% reported some difficulty with internet connectivity when accessing course material. This lack of access disproportionately affects rural, Tribal, and minority communities. Twenty-six percent of those in rural areas and more than half of those in rural Tribal areas lack access to fixed broadband. Moreover, only 66% of African Americans and 61% of Hispanics report having broadband at home. Even if these students have access to wireless internet through a mobile device, data plans are often capped -- making it difficult to engage in data-intensive activities, like online classes. Congress must prioritize policies that promote broadband access and adoption to keep all students on track.

The Benefits of Broadband for Postsecondary Students

Broadband allows those who might otherwise struggle to access postsecondary education because of cost or time constraints to get an education.

- Online learning can be more affordable than in-person education. One report found that online courses can save between $12-66 per credit hour, which ranges from 3-50% of the average credit hour costs. Broadband access can also save students money by allowing students to utilize publicly-available online textbooks for free. Without this option, many students are unable to afford required course materials. A study of Florida postsecondary students showed that 67% did not purchase a required textbook because of its price.

- In addition, broadband offers increased flexibility for the postsecondary students that need it -- such as students who are older, working, or parenting. A recent study found that working students or those with dependents are more likely to prefer mostly- or completely-online community college courses. Forty-seven percent of postsecondary students enrolled in online education have done so because existing commitments don't allow them to attend in-person classes.

- Broadband can also be utilized to provide on-the-job training, allowing students to earn wages while training for a career. The Institute for American Apprenticeships offers fully-online programs, where apprentices can take courses in medical coding, as well as do medical coding work from home. Other programs can recreate workplaces online, including hospital rooms. For example, the Nevada State Library and College of Southern Nevada uses virtual reality to immerse trainees in the experience of being a dialysis technician.

- Those without access to broadband are less likely to have the digital skills that will enable them to succeed in the Future of Work. Many employers are using online classes to train workers for the skills that they will need in the future.

- Online learning can reduce emissions. For every student enrolled in an online class, CO_2 emissions decrease an average of 148 pounds per semester due to less frequent commuting.