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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

January 13, 2021

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
United States Government Accountability Office
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

Every institution of higher education (IHE) serves current or incoming students with disabilities and who require accommodations to access the same opportunities as their peers. These accommodations are necessary for students to access the full range of academic programs and other services offered by their IHE, including classes, co-curricular activities, advising, registration, and counseling.

Under normal circumstances, accessing the appropriate accommodations can prove challenging for students in higher education. Common barriers to accessing accommodations in higher education include social stigma, financial costs incurred by students to document and prove a disability, and the lack of knowledge of available accommodations.¹ During the COVID-19 pandemic, students face many of the same challenges in accessing appropriate accommodations as they did prior to the pandemic, but must now do so navigating remote and distanced learning. Recent news reports indicate that the challenges in meeting these required accommodations have sharply increased during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the move to online or remote instruction² and increases in needed mental health supports.³

While online or remote instruction has accelerated due to the pandemic, colleges had already been increasingly reliant on technologies such as chat and videoconferencing, complex learning management systems, online collaboration tools, and instructional videos to deliver educational instruction. Even when students have access to adequate broadband and technology, these teaching modalities can, without forethought and planning, introduce particular challenges in meeting accessibility standards that are legally mandated through the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), resulting in potentially negative effects on the academic achievement and co-curricular learning of students with disabilities. Meanwhile, despite the requirement to make their products accessible, course developers may not be

¹ McGregor, K. K., Langenfeld, N., Van Horne, S., Oleson, J., Anson, M., & Jacobson, W. (2016, May). The University Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5033508/>

² Anderson, G. (2020, April 6). Remote learning shift leaves students with disabilities behind. Retrieved December 03, 2020, from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/06/remote-learning-shift-leaves-students-disabilities-behind>

³ Anderson, G. (2020, September 11). Students in great need of mental health support during pandemic. Retrieved December 03, 2020, from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/09/11/students-great-need-mental-health-support-during-pandemic>

accustomed to providing the range and volume of accommodations needed by students with disabilities in the vast variety of learning environments students find themselves during the pandemic. Some examples of instructional modification include, videos that must be captioned to serve deaf and hard-of-hearing students; diagrams, charts, and illustrations that need alt-text and embedded descriptions to be accessible for blind and low-vision students and students with some other types of processing disabilities; the ability to choose the color, font, size, and dimension of text and charts and graphs characteristics to make them accessible to students with colorblindness or other type of visual and cognitive process disabilities; the availability of interpreters or CART services for students who are lip readers or are deaf for situations where instructors must use a mask to reduce the risk of transmittal or contracting COVID-19; the availability of online software that is accessible to students using alternative access devices because they have mobility disabilities; and the use of text-to-speech technologies, which allow students with a reading disability, such as dyslexia, to listen to and read along with the text.

Past Government Accountability Office (GAO) work in this area has focused on the accessibility of public K-12 facilities (GAO-20-448) and special education services received by Native American students with disabilities (GAO-20-358). We request that GAO conduct a review of accessibility services and accommodations in higher education. Specifically, we request that GAO examine the following questions:

- 1) What challenges, if any, do college students with disabilities face related to accessibility and accommodations at institutions of higher education, including any related to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) How have some institutions of higher education supported students with disabilities, including during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Please contact Brittany Matthews of my staff at Brittany_Matthews@hassan.senate.gov or (202) 816-9501 to discuss the details and timing of this GAO review.

Sincerely,

/s/ Margaret Wood Hassan

Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator

/s/ Robert P. Casey, Jr.

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

/s/ Bill Cassidy, M.D.

Bill Cassidy, M.D.
United States Senator