October 21, 2020

Kathryn Barger, Chair
Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors
500 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Chair Barger,

We are writing to request, respectfully, that Los Angeles County institutions of higher education be permitted to responsibly bring students back to campus, once we have submitted a clear, scientifically-based plan for limiting the spread of COVID-19. Educational disruption of the magnitude we have seen this spring and fall is not sustainable, nor is it in the best interests of our students, our communities and the wider society. It is also not sustainable for our local economy, both immediately and in the future.

Colleges and universities across the nation have been challenged since March with balancing the difficult decisions surrounding a safe return to campus. Here in Los Angeles County, institutions of higher education have worked closely with public health officials since the beginning of the pandemic to promote safety for our campuses and wider communities.

Over the summer, even in the face of severe economic pressures, colleges and universities countywide invested heavily in preparing their campuses and adapting their practices to promote the safe return of students for fall. But the rate of COVID-19 spread at that time and resulting county public health guidance for higher education forced nearly all of their students—many at the last minute—to take courses and co-curricular programs remotely.

Though the August public health order was understandable, the county’s colleges and universities are now well-prepared to have groups of students safely return, as we have continued to prepare and learn from successful approaches elsewhere.

We thank you as a Board of Supervisors for your role in our preparedness. The Economic Resilience Task Force you established this past spring was a success in that it provided us as sector leaders with interdependent guidance on safe reopening. The same was happening at a state level with the Governor’s Reopening Council. We don’t know of any other county or state nationally that had the foresight to consider not only public health but economic vitality in establishing these sector task forces and reopening councils.

We believe that in L.A. County the Spring 2021 term should be treated differently than the Fall 2020 term. We want students to begin returning to campus, physically distancing in our residence halls rather
than cramming unregulated into houses and apartments nearby. We want students on campus where their academic, emotional, social and physical needs can be met. Our campuses provide healthy meals, physical security, social support communities, encouraging counselors, health care access, faculty who mentor them, all among the many benefits of a first-rate residential education.

Colleges across the U.S. have proven what works: strong preparation and implementation of safety measures alongside committed community compliance. When working closely with their local public health partners, institutions nationwide are successfully limiting and monitoring the spread of COVID-19, preserving the health of students and employees on and off their campuses without compromising their commitment to educational excellence.

The stories are certainly widespread of colleges with COVID-19 case surges or universities that have opened only to require students return home weeks later. These, however, are far more the exception than the rule, and many more colleges have stayed open and are managing their campuses safely without compromising their educational quality.

Universities and colleges in major urban centers across the country have proven they can offer on-campus learning and living while implementing protocols on testing, tracing, quarantining, isolating, masking, disinfecting, distancing and the like. They are COVID success stories. Rice University in Houston, Tufts University in Boston, NYU in New York, DePaul University in Chicago and the University of Dallas are current examples this fall of metropolitan universities managing a safe return to campus.

If we cannot safely return students to campus here in Los Angeles County, not only will our students suffer but institutions that serve the public will be weakened as well. Some institutions will be forced to lay off or furlough more faculty and staff, cut back on spending, draw down investments and shutter good programs. Not returning groups of students to campuses in the spring term will undoubtedly disadvantage us and Los Angeles County by contrast with other universities and the counties in which they reside. For these reasons, we wonder why it is that L.A. County, which recently has had some of the lowest rates of COVID transmission in the United States, would not allow groups of students to resume on-campus living and learning.

There is a high societal cost to keeping campuses closed. Colleges and universities serve on the front lines of this pandemic by graduating students into fields of education and public policy. We provide hospitals and clinics with healthcare professionals. Our researchers search for cures and treatments and advance other novel technologies and discoveries. We educate more women than men. We enroll and enable the success of DACA students, first generation students, low income students, adult students and under-served students who have been cruelly impacted by COVID. We support students who long to finish college and graduate into careers that continue our thriving society.

Collectively, our L.A. County-based, diverse institutions of higher education position the county as one of the nation’s premier intellectual hubs and contribute greatly to the flourishing of countless individuals and our entire region. Now that we are approaching 2021, we are concerned of the effect another carte blanche campus shutdown will have on our students and the strength of the county’s higher education sector.

Colleges and universities in other California counties and outside of the state have already been permitted to repopulate their campuses with groups of students while abiding by established health and safety protocols. We should be afforded a similar opportunity to safely move forward.
Throughout the county with few exceptions, colleges and universities have been diligent this fall in complying with LACDPH orders by keeping our campuses closed. Yet even in our closures, exceptions have been made. Some of these allowances pose seeming inconsistencies that have further confounded our efforts to manage student and faculty expectations. For example, intercollegiate athletes are permitted to access housing and compete regardless of need while this was not true for educating, for instance, upper-class students or first-year students. Students who demonstrate housing insecurity have been able to live on campus, as they should, but others with legitimate reasons have been excluded.

If we cannot assure a safe and appropriate return to campus for more students in the spring, many students will reach a tipping point that may impair greatly their post-secondary education or result in their transferring to other schools. We have heard from many students these very real possibilities. We are concerned about both learning loss for students and the economic toll for communities as campuses remain largely shuttered.

Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to L.A. County’s institutions of higher learning, we recommend flexibility for colleges and universities for Spring 2021 as they make decisions on a phased repopulating of their campuses based on each unique situation. Allowing colleges to move forward, abiding by the state’s guidelines and informing LACDPH as required, is the better approach to a safe campus start for our county’s colleges and universities as 2021 begins.

Thank you, Chair Barger, and thank you as a Board of Supervisors for your diligence in managing the multiple factors it takes for a safe and flourishing reopening of Los Angeles County and its diverse institutions of higher learning. With your guidance, we look forward to adding names to support this request from other leaders of our county’s colleges and universities.

Sincerely yours,

Barry H. Corey
President, Biola University
Chair, Assoc. of Independent California Colleges and Universities Exec. Committee
Chair, L.A. County Economic Resiliency Task Force Education Sector Work Team
G. Gabrielle Starr

President, Pomona College
Member, Assoc. of Independent California Colleges and Universities Exec. Committee
Chair, AICCU Council for Independent Higher Education Reopening Council
Member, Governor’s Higher Education Recovery with Equity Taskforce

cc: Supervisors Hilda Solis, Janice Hahn, Mark Ridley-Thomas, Sheila Kuehl
The following Los Angeles County institutions of higher learning have endorsed this letter by adding their name in support of petitioning for a safe return to our campuses for the academic terms beginning in 2021:

Paul Ferguson
President
Azusa Pacific University

Thomas F. Rosenbaum
President
California Institute of Technology

Ravi Rajan
President
California Institute of the Arts

Hiram E. Chodosh
President
Claremont-McKenna College

Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan
President
Claremont School of Theology

Mark Labberton
President
Fuller Theological Seminary

Maria Klawe
President
Harvey Mudd College

Angela Richey
President
Life Pacific University

Timothy Law Snyder
President
Loyola Marymount University

Ann McElaney-Johnson
President
Mount Saint Mary’s University

Harry J. Elam, Jr.
President
Occidental College

Charles Hirschhorn
President
Otis College of Art and Design
Jack Paduntin  
President  
Pacific Oaks College

Jim Gash  
President and CEO  
Pepperdine University

Melvin Oliver  
President  
Pitzer College

David Corbin  
Vice President for Academic Affairs  
Providence Christian College

Nathan Long  
President  
Saybrook University

Michele Nealon  
President  
The Chicago School of Professional Psychology

Devorah Lieberman  
President  
University of LaVerne

Minh-Hoa Ta  
President  
University of the West

Daniel R. Wilson  
President  
Western University of Health Sciences