Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader McCarthy, Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Peters, Chairwoman Maloney and Ranking Member Jordan:

As America experiences the harsh economic consequences of COVID-19, university and college towns also face another significant consequence: a Census undercount that could impact community quality of life for the next decade. We ask for your support to maintain an accurate 2020 Census count and help these communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the country in many ways, and university communities feel those impacts acutely: students are not allowed to return to their rooms, apartments, and homes, and many are falling behind on their rent to local landlords; small businesses throughout college towns are hurting; and academic, theatre, arts, sporting, and other events that bring visitors to these communities have been cancelled. However, no economic costs may be greater to these towns than taking the Census count in the midst of this pandemic.

Census counts shape outcomes for communities for the next ten years – from federal grants to economic development prospects to housing and transportation planning to the makeup of Congressional Districts. Due to the unique circumstances of COVID-19, large numbers of these university communities’ residents were absent on the day that matters the most, April 1, because many student-residents had moved out in March, when universities closed their campuses.

By doing what was best for residents’ health, university communities now face a potential Census undercount with consequences that could last a decade. Throughout March and April, university and college towns, like those described below, were already reporting dramatic shifts in population and economic stability:
Athens, OH, is a town of 24,000, according to the last Census estimate, and home of Ohio University, a large public research university with 18,000 students based at the Athens campus, which makes up a substantial portion of the city’s population. In the wake of COVID-19, the census counts in two “canary-in-the-coal-mine” census precincts with large student populations are down 20% or more compared to 2010 rates. Reflecting the impact are the month-to-date economic declines compared to last year: 71.9% decrease in commercial income tax and a 60.7% decrease in resident income tax. Additionally, April lodging is off 36% as large university events, like graduation, are cancelled.

Ames, IA, home of Iowa State University, was ranked the #1 college town in America in 2019 and had the nation’s lowest unemployment rate, at 1.7%, in February of 2020. The city now faces budget challenges because many of the 30,773 student-residents, roughly half of the community’s 67,154 population, have left because of the pandemic. Due to COVID-response, Ames’ estimates show a $9.1 million shortfall for FY19-20, with more losses assured for FY 20-21 if the pandemic continues. Hotel revenue losses, in just seven weeks, total $2.7 million, with two local hotels closing. Essential utilities have been hit hard: water revenue is down $380,000; sewer down, $470,000; transportation down, $700,000; and electric revenue down over $4.5 million. The joint Ames-ISU CyRide Transit Agency, operating the busiest bus route in Iowa by ridership, has gone from 33,000 passengers per day pre-COVID to 1,000 or fewer passengers per day.

Ithaca, NY, is one of America’s top small cities and home to Cornell University and Ithaca College, but the local economy has been heavily impacted by COVID-19. Ithaca and Tompkins County now face an estimated loss of $4 million per week because the 25,000 student-residents have left the community. The city’s budget shortfall could be as high as $13 million and the University’s estimated financial loss for the Ithaca and Cornell Tech campuses is at least $160 million. Early April (1-19) comparisons show 3,526 hotel nights booked this year compared to 34,856 in April of 2019, which brought in $5.4 million of revenue. Because of COVID-19, room tax revenue is off 41% from the original forecast, while air travel was also down 41% this March; April and May will likely be worse, with commencement postponed on both campuses. Bus ridership is now down 95% compared to last year.

State College, PA, the home of Penn State University, was one of the top 10 college towns in America in 2019. With a student population of over 30,000, State College has more student-residents than any other borough in Pennsylvania and the third highest ridership of public transportation in the state, behind Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Municipal estimates now place the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic at $1.7 million, including $700,000 of lost parking revenue, and this number will likely grow. The local hospitality industry reports that March revenues alone are down $3.5 million due to occupancy rates that are down almost 60% compared to last year.

Mt. Pleasant, MI, is a mid-Michigan town of 26,000 and home to Central Michigan University. Students comprise approximately half of the city’s population and most departed the area when the university closed due COVID-19. Census response rates in student-heavy neighborhoods now trail other neighborhoods by 20-30%. State stay-at-home orders cancelled all Census events and door-to-door outreach and prohibited the City from providing computer stations at City Hall, libraries, and senior facilities to assist those without internet access. Mt. Pleasant’s economy is heavily impacted by tourism, and COVID-19 has led to the closure of all but 5 of the 18 lodging properties in the area. The Soaring Eagle Casino, the largest gaming floor in the Midwest, is currently closed and has laid off 4,000 employees.
You can help us make sure that the 2020 Census is a correct count, not a COVID count, by supporting the following proposals:

1. Provide the Census Bureau direction to make essential and potentially unprecedented adjustments to their methods where COVID-19 has skewed accurate counts, especially in historically undercounted communities like university communities, and direct the Bureau to set up a working group to advise them on how to address the COVID-19 impact.

2. Provide an Emergency COVID-19 Accurate Census Count Fund in addition to existing Census resources to allow communities with substantial shifts in their count, such as university communities, to directly apply for funds to complete a recount or take additional outreach actions to reach an acceptable response rate while socially distanced, such as remote “Get Out the Count” activities.

3. Support H.R.6467, the Coronavirus Community Relief Act, and its Senate companion to provide local university communities a financial relief lifeline as they handle the tremendous loss of economic activity and strive to recover.

As we all navigate through this unprecedented time, your leadership and your support of America’s college towns are even more important. We will follow up with your staff to discuss the inclusion of these items in the next COVID-19 recovery package being negotiated by Congress. We look forward to continuing working together at all levels to provide essential services to our communities and rebuild our economic foundation as we recover.

Thank you,

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