

- Rappahannock Community College serves a 12 county service region and it is all rural and it is marked by five major rivers, multiple creeks. And broadband is difficult for us to have, but as an educational institution, whose mission is to provide inclusive access to exceptional educational and training opportunities to meet the needs of our learners and to prepare those to be employees, we have to have broadband. We can't meet our mission otherwise. All of our courses involve some technological component. Everything has an online component. This was exacerbated by the pandemic. And so those who don't have broadband are just left without an opportunity. Prior to the pandemic, 19% of our students didn't have broadband. And fall at 20, during the middle of the pandemic, we still had 18% without broadband. Can you imagine sitting, trying to do a zoom class without having broadband access on your smartphone or in your car in a parking lot, trying to get high speed internet. So it is really critical to us to be able to prepare our citizens to be the future employees of our world. We know that if 18% of our students don't have broadband, that's significant for our population, but what's really important is all the students were missing. Those students who didn't even bother who said, "I can't do it because I have no way to be able to complete my coursework." So we look at those that are enrolled, that we're not serving, but what we're really missing is the greater population who have just lost the opportunity for higher education in our service region. And we are the only educational institution that actually has the footprint. In these 12 counties, so we have, this is where our campuses are located. But when you don't have students on campus, and even when you do, you cannot successfully complete coursework for any higher education institution without having quality internet access. It's important that we provide these opportunities and the flexibility because we are hopeful that actually our students we have over 80%, more like 85% of our students are part-time. So they're also working. So they've got to fit in all these demands. And so broadband is absolutely critical for them to be able to access their courses. More of our students were not successful in the spring of 2020, and then we've had less students. And we were more greatly impacted than other places in Virginia. Our enrollment in our region was down 10% in the fall, 13% in spring. All across the state the average was 6%. And I would directly attribute that to broadband access. Broadband is like electricity these days. And we just create a further socioeconomic divide by not providing that access to all. So we ended up with the haves having more and have-nots having less. And so those of us that have access to broadband, we need to support that effort because it's best for our entire community. It's that old adage that, and I like to use this in our service region, that all boats rise with the tide. So we wanna make sure that we look at that as it's actually better for everyone involved if everyone has access to broadband.