REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
HBCU PRESIDENTS' ROUNDTABLE:
BUILDING AN EQUITABLE, CONNECTED FUTURE
FEBRUARY 18, 2021

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining me for my second HBCU Presidents' Roundtable. I truly look forward to that day when we gather again for an in-person session and are able to do so safely. And who knows? Maybe we'll be able to meet up during homecoming season one of these days. I do believe that it is incredibly important to revisit the conversation we had last year about the intersection of the digital divide and HBCUs – so that we can understand the work that has been done, what remains, and cross-collaborate on what we can all do to keep pushing forward, even in the face of headwinds. I appreciate you all taking the time to participate in this panel discussion today. As many of you know, I similarly recently re-convened a group to continue the dialogue about the future of work, and how we are going to reskill and upskill the Black and Latinx workforce that has been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, along with how to rebuild our small, Black-owned businesses.

HBCUs have rightfully been in the spotlight over the last several months, but we all know that HBCUs have truly presided as cornerstones of Black communities across this nation for generations. Our community has always treasured these precious institutions because they produce our most innovative, entrepreneurial, and socially conscious leaders. When you leave the hallowed halls of these institutions as alumni, faculty, staff, or even as a visitor, you leave feeling a sense of pride because you are reminded of how Black communities press on in spite of the barriers.

Over the course of this pandemic, it has been evident that systemic inequities in healthcare, education, and employment persist, and it is HBCU students, faculty, and alumni who continue to push for political, social, and economic justice. But in order for these institutions to continue producing our next generation of leaders, especially during a time where distance learning is widespread, we must ensure that these students have affordable, reliable access to broadband whether they are sheltering in place in their hometowns of Albany, Georgia or Memphis, Tennessee. There is so much at stake.

HBCUs graduate about 20 percent of all Black undergrads. Additionally, over half of HBCU students are first-generation college students and nearly 75 percent of HBCU students are eligible for Pell Grants. Pell Grant recipients are automatically eligible for the FCC's new Emergency Broadband Benefit, which will provide them with the affordable connected devices and broadband networks that we know they need to complete their studies. The statistics show us that we must make crucial investments to connect HBCU students, and more broadly, to the

communities they come from and the areas surrounding these institutions. The time to make these investments has never been more urgent. Just within the last week, 17 Senators sent a letter to Senate leadership encouraging them to craft a recovery package with additional emergency funds for HBCUs, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and other Minority Serving Institutions to support them through this historic crisis that continues to disproportionately impact people of color.

At the FCC, I've made an investment of my own through the recent launch of our Early Career Staff Diversity Initiative, which is a brand new program that will lead to paid internship opportunities and increased recruitment of students and recent graduates—including specifically from HBCUs— to ensure there is more representation of employees from underrepresented backgrounds to work at the FCC. The telecommunications and technology spaces in this country must better reflect the diversity of our nation, which is something I know our guests here know well since 25 percent of Black graduates with STEM degrees come from HBCUs. Success in these powerhouse sectors of our economy will change the social and economic fabric of Black and other marginalized communities across America.

It is past time that we have an equitable and connected country, but where there are gaps, we're going to be dependent on the folks listening in and participating here today to make investments in our HBCU students, bolster our anchor institutions, including HBCUs, and guide Black STEM professionals over the course of their careers.

And here with me today to discuss these pressing issues are change agents from across the country. We have a returning participant to this discussion, Dr. Wayne A.I. Frederick, who is the President of Howard University. Thank you for joining us again. Also, I'm pleased to welcome Dr. Tony Allen, President of Delaware State University; Dr. Glenda Glover, President of Tennessee State University; and Dr. David A. Thomas, who is a native of my hometown of Kansas City and the President of Morehouse College.

The moderator for this discussion is Dr. Dominique Harrison, who received her Ph.D. from Howard University. I have two Howard graduates who work in my office, so they always make it a point to remind me when there is another Howard graduate in the room. Dr. Harrison is the Director of Technology Policy at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. She leads the Joint Center's work on key tech policy issues affecting Black communities, including those related to data privacy, access to and adoption of broadband, ad targeting, and artificial intelligence. I'll now turn things over to Dr. Harrison. Thank you all for joining us here today.