Problem: The State of Louisiana has faced significant challenges long before Hurricane Katrina devastated the City of New Orleans. Based on 2006 U.S. Census data, the State of Louisiana ranked 1st in the percentage of its population living in poverty; 3rd in lowest median income ($32,566) and 3rd in the portion of its workforce that is unemployed. Twenty-seven percent of those living in poverty are children and 17% are seniors. Almost a quarter of the population lives in rural parishes as defined by the USDA. Of the 35 rural parishes in Louisiana, 32 are Black high-poverty parishes. The two groups, who are the most technologically and economically disadvantaged, rural residents and minorities, are one and the same in Louisiana. The lack of broadband technology is wide reaching and deep within Louisiana and if not addressed, this division will only further dampen job training and creation efforts. The State of Louisiana has a unique disadvantage in that both its rural communities are technologically un-served or underserved and its largest metropolitan areas are underserved. Statewide broadband penetration is less than 55% with an average of just 470 Kbps, placing Louisiana at 36th in speed ranking. Unless an efficient intervention is implemented, the digital divide for Louisiana’s rural and minority communities will continue to widen. Solution: To bridge the broadband divide in targeted communities, broadband equipped Public Computer Centers (PCC) will be established utilizing the facilities of the University, libraries and community support organizations. Each campus has long-standing and formalized relationships with a vast array of community partners. Our approach is to take advantage of an already existing network of SUS facilities, and community partners. Implementation of the proposed Initiative utilizes existing, operating libraries, churches, and facilities of the University which have a successful record of sustained operations. The Southern University System (SUS) will be the grant recipient and is capable of implementing the proposed Initiative along with its key partner the Alliance for Digital Equality (ADE). Southern University was initially chartered in April 1880, and has an impressive record of growth and successful operations. There are very few organizations within the State of Louisiana that can better serve the rural, unserved and underserved populations within the state. A total of 12 PCCs will be established with an additional 212 computers made available for public access. It is projected that 70,000 residents in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Shreveport and five rural areas of Louisiana will be provided access to computers and the Internet. In a predominantly rural state like Louisiana that is challenged by dwindling resources, escalating population needs and lack of access to broadband and other services, the Southern University System’s solution of using its facilities and community relationships to reach and serve local populations is not only cost effective, but creates a firm foundation for continuation beyond the term of the project. It also creates a template that other organizations and communities can use to provide and increase broadband usage among their citizens.
SUS, itself a HBCU, serves minority, low-income and educationally disadvantaged students throughout Louisiana and the nation. As a result, SUS has particular sensitivity and experience in serving the demographic proposed in the implementation of public computer centers. The size and geography of Louisiana is such that the Southern campuses in metropolitan areas like New Orleans, Baton Rouge and Shreveport, also serve rural parishes as a normal part of their community outreach, enabling these anchor institutions to address the issue of unserved and underserved communities. A total of 25 jobs will be created as a direct result of this funding, along with 154 induced jobs, and 2 indirect jobs.