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**STATEMENT OF LORI PLATO
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY SENIOR
BEFORE THE SECRETARY'S COMMISSION ON THE
FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE, DECEMBER 9, 2005**

Good afternoon. My name is Lori Plato. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to appear today before the Commission on the Future of Higher Education and to offer some thoughts from the perspective of a current consumer of higher education. I am honored to be participating on a panel with two other students who have demonstrated such personal commitment to attending college and making the most of their experiences.

I am a senior at Vanderbilt University studying Biology and Public Policy, with a concentration in healthcare. I am originally from Columbus, Ohio and began attending Vanderbilt in the fall following my graduation from high school. In addition to my studies, I also work for two offices within Vanderbilt's Division of Public Affairs, spending a total of about 15 hours a week on these part-time jobs. I am also involved in several community service organizations, such as Collegiate Leadership Vanderbilt and Delta Gamma sorority.

When exploring my available options for achieving a higher education, I came across several different types of schools offering different paths towards obtaining a bachelor's degree. Though every institution and academic path has its own benefits to students, I have found that my decision to attend a four-year institution immediately after high school has been the best option for me and my field of study.

For me, selecting a college was a challenging process because there are so many options available to potential college students. The higher education system is so diverse that students are able to evaluate their interests, personalities, and future plans and combine these different values into an effective tool for selecting a college. I believe that this alone helps contribute to students' intellectual growth, primarily because the college search marks the first time in a student's life when they are able to ask what type of school suits their interests, rather than finding their interests in a school's curriculum. My personal search for a college in a system with so many choices was an enriching experience because I was able to assess myself and my future goals by visiting schools in different geographic areas, of differing size, and with different academic strengths. In doing this, I was able to find an institution that catered to my academic interests, while also allowing me to thrive socially in a community suited to my personality.

The high school I attended was a private, college preparatory school, though I did not attend the school with the goal of gaining admittance to a leading university; rather, I chose to attend such a school with the intention of receiving a quality education. Because of this opportunity, I feel that I came to college equipped with the necessary tools to succeed. Academically my transition was relatively easy, though some minor adjustments were necessary. I realize how fortunate I am to have had such an experience; I witnessed several of my peers experiencing much more difficult transitions to the rigors of college-level studies.

My time at Vanderbilt has been extremely beneficial to me in terms of personal and intellectual growth. As mentioned, I am a double major in biology and public policy and am particularly interested in healthcare. This unique combination has allowed me to experience a

wide variety of classroom settings and teaching styles. I have been in nearly every classroom setting, ranging from the one hundred fifty student lectures to the small, discussion based classes. I believe all of my classes and instructors to be high quality, with many instructors being specialists in their respective class's specific topic within a broader discipline. Larger classes took more effort on my part as a student to reach out and make connections with the material, since classroom environments with more than one hundred students make individual monitoring by the professor nearly impossible. I have never experienced a professor who did not at least attempt to assist a struggling or confused student, and many campus resources are available to offer students academic assistance.

In terms of the quality of my education, I feel that my family and I have made a good investment that will benefit me for the rest of my life. In taking a wide variety of courses throughout my studies, I have learned a considerable amount of concrete, factual information. However, I think the most important lesson I will take away from college is that I have learned "how to think." That is, upon entering this university, I found myself intellectually challenged to not only learn new things, but to think about each concept in a new way, using new analysis skills. I have learned how to apply what I learn in class to broader issues facing the world today. The ability to critically analyze problems and form my own educated opinions about the world to the extent I am able to today is something that I do not believe I would be able to do without a college education.

Given what I have learned the past four years, I hope to take my experiences from Vanderbilt and work within the healthcare industry making policies. I plan to do this by first

gaining exposure to health policy by working in a health related organization and then likely attending graduate school. While I feel very confident that the education I received at Vanderbilt has prepared me for the workplace, I realize that there are some very practical aspects of the workplace that I must experience before deciding which type of graduate school is best suited to my interests. I have no doubt that I will be able to apply my knowledge and become a valued member of my future workplace.