

# Archived Information

## SECRETARY'S COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Testimony

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished commissioners, and guests, I'm honored to participate in this national dialogue on our higher education system.

My name is Mari Sela Corales. I am a 29-year-old student from San Antonio, Texas. I am currently enrolled at St. Philip's Community College and Texas State University. I have completed an associate's degree in culinary arts and will soon complete a second associate's degree in restaurant management. At Texas State I'm working on a Bachelors Degree in Occupational Studies. After completing my degree at Texas State I plan on teaching hospitality in high school.

I also serve as southern region vice president of Delta Epsilon Chi, the college division of DECA, an international career and technology student organization with more than 220,000 high school and college members.

My comments today are based on my personal experiences and my discussions with and observation of students in both high school and college during my three-year involvement with DECA/Delta Epsilon Chi.

Please allow me to briefly describe my personal experiences.

My path has not been easy. A child of divorced parents with few resources, I struggled in school, particularly high school. My involvement with the school choir was the one bright point in my high school experience. With poor study habits and without a strong sense of direction, I passed by the “skin of my teeth,” as my mother used to say. By 22, I had failed at my first try at college, joined the Marines and been dismissed because I was pregnant, had two children, lived in and out of shelters and lost custody of my children. I moved back home with my parents and a year later regained custody of my children. At 25, I met and married my husband and started rebuilding my life.

With the support and encouragement of my husband I enrolled in St. Philip’s College’s Culinary Arts program. We started the process of applying for admission, academic assessment and financial aid. Getting started was fairly easy, it only took about an hour to be admitted to the college, and by the end of the day I knew what classes I needed to take and I was enrolled. The hardest part was paying for it all. I applied for financial aid and didn’t receive my award till almost the middle of the semester. Fortunately, my husband had credit cards, and we paid for tuition until I received my award. Financial aid was definitely the deciding factor for allowing me to stay in school. After my first semester, I no longer qualified for the Pell Grant to cover the full amount of tuition and had to rely on scholarships, grants and loans to get me by. Most of my friends don’t want to deal with financial aid and go straight for the student loans.

At St. Philips I found an atmosphere that allowed me to develop a clear vision of my potential and the support I needed to succeed. The classes are

small and have a student teacher ratio of 1 to 21. The instructors always have time to help you out no matter what you need. I joined Delta Epsilon Chi at the encouragement of my faculty advisor. In Delta Epsilon Chi I found a way to connect with other students, build a strong sense of community and community service and develop my leadership skills. Through Delta Epsilon Chi competition and conferences I have grown in confidence and developed a valuable network of business contacts.

With that as background I'd like to make three recommendations to the commission.

1. Success in higher education starts in elementary and high school. The current emphasis on academic preparation is a very good start. However, academic preparation is only a part of the solution. Students, particularly high school students need to develop clear understandings of how their interests, passions and skills can translate into careers. They need to know exactly what higher education pathway leads to their career interest and how high school courses help in the transition from high school to college. As a future hospitality teacher and someone who has worked in the industry for several years, not only do I want to assist students with the vital transition to college and the workforce, I want to be a role model. We need to make sure that high school curriculums are rich with options and opportunities for students to develop both academic and career skills, and we need to do this in a nurturing environment. Student organizations like DECA, choir, and student government can play an

- important role in providing a place for every student to develop leadership and to foster community service.
2. The cost of higher education is a huge barrier for many students. It needs to be a little easier to pay for college. The criteria for qualifying for financial aid are often too high for even low-income families to meet. Student loans become a huge burden for students once they have completed their education. Graduates often face loans of \$50,000 to \$75,000 as they are starting careers. Average starting wages in most industries have not kept pace with the increasing education costs. We need to find ways to reduce the real cost of higher education to students, not just provide more loans.
  3. Too many students are not successful in college. Most students who enter college do not graduate. I believe colleges can be too impersonal with very large classes and little guidance. We need to find a way to provide formal and informal support systems in higher education that nurture students and create the environment of success. Perhaps rewarding faculty for quality teaching and mentoring students as well as academic research is a partial solution.

I have traveled a rocky road to get where I am today. I have a wonderful family who support me and who remind me how proud they are of me all the time. Without them, I would never have come this far.

I'm honored to be a part of this discussion, and I am happy to answer any questions you might have.