

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS
FIELD HEARING

Fulfilling the Promise of an Affordable College Education

Monday, April 21, 10:00 a.m.

Ohio State University, Michael E. Moritz College of Law

WRITTEN TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY

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My name is Debra Van Camp, and I am a junior at Ohio State pursuing a dual degree in Food Science and Nutrition and Agribusiness and Applied Economics. I thank you for opportunity to offer a student perspective at this hearing. I think it is appropriate that you have chosen to host a hearing on the topic of educational access at Ohio State, because this University truly epitomizes the values of the 1862 Morrill Act under which it was established to provide quality post-secondary education that would be “accessible to all”. I also believe our meeting is extremely timely as we are at a critical point in higher education and our country’s history. When the Morrill Act passed in 1862 the United States was engaged in a divisive civil war, but our leaders chose to make higher education a priority because they knew it was essential step to moving the country forward. Today as a country we find ourselves again engaged in a divisive war and operating in a very competitive global economy. Now once again the nation’s leaders have the choice of what priority to give higher education. This morning I would like to illustrate that federal support of education is the most fundamental key to our economic future by sharing my own personal experiences.

In the spring of 2005, I became the first-ever Fairfield County Land Grant Scholarship recipient. The Ohio State Land Grant Scholarship Program provides a full scholarship to at least one student in each of Ohio’s eighty-eight counties on the basis of academic merit and high financial need. I will never forget the day I opened my award letter from Ohio State and felt an enormous burden being lifted from my shoulders as I read that all of my college expenses would be covered. At the time I was living with my high school agriculture education teachers, Rich and Cyndi Brill, who are coincidentally both Ohio State graduates. They had become incredible mentors to me after my family went through a very complicated divorce my junior year. I knew when I was awarded the Land Grant Scholarship I had been given a tremendous opportunity, which I would not take for granted.

During my first year of college I took advantage of every chance to get involved. I started working as a student assistant in the Food Science Lab through the Land Grant Work-Study Program, and I became very active in Undergraduate Student Government. As time went by I found myself worrying less and less about money and beginning to consider opportunities that I *never* would have dreamed were feasible when I applied to Ohio State. By winter quarter my freshman year I made the most adventurous decision of my life thus far when I applied to study abroad in China during the upcoming summer! It was truly a life-changing experience, and after I can home that summer I felt as though there was **no opportunity beyond reach**.

The next fall I became involved in undergraduate research and began a new job as a student assistant in the newly created Economic Access Initiative, working with Tally Hart and Laura Kraus. I will never forget the first time I met with Tally and she told me about the research which had shown that the most qualified students in the lowest income quartile attend college at a much lesser rate than the least qualified students in the highest income quartile. I was, and continue to be, outraged by this fact! I worked with Tally and Laura to establish a student advisory group and to identify more than 400 first-generation college graduates among the faculty at Ohio State to begin spreading the college access message.

I am still very much involved with the Economic Access Initiative, although not as a student worker. I continue to serve as a strong advocate of educational access. Former OSU football

coach Woody Hayes said “You can never really give back, but you can always pay forward,” and I have found my own way to “pay forward” the opportunities I have been given by serving other disadvantaged students. This fall, with the support of a dedicated group of students from across campus, I founded a new student organization called Students for Equal Access. Our mission is to serve as informed advocates for equal access to higher education and to create a society that allows all qualified students an equal opportunity to pursue higher education regardless of income level or background. We serve two primary functions. First, we present and promote information about college access to both student groups and the community, and secondly, we facilitate college visit programs for grade school students. We know from research that college students can be powerful influences in convincing younger students that they *can* attend college, and we are working diligently to amplify this message.

As I reflect back on all the many opportunities I have been able to take advantage of during my undergraduate career, including studying abroad, conducting research, serving on the Board of Trustees, and creating a new student organization- I realize that all of these opportunities would not have been possible without the support of the Land Grant Scholarship. Ultimately my story illustrates two fundamental and important outcomes of financial aid: when you open the door of education first, you are helping the individual student to achieve success. Secondly, and more importantly, you are empowering that student to pay forward in society.

Additionally, I believe my story exemplifies two issues of critical importance, which I request this Committee support in the future. First, it is important to insist on quality. It is critical that qualified students from all backgrounds have access to a *quality* educational experience. This includes access to opportunities such as research, study abroad, and student involvement. I am sure many students would share that some of their most defining educational experiences occurred outside the classroom- perhaps in the lab, in a student organization, or in another country. Your assurance that students have access to the funds they need for college, as well as your support of national research foundations, such as the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, is critical to providing these opportunities. The federal grant monies that faculty receive not only fund cutting edge research, but also create many valuable opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students.

Secondly, it is vital to value diverse educational programs. As I have shared in my story, it was my high school agricultural education program that had a huge impact on my decision to attend college. I know for some of my peers it was an art or music program that kept them in school and encouraged them to go on to college. I cannot tell you how valuable these co-curricular programs are for reaching urban and rural students who are attending college at much lesser rates than their suburban peers. Unfortunately, in struggling school districts these are often the first programs to be cut, compounding the barriers to educational access. I have seen this first hand as the three teacher agricultural education program at my former high school has been reduced to just one teacher. It is important to recognize and support creativity and diversity in education and realize that a standardized, cookie-cutter approach is not the best way to increase educational access.

I believe many students at Ohio State and across the country, including myself, share the sentiments of Abraham Lincoln, who said “I view education as the most important subject which

we as a people can be engaged in.” I believe that there is no other investment that the federal government can make that will have a higher rate of return than education. Providing equal access to *quality* education is the most fundamental key in solving many, if not all, of the problems facing our society including issues such as job loss, poverty, and building a more prosperous economic future.

Senator, I thank you and the Committee for your service and dedication to students and our country’s future. I would be glad to respond to questions about these comments or any other issues of interest to you and the Committee.