

Testimony to the Coordinating Board for Higher Education and Steering Committee members of the Missouri Department of Higher Education regarding the coordinated plan for Missouri

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Good afternoon members of the Steering Committee of the Coordinated Plan for Missouri Higher Education, members of the Coordinating Board for Higher Education, Commissioner Russell and distinguished guests:

My name is Audrey Masek, and I am currently a junior at Truman working toward a bachelor's degree in communication. I am also an Access Missouri recipient and I receive financial support from The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I am here today to explain why an increase in Access Missouri, the state's need-based financial aid program, is imperative to improving Missouri's workforce and the quality of life of its residents. I am asking the department to put primary emphasis on affordability, particularly in regards to expanding need-based aid in our state.

Access Missouri is a critical component of my financial aid package at Truman. Not only does Access Missouri support my educational aspirations, it also supports some 50,000 Missouri students with financial need. Without these funds, many students, including myself, would not be able to finish their degree. Unfortunately, funding for Access Missouri has not kept pace with the need. As a result Missouri and its students are not meeting our educational goals.

In the 2008 coordinated plan, making higher education more affordable for Missourians was identified as a top objective and in the plan supporting growth for Access Missouri was an action step. Funding for Access Missouri, however, has remained steady at about \$62 million for the

last few years. Access Missouri student awards have been stagnant at the minimum, and yet Missouri students' financial need continues to increase.

Missouri students' ability to successfully access and persist through college depends largely on their access to financial resources. This is especially true for students like me, who have financial need. Access Missouri is an opportunity for our state to assist students in achieving their postsecondary dreams. All Missourians, despite socio-economic status, deserve an opportunity to become the best and brightest.

For the next five years, Missouri must do better in prioritizing financial need. Some ways the state could do this are:

- Consistently increase funding for Access Missouri so the program is funded in a way that all eligible students receive an award and students could receive maximum awards, not just statute minimums as is currently the norm.
- Include in the state plan, performance measure indicators that track the percentage of state financial aid that is awarded to students with financial need.
- Add a FAFSA requirement for all state aid programs to ensure limited state dollars are going to students with financial need.

Missouri can and should do better with need-based aid to support students. Access Missouri is supporting tens of thousands of promising students in Missouri. Recipients of access Missouri, like me, not only attend college, we earn college degrees. I ask that you keep us in mind as you move forth to create the coordinated plan to address the state's higher education needs.

Thank you for your time.