

PC #1

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:

I am Tavon Wilson, a graduate of Saint Louis University, supported by The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis. In December 2014 I graduated from Saint Louis University, majoring in Business Administration and Marketing. 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, especially in expanding need-based aid in our state.

Access Missouri was a critical component of my financial aid package at SLU and it 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. Supporting growth for Access Missouri was listed as an action step, but the results are lacking. Funding for Access Missouri has been about \$62 million for the last few years. The program's high point was in 2009 when funding was at \$92 million – even then the program was not fully funded. Despite increased financial need, student awards have been stagnant at the bare minimum.

All Missourians, despite socio-economic status, deserve an opportunity to become the best and brightest.

For the next five years, Missouri has to 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 statue 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 like me. Access is supporting tens of thousands of promising students in Missouri. Access Missouri played an important role in the completion of my degree. 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.