

William Megl
President, Keep Me In College
(573) 560-0900
WMegl.15@westminster-mo.edu

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Keep Me In College President William Megl's Testimony to Missouri Department of Higher Education to Inform Preparation of "Preparing Missourians to Succeed: A Blueprint for Higher Education" for Presentation to Coordinating Board for Higher Education

Topic: Higher Education Affordability

My name is Will Megl. I am president of Keep Me In College, a grassroots coalition of more than 3,000 students, parents and educational leaders from across Missouri. Our coalition has aggressively worked to protect Access Missouri, our state's need-based financial aid program.

I am offering testimony on behalf of Keep Me In College because our members believe Missouri should continue its proud tradition of making higher education affordable for all Missouri students attending any eligible Missouri college or university.

Access Missouri was designed to increase post-secondary enrollment by creating a simpler, more predictable need-based program. To qualify, students must, among other requirements, have an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) of \$12,000 or less. Approximately half of the recipients have an EFC below \$500, indicating the family is unable to financially contribute to the student's education.

Yet students' awards have significantly eroded over the years as the state appropriation for this important financial aid program dropped.

In fiscal year 2009, Access Missouri was funded at \$92.6 million, allowing the 43,305 eligible students to receive the statutory maximum awards. The awards covered approximately 25 percent of the tuition and fees at a 4-year public institution, while covering approximately 22 percent at 4-year independent institutions.

It's important to note that the General Assembly passed a bill in 2010 to revise Access Missouri award amounts in exchange for removing a provision that would have sunset the highly successful program in 2013. The statutory maximum/minimum awards for all 4-year students was revised to \$2,850/\$1,500. The statutory maximum/minimum awards for all 2-years students was revised to \$1,300/\$300.

In fiscal year 2014, Access Missouri was funded at \$59.8 million. The 53,206 eligible students received 51 percent of their awards. What this means is 4-year students received a maximum award of \$1,500, or \$750 per semester, instead of statutory maximum award of \$2,800. The maximum award for students at 2-year colleges was \$660, or \$330 per semester. Again, well below the statutory maximum award of \$1,300.

The needy and highly deserving students who receive Access Missouri can all attest to the essential role that these funds play in their ability to pursue the dream of a college education. As the son of a home health care nurse from Troy, I wouldn't be able to afford to attend Westminster College without the assistance of Access Missouri, the Federal Pell Grant, as well as institutional scholarships and grants. I will earn my Bachelor of Arts in Mathematical Sciences and Economics this spring. In addition to serving as President of Keep Me In College, I am a past president of the Student Government Association and a former chief executive officer of the Blue Blazers Investment Committee at Westminster College.

I am but one example of the difference that Access Missouri funding is making in the ability of working families to help their children achieve the dream of a college education. Only 35 percent of Missourians currently have an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree compared to the national average of 38 percent, according to Lumina Foundation. This should concern all of us because Missouri set a goal of 60 percent college degree attainment by 2025.

The only way to ensure that Missouri is able to achieve this goal and compete for 21st century jobs is to protect funding for our state's only need-based financial aid program.

Our coalition offer three recommendations as you create the "Preparing Missourians to Succeed: A Blueprint for Higher Education" plan:

- Work with the General Assembly to make Access Missouri a funding priority so that financially deserving students can once again receive maximum awards.
- Maintain the existing statutory qualifications for Access Missouri. We believe this is especially important if we are to measurably impact the number of students attending and completing post-secondary programs.
- We see opportunity by engaging our natural allies and speaking with one unified voice in support need-based financial aid. If employers and the business community include higher education funding and student financial aid on their priority agenda it will resonate with legislators and the governor.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony of behalf of the students of working Missouri families from all corners of our great state.