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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

June 4, 2015

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ORGANIZATION/AFFILIATION: The Scholarship Foundation of Saint Louis – Education Policy Intern/Fontbonne University, May 2015

Good morning, my name is Karina Arango and I am an education policy intern with the Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis. I graduated just last month from Fontbonne University in St. Louis. Today, I am here to discuss restructuring Missouri's financial aid programs, specifically the Bright Flight Scholarship Program. I would like to thank you all for giving me the opportunity to testify and I would also like to especially thank the Missouri Department of Higher Education for providing the data we requested in order to prepare for our testimony today.

I am a strong proponent of need-based aid. As Karissa just mentioned, there is a compelling need for additional need-based financial support for students in Missouri. I would argue that increasing need-based aid such as Access Missouri, rather than increasing merit-based aid such as Bright Flight, will ensure that Missouri helps students that need additional support the most. However, if Missouri must have a program that is merit-based, then at the very least it should be distributed equitably and fairly. In its current structure, Bright Flight is grossly inequitable and does not serve an economically or geographically diverse group of students.

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Bright Flight serves about 6,000[1] students who graduated from Missouri high schools and are in the top 3 percent of ACT test takers throughout the state. Whether students need it or not, Bright Flight provides these students a grant of $3,000, if they choose to attend a college or university in Missouri. Today, I will discuss these inequities and propose a recommendation to make Bright Flight a more equitable scholarship program. One-third of Missouri's nearly 700[2] high schools do not have students that are benefitting from the program.

Bright Flight is inequitable because it serves a disproportionate amount of private high school students. Private school students comprise only 10%[3] of Missouri's high school population, but they make up 20%[4] of Bright Flight recipients. In other words, private high school students are twice as likely to receive Bright Flight, in comparison to their public school peers. Bright Flight's current structure unfairly punishes students whose families do not have the financial resources to send them to private high schools.

In addition to being unevenly distributed amongst public and private high school students, Bright Flight is also inequitable because it is disproportionately awarded to public high school students in wealthier school districts. Throughout the

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[1] Exact number: 6,116. From MDHE FY14 Bright Flight by HS – courtesy of Jeremy Knee, MDHE General Counsel.
[2] 572 public and 110 private high schools. Missouri Dept. of Higher Education MDHE. Four Year Graduation Rates by Building, 2011-2014 AND National Center for Educational Statistics. Private School Universe Survey. Search for Schools.
[3] National Center for Education Statistics. Private School Universe Survey, 2011-2012.
[4] From Missouri Dept. of Higher Education FY14 Bright Flight Recipients by High School – courtesy of Jeremy Knee, MDHE General Counsel.

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state, 50%[5] of Missouri students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Seventy nine percent of public high schools with Bright Flight recipients have free or reduced lunch rates that are less than 50%[6]. The program's current structure overlooks those students attending under-resourced and impoverished high schools. These less affluent schools and the students that attend them cannot afford ACT preparation classes so these otherwise high-performing and hard working students are excluded from receiving a scholarship that is supposed to reward hard work and high scholastic achievement.

In analyzing the data, we were especially dismayed to learn that Bright Flight is inequitable because students from rural areas are severely underrepresented as recipients of the award. In 2014, 89%[7] of recipients are graduates of high schools in one of Missouri's five metropolitan areas[8], while only 11%[9] attended high schools in rural counties. The state's two largest metropolitan areas, St. Louis and Kansas City, together account for 72%[10] of Bright Flight recipients. Students in rural communities, such as Mercer or Franklin counties,

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[5] Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education: Students Enrolled in Free or Reduced Price Lunch.
[6] From Missouri Dept. of Higher Education FY14 Bright Flight by High School – courtesy of Jeremy Knee, MDHE General Counsel.
[7] From Missouri Dept. of Higher Education FY14 Bright Flight by High School – courtesy of Jeremy Knee, MDHE General Counsel.
[8] Those are the St. Louis, Kansas City, Joplin, Springfield, and Jefferson City/Columbia metro areas. From http://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/metroarea/stcbsa_pg/Feb2013/cbsa2013_MO.pdf
[9] From Missouri Dept. of Higher Education FY14 Bright Flight by HS – courtesy of Jeremy Knee, MDHE General Counsel.
[10] From Missouri Dept. of Higher Education FY14 Bright Flight by High School – courtesy of Jeremy Knee, MDHE General Counsel.

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have little access to resources at school to help them prepare for the ACT. Bright Flight's current system ignores the distinct barriers faced by rural students and instead marginalizes them based on where they live.

Bright Flight should be designed so that students at each high school compete only with their own classmates for the award. Using a weighted system based on each high school's enrollment numbers, Bright Flight funds should be distributed to support top-performing students on each of these high school campuses. To truly give high achieving students all throughout the state a chance at receiving state merit-aid, the program should be restructured to serve the top students at **EACH** school.

To make the award even more equitable and to ensure the program can sufficiently fund all qualified students, we recommend that Bright Flight awards be based not only on test scores but also cumulative grade point averages. Using both measures will help reduce discriminating against students who are high-achieving but do not test well.

I'd offer myself as an example of why Bright Flight is not truly indicative of potential. I am a graduate of Ritenour, a struggling north St. Louis County high school. Over the past 4 years, Ritenour has graduated more than 1,300[11] students. Only 7 of these graduates were receiving Bright Flight in 2014[12]. That is not

[11] Ritenour graduation numbers – sum for past 4 years. Missouri Dept. of Higher Education. Four Year Graduation Rates by Building, 2011-2014.
[12] From Missouri Dept. of Higher Education FY14 Bright Flight by High School – courtesy of Jeremy Knee, MDHE General Counsel.

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because we are not smart or capable. That is because we did not score in the top 3% on the ACT. Of the 250 undergraduate students who graduated from Fontbonne University last month, I was the only senior who received an academic hood in recognition of my accomplishments. According to the Bright Flight criteria, I would not be deemed as bright. The logic here is flawed. All students have the potential to be bright depending on what you're measuring.

In its current form, Bright Flight unfairly ignores high performing students in rural communities and less wealthy schools. To strengthen our workforce, and in turn our economy, we must make it a priority to serve all students. Along with my Scholarship Foundation team, I am happy to provide additional data or support as you consider restructuring Missouri's financial aid programs to serve students in a more equitable way. Thank you for listening and giving me the chance to share this information with you all today.

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