

Equity in Higher Education: A National Imperative
Shared Dialogue Search for Solutions
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Testimony of Ashley Minter
Equity Indicator – Postsecondary Completion

Good morning. My name is Ashley Minter and I'm from Trenton, New Jersey. Thank you, TRIO Student Support Services, Queen Jones and Dana Lopes.

With the encouragement of my aunt, in the summer of 2009, I enrolled at the Mercer County Community College, which allowed me to stay close by my family. By 2010, I was appointed President of the Student Activities Board, served as a student mentor, and was an active volunteer. While I might have seemed like a thriving student to those around me, this wasn't always the case.

Ten years ago, I was not the model student. I had no interest in school. I was either late or didn't go at all. Yet, somehow, I went from nearly dropping out of the 11th grade to deciding that college was a possibility. This was largely because of teachers who did everything possible to convince me that I was more than what I perceived myself to be. Burdened with anxiety, poor grades, and low self-esteem, things got worse once the recession hit. My mother, a proud business owner, was forced to close the doors of her daycare center. Over the next few years, my mother went from working odd jobs as a nanny and in a nursing home to sleeping in a homeless shelter. All of this led to her mental breakdown.

My mother's decline made my dreams of going to college almost impossible. Although I was accepted into a few schools, these offers were bittersweet as the expenses proved to be too much. I could not afford to travel away to school, live on campus, and pay for tuition and books. This led to my own mental struggle as I was diagnosed with clinical depression. However, I did not let this diagnosis stop me.

Despite my determination to while in college, little by little things were taken from my family—car, heat, running water, and eventually our home. As I continued to struggle with my classes, I continued to struggle through my depression. Although I never missed class, I was forced to drop one and failed another.

As I came to towards the end of my community college experience, I dreamed of pursuing my Bachelor's Degree at Howard University. With my acceptance letter, came a renewed sense of purpose. But my excitement turned to shame as I realized I would not be able to attend because I could not secure a co-signer for the \$1,200 - \$3,000 needed to cover room and board.

Humiliated, I went into hiding. I battled situational depression that mimicked an eating disorder. I did not go back to college or attempt to apply to another institution. Eventually, though, I began my road to recovery by working as a mental and behavioral health paraprofessional. Four years after starting community college, my health improved. The same aunt who convinced me to apply to community college advised me to apply to Rider University, just a few miles away, because it has a Continuing Studies program that would allow me to work full-time while taking

two courses a semester. I applied two days before classes started. Wanting to help myself and others, I declared Psychology as my major, with a Minor in Social Work.

My journey at Rider was a bumpy one. During my first year, I was average, but consistent. I helped get steady footing thanks to the TRIO Student Support Services program on campus, which provided me with academic and personal counseling. Occasionally, my grades would slip, but over time, I was an average student who became less and less average as my college career went on.

One thing that nobody tells you about being in school for too long is that eventually, you will run out of funding. I had exhausted my eligibility for loans and grants. Scholarships were my only hope. With the help of my TRIO advisors, I applied for and won the Charlotte Newcombe Scholarship, which awards funds to college women aged 25 and older who have earned at least 60 credits towards a bachelor's degree.

Things started to look up – I was thriving at my job and school looked promising as my senior year was on the horizon. Yet, I was physically and mentally hungry. Even with a full-time job, I did not earn enough to travel between work and school, pay my rent and light bill, and still feed myself. Around Christmas, I was informed that I would be evicted. However, I was determined not to lose my apartment. I couldn't find help from my family. After turning to my TRIO SSS counselors, I received help from a private donor.

Last Saturday, May 18, 2019, I received my Bachelor's Degree from Rider University. Over these 10 years, I have gained the gift of tenacity, mastered the art of perseverance, and earned the life experience to achieve my goal of becoming a licensed clinical social worker.

To other students who may be struggling as I was, I will leave you with this: Do not let life swallow your dreams and aspirations. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward." Thank you.