

Equity in Higher Education: A National Imperative
Shared Dialogue Search for Solutions
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Testimony of Sophia Berg
Equity Indicator – Stratification in Higher Education

My name is Sophia Berg, and I am from Hibbing, Minnesota. I would like to begin by thanking Tallie Sertich, my high school TRIO Upward Bound program director. She's here in the audience today. I am here today to share my experience as a first-generation college student from a low-income household of two institutions of post-secondary education – one of which, most would consider under-resourced, and the other that is the opposite. While growing up in Hibbing, Minnesota, I was confident that I wanted to go to college, but very uncertain of how to do so. My concern stemmed from unfamiliarity with the college application process as well as concerns over the cost.

Always a problem-solver, I did two things: I joined my local TRIO Upward Bound program, which provided me with more knowledge of the application process, and I began taking courses at the local community college through the post-secondary education option (or PSEO program), which provided me with free college credits. When it came time to apply for college, I could feel the very real benefits of earning those college credits for free at Hibbing Community College (or HCC), and possibly being able to earn my bachelor's degree in a shorter period of time. It would mean less money spent not only on tuition, but on housing and other expenses while going through college, and a quicker path to a larger paycheck. As it turned out, I would not be able to use these additional credits as the college I attended – Harvard University – did not accept my

PSEO credits. However, their generous financial aid package enabled me to engage in study for four years without the financial burden I had dreaded.

At Harvard, I was exposed to an entirely different view of the college experience. Previously, when taking courses at HCC, I had thought of college as a means to a job. Most students, including myself, were busy working jobs while also attending. However, Harvard emphasized the value of having a “transformative” college experience – growing with your peers and community members through an intensive academic and residential community. At HCC, courses were often seen as a necessary requirement for receiving a degree, which was itself a necessary requirement for receiving a job. One of the benefits of PSEO, beyond earning credits for free, was being able to earn a degree in a shorter period of time. But at Harvard, the idea of speeding through in two years, as one would with PSEO credits, was seen as silly and wasteful. Many of my college peers at couldn’t imagine giving up even a single semester at Harvard to go study abroad, much less give up two full years to enter the workforce more quickly. We were privileged to be able to spend 4 years with our sole job being that of students – immersed in a bubble that was academically focused.

In retrospect, I’ve come to realize the very real benefits of the professional and academic growth that came from being in an intensive college environment for four years. I’ve had opportunities to work on research in a lab, study abroad, gain teaching experience as a course assistant, and develop leadership in public service as a staff member at a student-run homeless shelter. Further, I was personally encouraged and expected to do so in a way I was not at HCC. I grew into these experiences throughout my time in college, building a strong base of global interpersonal

connections and knowledge of what was available in my first two years and finding my stride in the last two. These opportunities for growth, which will serve me well as I move into my profession, would have been missed had I shortened my college career with the use of PSEO credits.

These experiences were enabled in large part through Harvard's financial resources. As a low-income student, I would not have been able to study abroad or devote as much time to public service and research without the financial support Harvard provided to me. Even if the same opportunities of study abroad, research, and public service had been available at HCC, I would likely have had to give them up in order to work a job not related to my field of study. Yet, it also reflected a difference in the student bodies of Harvard and HCC – many of the students at Harvard came from backgrounds that had never required them to have a job, grew up focusing intently on education and had an understanding of college as an experience, not just as a job requirement.

I was fortunate enough to be accepted to one of the few universities in the United States that is able to meet the financial need of students from low-income backgrounds. Next week, I'll be graduating from Harvard with my bachelor's in Psychology. However, the chances of gaining admission into Harvard or a well-resourced university like Harvard are slim, and, as a low-income student, the financial benefits of dual enrollment are hard to pass up. I'm grateful to have had the option of PSEO available to me in the event that I did not get into Harvard. However, I hope we can develop a system where students are able to make their post-secondary education choices based upon the best fit for them, and not on financial constraints. Thank you.