

Statement of Will Farris
Student, College of Charleston
“Promoting College Access and Success for Students with Disabilities”
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
February 27, 2014

Good morning Chairman Harkin and Senator Alexander and other members of the Committee. I must say what an honor it is to be here talking to you this morning. My name is Will Farris and I am a 26-year-old senior at the College of Charleston’s REACH program. My major at the college is communications. I am originally from Brooklyn, New York but was raised in a small town called Ravenel, South Carolina about 45 minutes outside Charleston. My disability that I refer as to my uniqueness is called Asperger Syndrome. Between the age of six and ten I was just like your average child and student making A’s and B’s while participating in extra-curricular activities. These include Cub Scouts and sports. During the transition stages of me going to different schools my parents started to recognize certain signs of me struggling in 5th and 6th grade. The red flags that brought this attention toward them included doing homework from 5pm to maybe 12 or 1am as well as observing my interactions with peers and adults. Eventually, I went to numerous doctors who tried to figure out what my actual situation was. It was not until my 8th grade year that I was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome. The Doctor told my parents that I do not have ADD or ADHD. Now, I always knew there was something different about me, but I never could figure it out until I got into my late teens.

I graduated high school in 2006. The following spring semester of my first year in college at Trident Tech, was the most dramatic year of my life because my father died a month later after my birthday. During that semester I could not seem to concentrate on academics or anything else. While going through a lot I eventually got a full time job which turned out to be the night shift at the Charleston Air Force Base as a custodian. Then after working with them for about two and half years I switched over to Super Wal-Mart as a stocker in dairy just for about seven months. My life then changed when I learned about the REACH program.

My experience at the REACH program has been an amazing one for several different reasons, including the professors, job opportunities, and social activities. During freshmen year I was so fortunate to have the opportunity to learn more about my uniqueness by being able to take introduction to psychology and interpersonal communications. The professors Dr. May and Dr. McGee were able to give me a better understanding of my uniqueness to grasp it and explain it to others who never met me before. The part I enjoyed most about being in the program is that I have been able to take a variety of courses that have led me to my passion and field of choice. These classes include introduction to education, personal finance, advanced personal finance, introduction to business, public speaking, women and gender studies, graphic novel, strategic communication, business ethics, event planning, and many others. These courses eventually helped me to enhance my strengths and understand my weaknesses. For example when I was younger I would ramble on and on and I would never pick up on

body language, or be more concise when talking to other individuals.

The two things that are the second most marvelous part of being in the program to me is the job opportunities and social activities that come along with it. In order to graduate from the program I have to do seven internships which don't start until your second semester. The internships that I have been able to enjoy are in the Admission office, Black Baud, YMCA, YWCA, Metanoia, Communities In Schools, and the Medical University of South Carolina's Public Relations office. While having the chance to work with a variety of jobs, I was able to discover what direction to steer my major and career toward in the near future. The career path I have chosen is to work with youth with from ages 11 and up by helping them make a smooth transition from middle school to high school then to college or whatever direction he or she may choose to take.

My social experience at the College of Charleston has been just as amazing as my job opportunities. For example being here I have been able to change and grow by being more aware of how to interact with other people along with participating in multiple organizations and jobs that are part of the campus. These include being the first REACH student to be a Summer Orientation Intern, Alpha Kappa Psi Business Fraternity member, College of Charleston Mascot, College of Charleston Student Ambassador, REACH Ambassador, Residence Hall Assistant, Nominee for Homecoming King and member of the Charleston 40 Tour Guide Association.

Overall, my years here at the College of Charleston's REACH program have been the best years of my life. The simple fact is that I have been able to grasp my uniqueness while teaching and learning from others around me. Also having been part of this program I am more confident knowing that I can find a career that I love and can make a difference.