

Testimony of

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*Access and Affordability: How Expanding Pell Grants Will Offer Higher Education to More Americans*  
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PREPARED TESTIMONY

Good afternoon, and thank you Senator Casey for allowing me to tell my story today.

My name is Jessica Taylor Piotrowski, and I am currently a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. I am scheduled to graduate in May. In addition to my doctoral degree, I have also completed both my Bachelor's and Master's degrees at Penn. In other words, Penn has been my home away from home for some time now. Thanks to generous financial aid, *all of those degrees have been paid for*. I have been invited here today to speak about my experiences with paying for college, and I can tell you wholeheartedly that I would not have been able to pursue higher education without the generous financial aid I received from the University of Pennsylvania, City of Philadelphia, the State of Pennsylvania, and the Federal Government.

To help highlight the enormous role that financial aid has played in my life, I would like to first describe a bit of my back story. I grew up in Northeast Philadelphia, the oldest of six children. My upbringing was typical of a working class family. My father worked a full time job as a carpet installer while my mother worked two part-time jobs, one as a crossing guard and the other as front end manager in the evenings at a supermarket. Money was in short supply in our house. Each month it was an effort for my parents to make sure that all of the bills were

paid, that children were fed and clothed, and that all other necessities were met. Looking back, I can clearly see the many different ways my mother tried to shield her children from the financial concerns of the household – whether it be wrapping six pairs of socks separately so it looked like we had more presents on our birthday, to creating movie nights in our house with microwave popcorn, to using lay-a-ways at local stores for school supply shopping, or by shopping at the local second hand shop for her own clothing and other household necessities – she worked very hard to ensure that her children did not feel as though they went without.

Education was always held in the highest regard in my family. Neither of my parents hold a college degree, yet from my earliest days, I can remember my parents telling me that I was going to college. In fact, I can remember showing my father a test in which I scored a 100, and him telling me that I need to keep studying just like that if I want to get into a good college someday. My parents were the same with all of my siblings. I grew up in a household where high school was not viewed as an ending point, but merely a stepping-stone towards bigger things. My parents would consistently tell all of us children that they didn't want us to end up like them, they wanted more for us, and college was how to get there.

When the time came for me to apply to colleges, I had already figured out where I wanted to go – the University of Pennsylvania. I remember telling my parents this, and I remember seeing the color drain from their faces. They were barely making ends meet at the time and I was choosing to apply to an Ivy League University. The idea of how to afford college was new to all of us, but I kept telling them I would figure out a way. I spent time working with my high school physics teacher, as well as my college guidance counselor, and they helped me figure out how to navigate the often complex world of financial aid applications. And so, I began applying. While I nervously waited to find out whether or not Penn would accept me, I gathered

papers and forms and I read and read. My parents and I sat at the kitchen table pouring over tax documents, paper FAFSA forms, and more. We called help lines numerous times as we tried to figure out how to handle my father's self-employed status, and we wrote letters explaining our family situation. And then it happened. I remember the day so well that it brings tears to my eyes as I think about. I met the mailman outside of my house, and I saw the thick package he had in his hand. I knew it was for me. I tore it open and read the first line, "Congratulations!" and that was it – I was accepted to one of the best schools in the country. My parents were screaming, I was screaming, and then the moment of reality hit ... money. How were we going to pay for it?

There, in black and white, was a letter saying that all of my financial need had been met. With thanks from the federal grants, state grants, and a city scholarship – I would be able to attend Penn. I think it was at that point when my mom just started crying. At that time, at that young age, excitement was my main emotion. I only now realize just how important that financial aid package was for me. If it wasn't for the financial aid I was awarded, there would have been no way that I could have attended the University. I would have missed out on an incredible education, and education that fueled my desire to pursue graduate school. I would not be who I am today – a young woman pursuing a doctoral degree at one of the top Communication schools in the country.

Of course, after me, there were a lot of other children still coming – and the same financial concerns arose with each one. Of my five siblings, four have elected to pursue higher education at local Universities (Penn, Holy Family, Temple, and Manor) while the other sibling elected to pursue vocational training. In each case, for each year, there are the many financial aid applications. This past year I helped my parents complete four FAFSA applications, and all

of my siblings are benefitting from the aid. While not all of them have received as generous of financial aid packages that I did, all of them received some type of federal and state aid to help them pursue their study of choice. In order to maximize financial aid, they all elected to attend schools in the Philadelphia area. Thankfully, we live in an area where so many incredible schools are right in our own backyard. My sister will be graduating from Holy Family University this year with a degree in Education. If you met my sister, you would quickly realize that Education is the perfect field for her. Her personality, her patience, her overall demeanor – it just fits. And it is only through financial aid packages that she is able to make her dreams a reality.

I grew up in a modest home with modest surroundings, but with a family full of love and with parents who had a belief that education is the only way to achieve your dreams. If they could have afforded higher education for my siblings and I, they would have. But that was simply not a reality for them. As I know they are, I am so thankful that there were financial aid resources available that have allowed me, and my siblings, to reach for our dreams.

Congress is considering increasing federal grant aid. I am wholeheartedly in support of that plan. First, more grant aid will inspire confidence in students from modest means that there is a way to pay for college. And second, more grant aid will mean these students will not have to pay for school on credit which is costly to repay and risky for students who have little financial safety net if they cannot repay for any reason. I strongly support any initiatives that will help others do the same, because, like my parents, I truly agree that higher education is the key to incredible achievements.

Thank you. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.