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“Promoting College Access and Success for Students with Disabilities”
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
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Good Morning Senator Harkin, Senator Alexander, and Committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to speak about this critical topic with which I have personal and professional experiences. First to note about me is that I am a person with multiple disabilities. I’ve had my physical disability since birth as well as an anxiety disability acquired during college. Since graduation I have worked to support transition paths for youth with disabilities into postsecondary education and the world of work. In my current role at the Institute for Educational Leadership, I support a national technical assistance center aiming to better serve all youth, including youth with disabilities and a program training families and self-advocates to influence policy for people with disabilities throughout the District of Columbia. It’s through these experiences, that I’ve seen young people with disabilities be unable to obtain necessary services and supports throughout transition. It is with these supports we know they can and will become contributing members of their communities, but without them, prospects are grim.

I am very proud to be a 2010 graduate of University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. There was always an expectation in my family I would graduate and go on to college, as had my older sisters prior, but in looking at universities they attended, it became clear they could not provide supports I would need to be successful. A recent National Longitudinal Study by Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs showed completion rates for people with disabilities at 34% compared with 51% in the general population. Of those who left, reasons were varied but included, cost, poor grades, changing schools, and not getting needed services.

In high school, I researched schools to fit my needs and enrolled immediately in Georgia vocational rehabilitation (VR) services. I was told by my assigned VR counselor I was not a candidate for services because my disability did not have direct impact on my desired career choice, at that time journalism. When my mother asked what would happen if I wanted to be a tap dancer, I was told instantly that would qualify me for services. This obviously did not sit right with us and through research we discovered the Client Assistance Program through which I was able to seek a more qualified VR counselor. I repeated this process again when my counselor was unable to support me going to an out-of-state school. Unfortunately, this lack of awareness from VR is a story that I’ve heard too many times and most students and families are not aware that they can appeal the process so they miss out on what allowed me to be successful in college.

I was fortunate enough to be accepted into the University of Illinois, receiving a scholarship to play on the school’s wheelchair basketball team (one of four such opportunities for women in the U.S.). Illinois has been a leader in accommodations for students with disabilities since Dr.

Tim Nugent founded the university's disability student service center in 1948, ushering in numerous firsts for students with disabilities since. This scholarship was a financial burden lifted for my family; but I had other costs, specifically related to my healthcare needs, so I established eligibility for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Medicaid which provided me with necessary healthcare coverage, while simultaneously limiting my asset limit to \$2000. Without my scholarship, attending an out-of-state university would have been an impossibility, even with programs like Ticket to Work and the Plan to Achieve Self Sufficiency plans aimed at alleviating this issue. Additional issues cropped up with SSI limitations when I tried to participate in learning experiences such as study abroad and out-of-state internships. For me, SSI played a strong role in helping me achieve my educational goals; however, for too many young people it becomes a life-long parking lot.

Despite the barriers illustrated, more and more students with disabilities are enrolling in postsecondary education and discovering a higher education system not ready to accommodate them. We're seeing students who don't know their rights when they are no longer getting IEP services and understaffed, underfunded disability student service centers are more focused on legal compliance than supporting students in college and future employment.

Again, I was fortunate to attend my university where the disability student center had so many of the supports I and my peers needed to be successful including: assistive technology, note taking, priority registration, testing accommodations, interpreters, tutoring, and on-site clinical psychologists. The academic accommodations at Illinois do not stop on campus. All their online and distance learning classes are automatically captioned. Their comprehensive commitment to inclusion also applies to career transitions services. Staff saw higher education as a stepping stone towards gainful employment, hosting workshops on disability disclosure and employment issues, providing career assessments, and bringing in organizations seeking employees and interns with disabilities. Unfortunately, this level of commitment to serving students with disabilities is not the case in far too many of our nation's colleges and universities.

Access at Illinois also included access to the other components that make up a true college experience, including recreation, study abroad, integrated housing accommodations, transportation, and healthcare. I got a top-notch education and, because of these supports, I left college prepared for work and independent living.

If I could sum up a few recommendations for the Committee to consider, I would encourage:

- Working with existing Federal and State programs to provide students with disabilities an even playing field to afford college including creating clarity with asset limitations and opening minority and diversity scholarships up to students with disabilities, arguably the most underrepresented minority in higher education.
- Starting transition programming earlier so students are knowledgeable of how their rights and responsibilities will change in higher education and what services are available to them.
- Improving disability student services with increased staff and better integration into other areas of universities such as career center, tutoring services, and study abroad offices.

Thank you for your time and for allowing me to share my story today.