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Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the barriers that students face when accessing financial aid and, in turn, pursuing postsecondary opportunities.

College costs and issues of affordability are a significant challenge facing our young people and our adults. The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act can address key policy levers critical to ensuring that more low-income students—and increasingly—those from middle-income backgrounds as well can afford higher education.

In Ohio, these challenges are especially pronounced due to the state's higher than average "cost of attendance." According to a 2016 report by Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education and Human Development and the Penn State University Graduate School of Education, Ohio ranks 45th in the nation in key college affordability metrics (Institute for Research on Higher Education, 2016). The average cost of attendance at a public college or university for an Ohio resident in 2018-19 was \$26,275 (College Now, 2019). This compares to \$20,770 nationally (Value Penguin, 2019). To afford to enroll in postsecondary, most Ohioans must borrow loans or qualify for grants. These resources, in addition to even institutional merit aid and scholarships, can be accessed only through successfully completing the

Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or the FAFSA – an oft-used measure of need by financial aid providers and not just the Federal Government.

Unfortunately, both the real and perceived complexity of the FAFSA form, often followed by an unwieldy verification process, serves as a hindrance to college access for the most in-need students, including our homeless and at-risk for homeless youth, foster youth, and young adults aging out of the foster care system. Each year, only 45% of low-income students complete the FAFSA, missing out on \$24 billion in financial aid (Kofoed, 2016). Of those students who do successfully complete the form and are deemed Pell eligible, a total of 25% are lost to the verification process and do not enroll (Warick, 2018). It is critical that Congress continues to simplify the FAFSA and the resulting verification process so that more students, especially those who are first-generation and low-income, can actually pursue postsecondary education.

Simplifying the federal financial aid process is key; but not enough. We must think comprehensively about strategies for making postsecondary more accessible and affordable to vulnerable populations. Federally supported programs like GEAR-UP and TRiO (which includes Talent Search and Upward Bound, for example) implement and iterate on best practices for promoting much earlier college access and awareness about college affordability. In addition, we must continue to increase the Federal investment in the Pell grant – which now only covers 29% of the total cost of attendance at a four-year school for an in-state student. This is a staggering decline from 1975, when the Pell grant covered 79% of the cost of attendance (Center on Budget & Policy Priorities, 2018). We also encourage the publishing of more data by the Federal government – disaggregated by race and ethnicity to fully understand who is utilizing existing federal programs – and who is being left behind. The availability of such information can help ensure nonprofits, like College Now, are serving the most in need and directly addressing known equity gaps.

My name is Dr. Michele Scott Taylor, and I have served as the Chief Program Officer at College Now Greater Cleveland for more than eight years. In this role, I provide strategic leadership for the organization's comprehensive and diverse programmatic efforts, including school-based and community-based college access and success advising programs, as well as federal programs such as Talent Search, GEAR UP, Upward Bound, and 21st Century Community Learning Centers. I work to ensure that our programs and services represent best practices and are on the cutting-edge of college access and success research, policy, and practice. In addition to providing direct service to high school students as recently as last night, I have just as much, or even more experience, working with adult learners and college students – having served in diverse functional areas on college campuses including in student affairs, admissions and financial aid, and multicultural/diversity affairs. I also teach in undergraduate and graduate programs. For many students whom I personally have supported, mentored, mothered, coached, and dragged across the finish line, as well as for thousands of students that College Now serves, getting to and through college is a full-time job beyond the academics. I can say this because I have witnessed it and lived it.

Coming from a family with low-income, where neither of my parents nor immediate family members earned a degree, I was not exposed to what David Conley calls college knowledge and transition information.¹ I had been told my entire life that if I did well in school, I can go to Harvard for free. While I did do well, it was within the context of a lower resourced public-school system and an equally low-resourced family! I was not provided enough information about affording college or the process of getting there! So, I navigated my way through with enough Pell grant dollars and aid to allow me to focus on my academics. I didn't consume myself with worry about my school bill (though I did become an RA to get free room and board!) This, in honesty, is the reason why I have committed my life to

¹ <C:\Users\mscotttaylor\OneDrive - College Now Greater Cleveland\4Keys-Conley.pdf>

working in higher education, first on college campuses and now in that space where high school students and adults prepare for and pursue all kinds of postsecondary opportunities and become successful.

That's where College Now comes in and helps students like Symone...

Symone is a second semester freshman at a large public institution currently struggling to pay her spring school bill. She filled out the FAFSA twice now and was not awarded the Pell grant either time, which is frustrating because her father is a construction worker and her mother is unemployed. On paper, it appears that her family has more money than they actually do. She has expressed that the government does not take into account the realities of her life (a common reality of the FAFSA). Her parents have other children and siblings of their own that they help out financially when it is necessary which, unfortunately, is quite often. Symone has applied to countless scholarships and received some of them, however, she was not eligible for countless others as a result of the FAFSA's calculation of her "need." Symone is mentally and emotionally stressed from trying to figure this out. We are working to keep her in school as long as possible and hopefully to degree completion.

College Now's mission is to increase postsecondary educational attainment through college and career access advising, financial aid counseling, and scholarship and retention services. It was the first organization of its kind in the nation – providing scholarships and college access services to support students going into higher education. Since our inception in 1967, we have become the largest college access provider in Ohio and remain one of the largest in the nation. College Now is a national leader, including serving as a founding member of the National College Access Network in 1995 and as a model for other organizations around the country.

We assist over 29,000 individuals – middle and high school students as well as adult learners – helping them pursue their dreams of going to and succeeding in some form of education beyond high school.

Many of our students are from low-income families and are first-generation college goers. We provide

important services to adults pursuing higher education for the first time, attempting to go back and finish, or seeking to retool their skills in light of rapid changes in the world of work. For us, serving adults is critical to the success of developing our region's talent and closing our existing skills gap. As in many parts of the country, there are simply not enough 18-year-olds graduating from high school and heading to postsecondary educations to meet current and projected employer demands.

By 2025, 65% of jobs will require some postsecondary degrees, but today only 44% of Ohio working-age adults have any education or training beyond a high school diploma. In Northeast Ohio alone, there are approximately 500,000 people who have some college but no degree. In Cleveland, educational attainment is just ridiculous at only 27%. Time after time, while we seek to support those looking to improve their lives, affording needed further education rings loud as a key barrier. An additional – albeit an unnecessary and yet easier to remove – barrier is the current process through which students can even access financial aid that is available: the FAFSA form and verification process.

While Symone's story about affording college is very common, those from Melina and Brandon, which are about actually completing the FAFSA form, are stories we experience every day – getting tax and financial information from “parents.”

Melina has DACA, but her parents are undocumented. While they pay taxes, they are concerned about using the data retrieval tool because they are worried about being deported. Melina has already received a scholarship from her college that will allow her to attend, but she is scared of asking the wrong person for help with her next step in verification. Therefore, she doesn't take the next steps.

Brandon, a student who is eager to raise himself and his family out of poverty, attempts to complete the FAFSA himself (and not with our College Now advisor). We later find out that he answered questions wrong such as family size and dependency status (he thinks because he supports his family financially

and pays his own living expenses, he should be considered independent). Subsequently, he finds out about these errors and his selection for verification post important scholarship deadlines. Now what does he do!

Having federal financial aid is crucial to the college-going process but completing the FAFSA form is a barrier for many students. Not all students are fortunate enough to have a relative, school counselor, or college access advisor available to help them through the process. And as with filing your taxes, help is frequently needed.

Given the impact on students' ability to attend college, simplifying the FAFSA form is a necessary step in the quest to make college more affordable. Several organizations have promoted a system to simplify the form that would group students based on their financial strengths and then have them follow pathways with respect to their FAFSA completion based on their unique circumstances with the ultimate objective of allowing for a far shorter FAFSA form.

To be fair, creating the FAFSA form was well intended. One of the goals was to have a universal form because before 1992, students could use various forms to apply for federal financial aid. But they also had to complete a separate state form and additional forms for each institution to which they applied. And yet creating the FAFSA was not enough. Fast forward to today, approximately 300 selective postsecondary institutions also require that students, yearly, complete the CSS profile and/or their own form before awarding their institutional aid because they believe the FAFSA is inadequate.

Further simplifying the FAFSA form isn't enough. We must also work to address issues related to verification. Verification occurs when students who submit the FAFSA are asked to submit additional documents to the college's financial aid office to support the information entered on the FAFSA. The

process is intended to reduce fraud and ensure the integrity of these distributions. Once selected for verification, financial aid cannot be dispersed until the process is complete.

The process itself is cumbersome to students causing upwards of 25% of Pell eligible students to “melt” between being selected for verification and their enrollment. Furthermore, low-income students are more likely to be selected for verification because students who are calculated to have a zero expected family contribution (EFC) (meaning their household income is less than \$25,000) have a higher chance of being selected for verification than their wealthier peers. While it seems abundantly reasonable that the Federal government and/or a college or university would want to conduct its due diligence before awarding financial aid dollars, if selected for verification, a student should be able to provide as sufficient evidence proof of enrollment in another means-tested government benefit (e.g., SNAP).

Not only that, the current verification selection algorithm also means that if you’re selected for verification at one institution, you are likely to be selected at multiple institutions. This increases the barriers to getting aid because each college has its own verification process usually requiring students to submit a combination of tax returns, W-2 statements, 1099 forms, and other legal documents.

So there is Deanna...

Deanna is currently a student at local Northeast Ohio community college studying to become a nurse.

Deanna has relied on the Pell grant for the last two years. She turned in all the required paperwork and registered for classes. After the semester began, she was notified that she had been dropped from her classes because she owed a balance. When she spoke with her Financial Aid office, she learned that all her Federal aid had been revoked. The Financial Aid office claimed to have not received her necessary paperwork by its verification deadline. Because the school year had already started and Deanna had

been attending classes, she had to re-pay the Federal aid for which she was eligible. As long as there was an outstanding debt on her account, she would also be ineligible to receive any future Federal aid.

This missed verification deadline cost Deanna thousands of dollars. She not only lost her Federal aid last year, she also lost a scholarship that required an award letter and proof of Pell grant eligibility. On top of all of that, she now had to pay for her tuition out-of-pocket while also trying to make payments on the debt she shouldn't have owed in the first place.

Our receiving colleges are burdened with the task of verifying student information impacting their student yield rates by creating additional processes that serve as barriers.

Communities, students, families, school districts, and postsecondary institutions are working to help student surmount these and other barriers to education. The consequences of not doing so are evident in educational attainment rates, the skills gaps, earning potentials of family members, rates of poverty (especially among kids), and the list goes on and on.

But there is some hope – just being here and sharing this with you gives me hope. In places like Ohio and other states, we are setting aggressive goals for increasing educational attainment. We are implementing strategies to mitigate the barriers: such as competing for Federal grants to increase awareness and preparedness of student and families; raising millions in scholarship dollars; working with state agencies to increase state support for post-secondary; and making community college free, among many other activities. In Cleveland specifically, we were recently named a Say Yes to Education city, the final of four chapters to be established. Our theory of action is to provide comprehensive wrap-around services along students' K-12 educational paths and then offer last-dollar tuition scholarships for graduating high school seniors. In Cleveland, the community has raised enough scholarship funding for two generations of students! Completing the FAFSA is a requirement for receiving the Say Yes

scholarship, and College Now's commitment is to ensure that we provide enough support to help these students get through the form and verification process!

The Federal government has also taken steps to mitigate barriers to post-secondary including: the use of Prior-Prior year taxes, which supports student completing the FAFSA earlier; opening the FAFSA form in October versus January; implementing the IRS Data Retrieval Tool; and creating a mobile responsive web site and app, with partners such as NCAN. Likewise, funding continues for programs such as GEAR UP and TRiO (but not enough), but there is so much more that needs to be done...

Congress can address issues related to the FAFSA and verification process including:

- decrease the number of data elements on the FAFSA, thus decreasing the number of items that need to be verified;
- allow FAFSA filers receiving means-tested benefits to receive an auto zero EFC, and not selecting those students for verification, based on their means-tested benefits receipt
- use data-sharing across Federal agencies to confirm the receipt of the means-tested benefits; and
- amend Internal Revenue Code Section 6103 to allow for direct sharing of data between the Departments of Treasury and Education.

In addition to these direct fixes, Congress can legislate numerous recommendations to force the enactment of the changes by the Department of Education and through the NRMP.

Opportunities abound to support kids and adults across the nation and especially in Ohio with necessary post-secondary education. Our ability to compete as a region, a state, and a nation requires more of our students (who come from low-income backgrounds and/or are first-generation goers) to increase their educational attainment. We are the rising demographic.

Thank you again for this opportunity. If there is any additional information that I can provide to support your work on higher education and college access issues, please do not hesitate to contact me. I am proud and honored to be of service to your deliberations.