REAUTHORIZATION OF THE DC COLLEGE ACCESS ACT OF 1999

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Good Morning. My name is Argelia Rodriguez and I am the Executive Director of the District of Columbia College Access Program, or as it is more commonly known, DC-CAP. I am delighted to have been asked by the Committee on Government Reform to speak to you today about the importance of the reauthorization of the DC College Access Act.

Let me begin by thanking the members of Congress who have championed this program from the beginning and who secured passage of what may be the single most important and successful education initiative in the history of the District of Columbia.

In particular, I'd like to acknowledge you, Chairman Davis, and you, Delegate Norton, for your extraordinary efforts to transform a good idea into an Act of Congress. The DC College Access Act was born here in the House of Representatives, and we're grateful for the leadership of Congressmen Istook, Knollenberg, Frelinghuysen and Fattah of the House Appropriations Committee for ensuring that the Act was fully funded from the start.

Indeed, the DC College Access Act has enjoyed not only bipartisan support but unanimous support in these first five years, in both the House and the Senate, where Senators Voinovich, DeWine, Durbin and Landrieu have been particularly helpful in securing passage and funding of this landmark program.

DC College Access was seen from the start as a partnership between government and the private sector. The government agreed to pay the difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition for DC students attending college beyond the borders of the District of Columbia, and the business and philanthropic communities in this area agreed to provide the resources needed to launch and operate an unprecedented counseling, college admission and retention program for the students of DC public high schools. **The DC College Access Program** represents the fulfillment of this agreement and the private sector's substantial and long term commitment to increasing DC student college access.

DC-CAP has recruited, trained and put to work full-time, school-based DC-CAP advisors in all 18 DC public high schools. We provide direct college counseling services to more than 12,000 public high school students and their families, starting in 9th grade. We start by telling these students that college is not an impossible dream, and that thanks to you and this remarkable legislation-- they can go to college if they get the right preparation in high school.

As the high school years unfold, we make sure these students are taking the courses they need to gain admission to college. We assist them with their college applications. We help secure financial aid and scholarships from public and private sources. And if there is still a financial need, DC-CAP will provide them with up to $2,000 a year in last-dollar scholarship assistance to make sure they can pay all the expenses associated with a college education.

Once they're in college, DC-CAP College Retention Advisors continue to work with these students and their families, providing on-campus student support services, academic and financial aid counseling, for up to five years of college, to help ensure that students are able to complete their education.

DC-CAP is currently tracking, counseling and/or providing financial assistance to almost 3400 students, at over 400 colleges around the country, and has awarded almost $5 million dollars in scholarships for low income students.

This partnership has succeeded beyond our wildest expectations. DC-CAP, as a nonprofit organization has raised some $35 million in private funds over the past five years. Much has come through significant grants from Lockheed Martin, Exxon Mobil, Fannie Mae Foundation, Marriott International, AES, Verizon, the Robert and Arlene Kogod Foundation, the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, Sallie Mae, the Catherine Reynolds Foundation, the Riggs National Corporation, the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, the Kimsey Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, Comcast, Bank of America, Wachovia, Dell, US Airways, NASDAQ, the Advisory Board, ObjectVideo, the Foster Family Fund and nearly 100 other companies and philanthropies.

We've also raised money through special fundraising events such as Fight for Children's School Night, the Sallie Mae 10K Run, and the Tony Kornheiser-Michael Wilbon Celebrity Golf Classic and Roast. We've received large anonymous gifts and small donations from private citizens. This community is fully invested in DC-CAP, and their investment – along with yours – is paying large dividends already.

This remarkable partnership between Congress and the Washington community has in five short years become a model for the nation of what the public and private sectors can do when they harness their distinct resources to a common purpose.

The DC College Access Act is an unequivocal, unqualified success. While historical numbers are difficult to verify, we believe that the number of DC high school graduates going on to college has doubled in the last five years, rising dramatically from 30 percent of students to 60 percent of students. Our belief is based on the unprecedented increases in DC student enrollment in colleges and universities around the country, as reported by the individual institutions themselves. As an example, from the fall of 1999 to the fall of 2002, DC student freshman enrollment increased:

- 312 percent at Virginia State University;
- 900 percent at St. Mary's College of Maryland;
- 200 percent at North Carolina A&T;
- 185 percent at Ohio State;
- 243 percent at Penn State;
- 206 percent at Norfolk University;
- 100 percent at the University of Vermont

I could go on and on, case after case, state after state, citing examples of colleges and universities in DC, MD, VA and all around the country, that are reporting that their DC student enrollment has doubled, tripled, and even quadrupled in less than four years. And let me reiterate that these statistics are not numbers that have been gleaned, or extrapolated, interpreted or massaged in any manner. These statistics have been provided by the individual institutions' enrollment offices.

And what does this mean when we know that the national freshmen student enrollment only grew by an estimated 5% over the same period? What does it mean when there is this dramatic a rise in the college enrollment of students who come from a city whose population has been declining and now stagnant for the past five years?

It means that a whole new population of students in the District have been given the opportunity to go to college and they are taking it...The impact of the DC College Access Act simply cannot be overstated especially when you consider that 80% percent of the children you're sending to college are the first in their families to ever have that opportunity. Most of them come from poor, single-parent homes. Most have lived on public assistance all their lives. More than nine in ten are minority students. Many had never ventured across the Potomac River until you gave them a chance to attend college and a choice of colleges to attend.

This legislation has given access to literally thousands of students who would otherwise never have had the opportunity to go to college. By giving these underrepresented, disadvantaged, low-income students the "equal" opportunity to attend college, in one single generation you could reverse decades of family despair, poverty and welfare dependency.

And for DC-CAP, the best part of this news is that 75% of the students that we are assisting are staying in school year after year, and the first full complement of DC-CAP students will graduate from college this spring.

What you've done with the passage of the DC College Access Act is nothing less than to transform thousands of young lives. You've helped them break the cycle of poverty and despair in which their families were imprisoned for generations.

In conclusion, I urge you – I implore you -- to reauthorize the DC College Access Act. It is a government program that absolutely works. It has brought out the best in the Washington business and philanthropic community. It has brought fairness and choice to DC students, who are used to having neither. And it has created life-changing opportunities for thousands of young people who are taking advantage of it in record numbers. It is legislation you should be proud of, and it's an Act of Congress that has earned the right to be renewed.

Thank You.

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