
GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA



EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

Committee on Government Reform
United States House of Representatives

Congressman Thomas M. Davis, III, Chairman
Congressman Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Member

***“Maintaining a Level Playing Field for D.C. Graduates
Reauthorization of the D.C. College Access Act”***

Statement of
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Mayor
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Chairman Davis, Congresswoman Norton, and members of this distinguished committee, I am pleased to have the opportunity to present testimony on the District of Columbia's Tuition Assistance Grant Program. Both of you were responsible for the creation of this program and were intimately involved in its launching. I am pleased to be here before you, five years later, to affirm that the program has actually exceeded the expectations and has profoundly influenced the lives of thousands of District families.

Thanks to your tireless efforts, as well as the efforts of other members of the House and Senate, the District of Columbia College Access Act of 1999 was signed into law on November 12, 1999. A short time later a Mayoral Order created the D.C. Tuition Assistance Grant Program (DC TAG) to carry out the requirements of the legislation. Just a few months later, applications were disseminated and by the fall 2000 nearly 2000 undergraduates were attending college under this program. Since its inception, DC TAG has awarded over \$63 million dollars to District residents with higher education goals.

As you consider reauthorizing the program, I believe it would be useful to examine if DC TAG has achieved its primary goals of expanding both the

number of DC residents attending college and the choice of post-secondary institutions available to them. Very simply, the answer is a resounding “yes.” Quite simply, were it not for this program, thousands of DC families could not have afforded to send their sons and daughters to college.

Moreover, many families would have been faced with very limited options in terms of where their children could attend school.

The evidence before us is quite compelling. For example:

More DC residents are attending college than ever before. Between 1998 and 2002, the number of DC high school graduates who enrolled as freshmen in colleges and universities nationwide has increased by 28%. No state in the union can make that claim. This unprecedented figure is due in large part, if not almost exclusively, to DC TAG and the expanded opportunities for DC residents as a result of this program.

For many families, their sons and daughters are first generation college attendees. A survey among Woodson High School graduates using the program shows that more than 50% of those students are first in their families to go to college. Besides being an enormous source of pride for these families, this fact promises much for the educational attainment of

their siblings, other children and grandchildren to follow. Indeed, this can significantly improve economic development and other societal factors in neighborhoods plagued with chronic underdevelopment and limited educational attainment.

For District families, DC TAG has made college considerably more affordable. In fact, during the 1999/2000 school year undergraduates from the District of Columbia paid more than twice the national average to attend public institutions outside the District, while during the 2000/2001 school year not only did DC TAG level the playing field, but students saved thousands of dollars in college costs.

DC TAG has become an essential element in higher education planning for District residents. Altogether, more than 6500 students have received tuition assistance since 2000. The number of awards for current school year is more than 4000 – twice the number awards in our first year.

Our students have attended more than 300 institutions in 46 states, including nationally recognized public institutions like the University of Virginia, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, the University of California-Berkeley

and Rutgers University, as well as many public Historically Black Colleges and Universities, such as Virginia State University, Morgan State University, North Carolina Agriculture & Technical, and Delaware State; private HBCUs, such as Morehouse, Spellman, and Hampton Universities, and local jewels like Georgetown University, Howard University, Trinity College, and the University of Maryland College Park.

Participation in the program represents the full diversity of the city, with representation across the city's eight wards. Our outreach efforts have been successful insofar as the participants represent young people from all ethnic backgrounds and income levels, as well as students from virtually every public and nonpublic high school where District residents attend. As we seek to improve the prospects of our current residents and expand our base of tax paying citizens, the DCTAG Program is an important tool for economic and social development.

We are excited about the prospect that DC TAG graduates will utilize their experiences and newly minted degrees at home in the Nation's Capital. The academic success of these students holds the promise that they will return to the city as catalysts to sustain the social and economic changes that are

prerequisites for this city to realize its position as a leader in this new economy.

Our DC TAG students venture out of the city leveraging this educational opportunity while exposing their new environments to a distinct set of experiences, values and culture. They are also absorbing new ideas and ways of being, which serve to strengthen the communities that they call home. The District is fully engaged in an economic revitalization and poised for this social transformation.

Not only does DC TAG support our students who are venturing out of the city for education, but it also supports educational aides, often community anchors, who are working in the District's school systems. Specifically, the amended changes to the original legislation opened the classrooms at local universities to support our city's educational aides as they strive to meet the 60 college credit requirement of the No Child Left Behind legislation. The Catholic University of America's Para-education program is a pioneer in this endeavor.

Today you will hear testimony from Brian Ford, a graduate of Eastern High School. DC TAG enabled him to complete his studies at the University of Delaware. Brian is a financial aid professional at Trinity College. He is truly a living example of the investment in education that is now paying dividends in his home community, Washington, D.C.

In many ways, DC TAG is a victim of its own success. As previously mentioned, District residents are attending college at record levels. They are attending colleges across the country, including some of the country's most prestigious. Beyond the rising number of participants, we are faced with significant increases in public tuition costs across the country. The impact on the program's budget is shown by the fact that in our first year, under \$10 million in awards were issued, while this year it will be closer to \$21 million.

With your increased support, we anticipate that over the next five years DC TAG will grant over 30,000 awards. Specifically, we will need annual appropriation of at least \$25.6 million to enable us to continue offering the same level of benefits to new graduates. Without such an increase, we would be faced with several very unpleasant possibilities: decreasing the

lifetime award maximum, reducing yearly maximum awards , and/or converting DC TAG to a needs based program. We know that this would limit participation in the program and otherwise narrow the choices available to our residents.

Legislators might ask if it is not reasonable for the city to use local funds to sustain the program. Mr. Chairman, such sentiment ignores the basic premise for the program, namely that the relatively small population of the District and the federally imposed constrictions on its fiscal condition, preclude it from funding the sort of post-secondary institutions that its citizens deserve. This program helps to level the playing field by granting DC residents the sort of options enjoyed by residents of other states. Our own public university, the University of the District of Columbia, is constrained by both funding and scale from offering our residents a full educational menu.

As long as Congress continues to limit the city's tax base and impose onerous financial burdens – situations that are directly related to the denial of voting representation in the Congress – we are unable to fund this important program. Few cities across the America have the responsibility of

providing a higher education network for their residents. All cities in the country can rely upon their state capital to provide a host of post-secondary institutions. No city in America faces what the District does – no state government to administer a university system and no financial base to make up the difference.

Mr. Chairman, for all these reasons it is entirely appropriate for the Congress to help the city maintain its virtual university system for our residents and to take tremendous pride and satisfaction in what you have made possible during the first five years of the DC Tuition Assistance Grant Program. I strongly urge you to reauthorize this program and continue this partnership, which is allowing our long-neglected young people to soar to new heights. I am confident that years from now you will be able to look back and say this program was an important part of our shared journey to turn this city into a national jewel and reverse years of educational and economic despair in this great city.

We are committed to sharpening our focus to improve college retention rates. We have a long-standing relationship with the DC College Access Program (DC CAP) who provides college and financial aid counseling and

college preparation assistance to DCPS students and their families. In cooperation with DC CAP, we are monitoring college retention rates and implementing strategies to ensure that we are not just sending students to college, but that we are also addressing any non-financial issues that could derail their college careers. This is a perfect example of public/private partnerships working towards the greater good of our city. We are also appreciative of the support and flexibility of the local university community as we have undertaken this work.

In conclusion, I appreciate the opportunity to testify and welcome any questions that you may have.