

“Good morning, my name is Aaron Arnold. I serve as the executive director of Waukegan to College, a nonprofit organization that supports first-generation students to and through college. I am here today to compel the commission to continue pursuing equitable funding for students for whom access to a college education is essential to following their dreams.

The students we serve approach their post-secondary education possibilities at a disadvantage in many ways. They come from an underresourced school district, lack the experience and support of parents or caregivers who know and understand the path to college, and belong to social identity groups that have been historically marginalized. While many are able to overcome these barriers to getting to college, the number one reason they are not able to persist is due to financial hardship. This is not due to a lack of effort on their part as our students do what they can to minimize the cost of college, such as commuting or attending community college as a first step toward a four-year degree. The vast majority of our scholars work while they study, not only to cover their costs but also to fulfill their role as financial providers for their families. This demanding reality is a difficult challenge to overcome, and also a reason that many students and families are deterred from even exploring the option of a college education. The sticker shock is too much and they see it as an insurmountable obstacle to a brighter future.

The ability to afford a college education is not the only issue that needs to be addressed in order for Illinois to say that we have an equitable post-secondary educational system. Students, like the ones we serve, need and deserve unique supports as first-generation and low income students. As we face a mental health crisis among our youth, resources and services are essential for college students who bring with them the weight of trauma, which can be exacerbated by their striving to succeed and find their place in a new environment. They also need more guidance and support as they explore career paths and pursue career building opportunities like internships. They need to see representation among faculty and administration that encourages them and demonstrates that they can pursue similar opportunities.

I believe in the potential of the students that we serve. I believe in their potential to excel as college students, and to mature into citizens who contribute to the betterment of their communities. They don't need our sympathy, they need to be afforded the same opportunities and resources that for so long have been allocated, intentionally or out of inaction, to those who come from certain zip codes or identity groups. I urge the commission to put forth recommendations that address the issues of inequity in the funding of our public universities and thank you for your consideration of my comments. On behalf of the hundreds of students and families who make up Waukegan to College, we are grateful for the work that you are doing and count on your diligence and forthrightness concerning the inequity which must be confronted.