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April 2, 2025

Karina Arango, Director of Advocacy
The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis

Testimony in Support of House Bill 265

My name is Karina Arango, and I am the Director of Advocacy with The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis. Founded in 1920, the Scholarship Foundation has provided direct funding to low-income, first-generation students to access and complete higher education. I write to testify in support of House Bill 265, which seeks to increase the Access Missouri grant award.

Access Missouri is the state's only need-based scholarship program, currently serving over 40,000 students. However, despite its critical role in supporting Missouri students, the program has been consistently underfunded. In 2024, the total budget for Access Missouri was \$83 million, nearly \$10 million less than it was in 2010. As a result, individual student awards have remained flat, falling far short of the statutory maximum of \$2,850. With rising tuition costs and the dramatic need for a qualified workforce, these stagnant awards have made it increasingly difficult for Missouri students to afford college and secure jobs that support their families and our state.

House Bill 265 proposes a much-needed increase to Access Missouri grant amounts, raising the maximum annual award to \$1,700 for public two-year institutions and \$3,500 for public four-year institutions located in Missouri. These increases will provide relief to students facing financial hardship. Additionally, the bill replaces the term "expected family contribution" with "student aid index" to match the federal financial aid terminology. However, while HB 265 updates the language, it does not address a key concern: ensuring that Access Missouri grants are targeted toward students with the greatest financial need.

Currently, all students with a student aid index of \$12,000 or less qualify for at least the minimum award amount: \$300 for public two-year institutions and \$1750 for public four-year. We urge the legislature to consider lowering this threshold so that Missouri's limited financial aid resources are directed to students facing the most significant financial barriers. Many students with substantial financial need may not be able to attend college without state assistance, and it is imperative that the program prioritizes these individuals.

Opening Doors to Education

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By strengthening this program and ensuring that aid reaches the students who need it most, the state can help remove financial barriers to higher education and work towards Missouri's Big Goal to have 60% of its working-age adults attain a postsecondary certificate or degree by 2030. We urge the legislature to support House Bill 265 with a commitment to ensuring that Access Missouri prioritizes Missouri students with the most significant financial need. Thank you for your time.

Sources:

Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development, Access Missouri Financial Assistance Program, 2025. <https://dhewd.mo.gov/ppc/grants-scholarships/access-mo>

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