

Senate Finance Committee
SB 182 – Establish Foster-to-College Scholarship Program
Proponent Testimony
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Thank you for your time to read my testimony, Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and esteemed members of the Senate Finance Committee.

My name is Gabriella Craft and I was in foster care as a teenager. I was blessed to have one foster care placement in one home from 14 to 18 years old. The problems for me began when I aged out of care in 2005 even though there were plenty of programs available to foster youth who age out of care and want to attend college, I was not informed of any of the resources for foster youth. I have known since the 6th grade that I wanted to be a social worker and I have known since about 8th grade that I wanted to attend the Ohio State University and obtain both my bachelors and Master's in social work. That's what I set out to do and I accomplished it. I obtained a Bachelor's of Science of Social Work and a Masters in Social Work from OSU. I have also worked with many former foster youth who attended college throughout my recent career. I worked with former foster youth as a foster care case manager, a case manager in charge of providing programing and case management to former foster youth in a housing program, and I have provided peer support at a community college in a holistic program that supports former foster youth.

One of the first challenges I faced when I got to college after aging out of care was issues with housing. In the dorms you have to leave during breaks and it's difficult when you have nowhere to go. It's also very difficult when you don't have money for housing. This is partly why my loans are so high because I had to borrow money to live off of while going to school. I'll never forget my freshman year when I found out that I was forced to stay on campus but yet I had to leave during break times. It was extremely difficult to find a place to stay during the breaks.

Sometimes like many former foster youth the places I would stay were toxic environments.

Many foster youth put themselves in situations that are not good for them sometimes even in abusive situations just to have some type of stability of having a place to stay. Fully funding a scholarship program that covers the full cost of attendance while in college would enable former foster youth to have access to safe affordable housing while obtaining their degree.

I have achieved success through graduating with Master's in social work. It would have been extremely helpful for me to have a scholarship that would pay for my schooling. While I was in school for my bachelors and master's I did not have the support of a holistic support program like the Scholar Network at Columbus State. It wasn't until I came to Columbus State in Spring 2021 to pursue my entrepreneurship certificate and being in Scholar Network has made such a difference in being able to stay in college. Even going back to school when I was older was a challenge for me. Every time I had an issue, the Scholar Network has been there to support me.

As a Scholar Network Coordinator, I have seen firsthand from the students who I have helped that this Support can make the difference between someone dropping out of college or staying in college. As a coordinator I have helped support students through their college journey by providing an empathetic ear to listen to their concerns and walk beside them as they navigate resources such as ETV, Ohio Reach Emergency Funds, and Medicaid/ Food Stamps. I know a student that comes to mind is one who was struggling with housing and motivation to stay in school. Although it took a year of me being consistently present that student ended up returning to Columbus State and is now thriving.

The Foster-to-College Scholarship program is important because the current programs are insufficient. One of the biggest issues is the age limit on many of the programs that are offered to former foster youth because it assumes that youth are informed of these services when they are not. I found out literally 1 day too late past my birthday about ETV funds. I found out

because I was interested in policy around former foster youth aging out of care and was doing research for a social work class. Yes, Bridges and ETV exist but because they have strict age requirements many youth don't find out about these programs in time to participate in them because they are older. Then with the focus on family preservation even in cases where reuniting with the family is not in the best interest of the youth many teens are reunited with their biological family right before they would age out of the system making them ineligible for participating in programs that would help them.

Overall, what I have observed while working with college students who are alumni of care and what I have learned from my experience of aging out of care is that the current systems in place are not enough. I hope that you will join me in supporting Senate Bill 182. Housing is the number one barrier I see students struggling with, the second is not being able to afford paying to go to college. The current systems are not enough to overcome the multiple barriers young adults face when attending college. I believe that supporting a fully funded scholarship program for Ohio's former foster youth will increase the number of skilled workers in Ohio's workforce and set many youth up for success.