

Illinois Student Assistance Commission June 26, 2009 Testimonials

The following are testimonials from the June 26, 2009, Illinois Student Assistance Commission meeting held at the University of Illinois at Chicago relative to approval of the FY2010 budget spending priorities for ISAC-administered gift assistance programs.

The Commission heard from 14 different speakers from throughout the state relative to the impact of anticipated cuts to student aid programs. Following the Commission meeting, [ISAC issued a public response](#) to the testimony that follows:

Mr. Damien Wolak, President, Undergraduate Student Government, University of Illinois at Chicago: “Hello, and thank you for allowing me this opportunity to address ISAC this morning. Although I do not personally qualify for financial aid, I am here to speak on behalf of the 80% of our student body who does qualify for assistance. Of that 80%, 40% is qualified for the Monetary Award Program (MAP). UIC prides itself on two distinct characteristics, the first being a diverse population and the second is providing quality affordable education. UIC is nationally recognized for student diversity and the fair price that students pay for a phenomenal education. These characteristics are cornerstones of UIC’s place in the state of Illinois and they are in danger. For those who are unaware, the MAP recipients are acknowledged to be the students that are in most need of state funding. It is devastating to consider that for UIC, the MAP grant budget may be cut from nearly \$24.5 million to approximately \$9 million, while additionally eliminating other programs such as the Illinois Veterans Grant, which was allocated around \$2 million in FY2008.

“If this budget passes, I do not know what the affected students will do, and I am concerned for them and the reputation of UIC. In my eyes, the options are limited. They might seek private loans and may be denied due to financial constraints and social economic status. Students may choose to find a job in order to cover the expenses of their education but will fall short due to the unemployment rate climbing close to 10%. Research tells us that students who work more than 15-20 hours per week experience difficulties in their academic pursuits. Many may be faced with one option left – withdraw from the University. What is the State of Illinois prepared to do ultimately when they drive away students from higher education? Did the State of Illinois consider the damage to UIC’s reputation if these cutbacks are passed?

“It is no secret that most MAP recipients are students from underrepresented populations. If [the budget we’re discussing is] passed, I believe UIC will be stripped of its two most fundamental and defined characteristics.

“These past couple of years, I found it refreshing to find incoming students radiating with emotions of joy and ambition, but this past year, it isn’t hard to sense that these obvious emotions from the incoming class has disappeared. One can argue that this strong sense of emotions may have disappeared from the students due to a sense of insecurity in financial aid. It seems this year that the incoming students do not radiate with such strong sense of joy and ambition as they did in previous years.

“Let’s take a moment and focus on the word “aid”. Aid is a verb, meaning support either by furnishing strength or prevent or remove evil. If the argument presented could be proven true, the State may need to reconsider the use of the word “aid”—for the word’s meaning, aid, is something that strives to strengthen the needy and in this case, the word aid means to drive students in need away from higher education.

“Luckily I am blessed enough not to qualify for MAP, this allowed me to objectively assess the situation. I considered that maybe the State believes that President Obama’s Pell grant increase will cushion the decrease in true aid for affected MAP recipients. After evaluating the numbers with the UIC financial aid director, it becomes painfully apparent that the Pell grant cannot sustain the gap.

“In addition to the multitude of problems that UIC students will be facing for FY2010, there has been an estimated 20% increase in documented MAP applications. Interestingly, instead of seeking possible solutions for the increase in applications by providing additional aid, the application deadline was finally moved to an earlier date than expected. This subtle shift disenfranchised countless viable applicants who applied with last year’s deadline. With this knowledge I find myself wondering if a 20% increase in applications is even an accurate reflection of the true level of need, especially in the light of the unannounced deadline change.

“I realize I propose many points for consideration on behalf of the students of UIC. It is my hope that together we can navigate this financial crisis and avoid a backlash which will result in a loss of our student population and our students’ ability to access a quality education at our fine university.

“As the student body president, I speak on behalf of those who are unable to be here today, and we believe education equals empowerment. It is because of this belief that I ask you to take these documents and my plea to state legislators. I have discussed this matter with many students who rely on financial aid and they are all in agreement that this change in funding is devastating. I believe if we all do our part in pushing for an increase in the projected budget we will avert these catastrophic circumstances. Failure to advocate on behalf of the students of UIC would be remiss in the responsibility in producing the next generation of educated, productive, and contributing citizens. Thank you for your time.”

Ms. Meegan Dugan Bassett, Women Employed: “Good morning. I’m a senior policy associate at Women Employed. Women Employed is a non-profit advocacy agency committed to improving women’s economic status. Education is one of the best ways of doing that, and Illinois’ need-based financial aid programs are absolutely essential to helping low income women to enter and complete higher education. That is why Women Employed has been a strong advocate for increasing need-based financial aid and other educational support.

“As Chairman McNeil mentioned, the Illinois General Assembly has passed a budget that would cut over 50% of vital social services and state financial aid. We are deeply troubled by these cuts and are working hard to fight for a permanent revenue solution. In the last three weeks alone we have mobilized our action network to e-mail and call legislators and the Governor, and I would encourage all the students in this room to do the same. In the last three weeks, over 804 voters have sent 2,253 e-mails to policy makers through our action network.

“With such deep cuts from the legislature, we know that the staff and the Commission must make tough decisions, and we support your decision to concentrate most of the remaining money into the MAP and Illinois Incentive for Access (IIA) in an effort to make efficient use of what little funding you have. We believe this is the lesser evil in this dire fiscal situation. We believe that may allow students who absolutely can’t attend without these funds to complete some credits towards their degree instead of dropping out entirely in the first semester.

“Without education, training and support services for Illinois workers, our state’s ability to recover from the current economic crisis, as well as the competitiveness of our future workforce, will be gravely compromised. You have our support and our promise that we will continue to fight hard to end these cuts, and we hope you will do the same. Thank you.

“I would like to introduce Elena Herrera, who will talk about how these cuts affect her and other low income non-traditional students.”

Elena Herrera, Moraine Valley Community College Student: “I am a second year student at Moraine Valley Community College at Palos Hills. I’m 40 years old, and I have been working in a warehouse since 1995 on low wages. I’m a student majoring in the health sciences and holding onto a 3.8 GPA. I am the primary caretaker of my senior parents—who are very cute—and they are over 75 years of age. I’m the last child of 12 children and the only one to make it to college, so they are thrilled that I have this opportunity to be in college.

“With the MAP grant, I hope to graduate in the spring of 2010 with my associate degree in the health sciences, but in the fall I had hoped to come here to UIC to enroll in the nursing program. I’m not certain how that is going to happen how.

“I’m here today as a student organizer for Student Advocates for Success. I lovingly call that SAS. SAS is a group of students from Illinois community colleges that advocate to protect and improve the financial aid system so that more students can go to college. I work hard in SAS because I know that funding for higher education has the power to change lives. Higher education is a change for a better quality of life and it will equip me to serve society. I want to ensure that the opportunity is made available to others. Students like myself have sacrificed and risked everything to attend college. These supports are the only means for low income students to get family-sustaining careers. If I lose these supports, these grants, I may lose my only chance to graduate. But I promise you that myself and the members of SAS will continue to fight for the restoration of funding and I ask that you do everything you can to do the same.”

Mr. Dom Belmonte, Golden Apple Foundation: “Chairman McNeil and Commissioners, thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you. At the beginning of this month, I introduced to the Board members of Golden Apple Cortez Salfal. Cortez is a six-year-old student at Bright Elementary at the city’s far south side. He was there as the guest of Golden Apple award winner Jennifer Farris, and she came with a simple message about him: Cortez was able to double his reading score over the past couple of years because of the love and attention he had received from a teacher as fine as Jennifer. Such achievement was even more remarkable for the fact that Cortez and his family had been homeless for the two months prior, and Mom had been wandering around from one shelter to another trying to be in close enough proximity to the school so that Cortez could get to the place that he so loved. It was at that point that some of the members of our Board privately decided that Cortez and his family would acquire housing and sufficient transportation to allow him to continue. Cortez continues on a pathway, in part because of the care and concern of those involved in the teaching profession.

“Also in that room that day, I introduced to the Board Taylor Cheatham, a 2009 Golden Apple Scholar full of potential and pride, at the beginning of his journey to become a teacher, graduate of St. Lawrence. I taught him on Monday, and like all the other 400 undergraduate scholars that are on the path to becoming teachers or the other 750 who are currently teaching now in Illinois, they have a bright future. I had said to the Board and I will say it to you, that the chances of Cortez going from a six-year-old to a seventeen-year-old with the same amount of potential depends in large part on the quality of the instruction and teachers in his life. In our work, we try to impose a simple message to our young people that the quality of the instruction they receive to the youngsters we direct our scholars to begin their career is, to those children, a matter of life and death. It is a small portion of the human risk that the decisions of the State of Illinois that you are burdened with can suffice.

“Will Taylor become a teacher if it weren’t for Golden Apple, if it we were forced to close our doors? Most likely, yes. Will the bulk of our Scholars end up in the teaching professions in the schools that deserve to have such talented people in front of them? Don’t know. Will Cortez grow up to be a productive citizen or a gang lord or statistic? Conjectural.

“I stand before you in gratitude for the faith you have given to us. We are like the crew mates in the ship in the movie *The Perfect Storm*: We do a real good job putting our fish on ice under the decks and then look up to see 50 foot waves that we had no part of, contending over us. So while we are grateful for the consideration you have given to Golden Apple and to the MAP grant, may I suggest something of you who are so devoted to the concept of student assistance—that maybe on a post-it note attached to the recommendation you would give, that you would put down “that we the Commissioners of the Illinois Student Assistance Commission don’t believe in doomsday, we believe in a better day, a better day that the programs that we sponsor support one and all.” To give you a little further human face of the impact of these potential cuts, a number of my future colleagues wish to say something.”

Heather Knobloch, Golden Apple Scholar: “Good morning. I attend an Illinois university and my major is elementary education with a reading endorsement and interest in language arts. I just want to say, first and foremost, this is my family, the Golden Apple students. This is my family. I came to Golden Apple from a very loving family—I love them to death, but these are my colleagues. These are people who understand me. My parents don’t always understand me. These are the people who I can turn to when I don’t know how my lesson plan is going to go, or the first day I get into that classroom and I need a pointer or even just a hug – these are who I’m going to.

“I’m going to talk about my summer institute experience. In Golden Apple we have this program, summer institute, where we get to have this experience and teach in the classroom. How many undergraduates get to say that? They don’t student teach until their senior year of college, let alone second semester of senior year. Last year I had the privilege of teaching at an elementary school on the west side. I taught third grade summer school. In the beginning of that class, Mr. Beasley was my cooperative teacher. He told me that, “Heather, you’re a Golden Apple scholar, shoot for the stars. You get to take attendance. Here’s the math book. I have faith in you.” That little bit of faith brought me to success.

“We team tagged. His students had an average of 40% on their math scores. I said I was a language arts interest, so this tells you something: At the end of that summer their average math test scores were 80%. Talk about impact, not only for them, but for me. That day when they found out that test score, each one of them lined up at the telephone and called their mother, their father, whoever took care of them, and said “I’m going to fourth grade.” Those were the best words I have ever heard in my life.

“Some of my family members, they can’t go to college without the Golden Apple Scholarship. They can’t do it. And it’s not just this experience [at stake], it’s their passion for teaching. We chose this profession. We could have been lawyers or doctors, but we want to impact children, and without the Golden Apple Scholarship, some of my family members can’t go to college and achieve this goal. So I’m here to fight for my family. Thank you.”

Katie Lusk, Golden Apple Scholar: “Hello. I’m from Galesburg, Illinois. I was the first one to get the Golden Apple Scholarship from Knox County, and I’m so proud. I called the *Register-Mail* because I wanted them to put it in the paper so everyone would know. I’m so proud and my parents were so proud. I’m a first generation college student, and since I got the scholarship two more Knox County people applied and got a scholarship and I couldn’t be any more proud of my small town.

“My major is special education and I’m currently at Western Illinois. I barely scrapped by—“ [*crying*]
“I’m sorry but I’m very passionate and emotional about this. When I found out that these cuts were happening—I have a lot of education scholarships, but Golden Apple helped me just barely scrape by and attend college. I broke down the other day in my Reflective (which is a part of Golden Apple) in Golden Apple when he asked me where I was going to school next year and I said I’m going to Western IF I can afford it. Those were the hardest words for me to say. I’m so passionate about being a special education teacher that I talked to my parents about the four and a half year degree for special education at Western and they said maybe I should change to elementary which is only four years, but I’m so passionate. I don’t want to be a less passionate person but a fully passionate person in special education.

“I hope that Golden Apple can still get funded. Community College isn’t really for me but it might be an option for next year, I can save up and maybe my parents can help out. Please support my family.”

Brett Fullmer, Golden Apple Scholar: “I come to you from Belleville, Illinois, about five hours south. I went to a Catholic high school and am the fifth person from that high school to receive a Golden Apple Scholarship. I know money makes the world go around, but I’m here more to talk about the future. Upon arrival here at UIC and I was welcomed into the building, I saw something that lasted me for a while. I saw a woman holding a six month child who said the words ‘this is our future.’ That is the most true statement I’ve heard. Those children out now that are two and younger, they are our future. But we, Golden Apple, we are the future educators; we are the ones to make their future possible. We are the ones who will show them the right path to be whatever profession they want to be—pharmacist, lawyer, doctor, any degree they want. They start at the early childhood age and go into secondary education.

“I’m going to SIUE and hope to major in special education and hopefully modern history if the funding is there. I would like to teach because Golden Apple said every student deserves a chance. Without the funding, students out here won’t get that chance to go to college and give that chance to other young children who need us.

“There is a difference between *want* and *need*. Every person out here, my family, *needs* to go to college. We would *want* the money, but we *need* to go to college to get that education for the *need* of the children we will teach. Without this Golden Apple Scholarship people said, ‘I will need to switch my major or do something else,’ but me personally, I want to be a teacher because I want to be a success story for the younger children who I will get to teach and show them the right way. And it can be done. Thank you.”

Katie Mundle, Golden Apple Scholar: “Hi. I’m an elementary education major and I attend North Central College in Naperville. I am usually the emotional one up here, but I’m going to be strong because this is something we are all very passionate about. Mr. Belmonte asked us this question in one of our classes, “Would you do this for free?” All of us said yes. We would totally become teachers for free. And I live by that and I want to make a difference and I know everybody sitting here today from Golden Apple would agree with me that we are here to make a difference in kids’ lives. Any support we can have to make it through college just to get that degree and stand in front of our classrooms so we can start our real journey – all this right now is the pre-party – our true journey is to stand in front of that classroom just as I’m standing in front of you today, to make a difference. We are here to make a difference, to watch the future succeed and any support that me and my fellow colleagues can have to get through college, that is all that we need. Thank you.”

Heather McKane, Dean of Student Financial Services, Aurora University: “Hello. My story may not be different from those that you have heard before me or after me, but please hear the statistics and

personal stories as more examples of the significance of this fiscal year budget decision will create for the State of Illinois college and universities, students and the future of our state and nation.

“At a time when President Obama is making access to education a priority and has identified a need for the United States to improve the percentage of individuals who graduate with a college degree, how can the State of Illinois build a budget that will reduce access and potentially decrease the number of students that can finish their undergraduate degree? I appreciate your thought process and thinking that front loading is helpful if the budget goes through as-is, but it is truly delaying the inevitable.

“At Aurora University, 807 students were able to continue their college education in 2008-2009 with the help of MAP, totaling \$3.38 million. We are currently seeing the same trend for the 2009-2010 academic year. This accounts for approximately 40% of our students. Included in this percentage is approximately 360 juniors and seniors. They don’t have the option of looking at other colleges, as they are in the final stretch of their degree.

“I can provide you with a lot more data or different ways to look at this, but I think more importantly, I have real students with real stories from Aurora University. Thank you.”

Bryn Golden, Aurora University Student: “Hello. This year I will be a senior social work major at Aurora University. Now, money is an issue for everyone, but especially for students trying to pay a full-time tuition (as most here know). Every year that I have been in school I have received a MAP grant, and it is very frightening to think of that going away or to be drastically cut. I know that I’m lucky--with these cuts, if they were to go through, I could make it happen. But I know I’m in such a better place than some of the situations that so many of my friends that I see going through. I don’t know what they are going to do. At this point, I already know people, even without these cuts, who have had to drop out of school because of lack of funding. And there is so many people at Aurora University and all universities in Illinois, that these cuts are going to make the difference. They aren’t going to and have already exhausted their resources. I know I’m talking to people who already understand the importance of this, but as much as we can pass on the importance of the funding of education in Illinois, please pass it on. I greatly appreciate it. Thank you.”

Deanna Childress, Aurora University Student: “Hello. In the fall, I will be a senior with a double major in psychology and sociology. For me, I come from a low-income background—first generation college student. Just the neighborhood where I grew up—it was really unlikely for other people around me to be in college. Out of my graduating class in my neighborhood, I’m the only one to go to a four-year university and still going to school.

“For me, education is my key to a successful life. I have grown up watching my mom struggle and still struggling today. Education is my priority because that is what is going to get me to where I need to be in life. I received MAP all three years at Aurora University and if it is cut now, I don’t know what I would do personally to pay for my tuition, I have no other resources. When I consider my options I think maybe I can take out more loans, but that is not an option since I have exhausted my loans *with* the MAP. Then, consider working, but I already work part-time on campus as many hours as I can during the school year. There really aren’t many other options for me. That leaves me at a loss. The MAP for me is essential in obtaining an education. If it was cut I don’t know what I would do. “

Jessica Wernli, Aurora University Student:

“I will be a senior this fall. I received the MAP for the past three years and hearing about the recent cuts on the budget was more than a huge disappointment to me. I actually took the news a little personally. I feel like for a state government to take these funds away from us, they are saying they don’t care about us. They don’t care about the hard work it takes for students to make it to and through college. They don’t care about the fact that students are already working full time to pay for their education. They don’t care about the future or our future. Then I got to thinking, maybe I should give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they do care, they just don’t realize. That is why we are here today to let them know the consequences that these budgets will bring.

“Many students who are in school now are already digging deep into their pockets to pay for their education and will now have to scramble for funds to pay for college. These actions could include working or taking out more loans. The first option means less time spent on school work, which is more costly than a lot of people realize. I have seen many students who are forced to make work a priority and who have not reached their full potential in college. Some failed a few of their classes and some even dropped out.

“With the second option of taking out more loans, students are forced to acquire more debt. This may put students in a hole they may not be able to escape from when they graduate, which is a fear I have myself. However dismal these options seem, at least they are options afforded to some students. I am also afraid of the significantly large number of students who will no longer be able to further their education. I know many students who are hanging on by a strand and this budget is more than enough to cut them from that strand and take away their future. With the significant decrease in MAP we are not only dousing the flames of our student’s futures, we are also smoldering the fire that could be and should be the future of our state. I do realize we need to make changes in our budget and the way we use the funding, but our state is trying to quickly fix things now that in a way will be damaging to our future.”

Shawn Warden, Chicago Public Schools, College and Career Preparation: “I’m not necessarily speaking officially for Chicago Public Schools. I came to this meeting to listen because I’m very concerned about the cuts to MAP. My primary role is that I chair the financial aid committee for our department. I have roughly 12,000 children of my own that I’m standing here representing. In our department, our goal is to move our students from high school into college.

“I’m feeling a little bit like a liar because I have spent the last year telling my kids, telling my staff, telling my teachers and counselors that we can get our kids into college and get them money to go to college. I have told this to my kids and their parents. And now, last night, I was sitting at my kitchen table trying to figure out how to write a letter to send to my kids who have graduated now and are making plans to go to all the schools that you represent. I want to tell them that they need to prepare plan B and ‘with no fault of your own, are about to affect you and may change your plans’. I personally think that not only will this change their plans for the upcoming school year, but forever. That is a serious pill for me and my kids to deal with.

“Of the 12,000 students we graduated this past June, roughly 64% of them are MAP eligible. That is almost 8,000 students who would be going to the state and private universities across Illinois. That is a hit for them. A number of our students come from low income, first generation families. And because they are low income, they may not be able to take the plan B that you mentioned at the opening of this meeting, such as loans, or use credit cards to pay for the tuition and fees—because they don’t have credit cards. They don’t have access to the private loan system. Some of my people are still going to the currency exchange, so this is a significant hardship for them. I’m speaking on their behalf. I feel like my role is, and has been for many years, as an advocate for them. What I want to say is that my kids need MAP and they need a full MAP or they are going to be staying right here in Chicago and I will be driving

down the street in the morning and evening on my way to work and home and see them standing on the corner because they aren't going to have a plan B. College is what we told them is what you need to do, and I told them I had a way to help them to do it. Now I have to tell them I didn't tell them the truth. Thank you."

Kenny Woodard, Illinois Wesleyan University Student: "Thank you for inviting me to be here. I'm a senior at Illinois Wesleyan University and am a political science major, and I'm here to basically advocate for students that can't afford the cuts that have been proposed to financial aid. If you can, imagine having to sit in a financial aid office and being asked to consider taking time off from going to the university that you are at because there aren't financial aid resources available for you. I imagine that a lot of students are going to hear this conversation and struggle with this if the cuts that are proposed, almost up to 75% if the cuts pass.

"I can speak from experience that struggling with mounting financial aid issues has the potential to suck the life and motivation and hope out of a student, even the most promising students, because that is what happened to me. As a student from a low income family, I know how important it is to have that financial aid support. It took me three years to find a college that was able to support me in a way that I needed without having to worry about money issues. When I was accepted into Illinois Wesleyan, it was initially bitter and sweet. At first I was going to a community college and transitioning to Illinois Wesleyan, one of the prestigious universities in the Midwest, and was thinking to myself, 'This means a 950% increase in the tuition that I would be paying. How would I do this? I struggle with paying \$2,000 a semester.' How was I going to pay \$19,000 a semester? But yet, I knew I couldn't turn down this awesome opportunity to go to Illinois Wesleyan. Visiting, I knew that it was the right size school. I met some of the political science professors and they were all great from what I could tell. I could also tell that the students had an intellectual caliber that would push me and force me to my intellectual limit, so I was set on the school. Also, my academic drive at the time was so strong and my interest in the political science field was so strong that I needed an institution to support me in my ambition and develop me.

"Basically, my story is this: If it had not been for MAP and Pell and other financial aid, I wouldn't be going to the school that I know was the perfect fit for me. This explosion in interest in learning that I was talking about didn't just happen all of a sudden. I'm 23 years old and I started college five years ago at Illinois State University but I didn't have the monetary support that I have now. That caused me to have a lack of motivation, and I left the school. I began to lose respect for myself and focus on why I was in college in the first place.

"Three years ago miraculous changes occurred, I found Jesus Christ and found support from church members and from an organization called Project Rise at Heartland Community College, and I began to go to that college as well. I began to do research right away on Illinois Wesleyan and at that time, my interest in Illinois Wesleyan had peaked and I talked to my advisors about attending there.

"This was also the time that I was transitioning from losing my apartment and moving into a homeless shelter. That made it tough to stay focused on my education. I believe that most of my dreams that I had on going to Illinois Wesleyan happened that summer at the shelter. Often my mentor at Project Rise would encourage me and tell me I could do this. That built courage in me—so much so that I got the courage to apply to Illinois Wesleyan and was ultimately accepted with literally no money in my pocket.

"After I was accepted at Illinois Wesleyan, I think the most astounding thing for me was sitting in the financial aid office and realizing that there were funds available for low income students like me going to a university like Illinois Wesleyan. That was a stunning fact for me. I had to take out some loans, but it wasn't so much that I had to walk away from the university and walk away from the opportunity.

“Now, I really appreciate it and I learn as much as I can while I’m at Illinois Wesleyan because I know I’m living in the midst of some of the greatest opportunities I’ll ever have in life—opportunities like last summer’s enrichment program which gave me an internship at the McLean County Urban League, and this summer the Action Center Program which gives me an internship at State Farm Insurance Company and the Unity Community Center.

“Even though my story is a little unusual, I know that many other students struggle with similar challenges. So on behalf of these students, I encourage you all to protect the one important thing that keeps us there, the MAP grant: one of the best programs in Illinois. This is what supports ambitious students that aren’t necessarily as fortunate as everyone else, and if we really want to level the playing field, it is important to keep this program in place. Thank you, everyone.”