

Delivered to the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, January 24, 2017 –

Good afternoon. I'll begin by expressing my gratitude to the Board for the opportunity to speak here today. My name is Christopher Aguirre, I'm twenty years old, and I have been a student at Bunker Hill Community College since the Fall of 2015. Prior to that, I lived in the Boston area for a year, after leaving an abusive family environment in South Florida. When I arrived, I was fortunate enough to have found a job and a place to rent in Revere.

That was three years ago. My situation appeared stable until next year, when rising rental costs had made it unsustainable to continue living there. Working full-time as a bank teller, it seemed, was not enough to make ends meet. I had already realized how important it would be to further my education: I earned a high school equivalency credential, began the process of applying to Bunker Hill, and was registered for classes in the fall.

But in July 2015, after an exhaustive search for a higher-paying job and a more affordable place to rent, I came to lack fixed housing of any kind. In the months that followed, I arranged for temporary, informal stays with friends – what many would call “couchsurfing” – before I began to spend nights between Terminal B and Terminal C of Logan International Airport. In September, just as the semester was about to begin, I was able to find a new job in the same airport working as a bookstore clerk. That blessing came just in time, because even after having to ration my savings such that I could have one meal each day, I had almost completely run out of money.

I continued to sleep daily at Logan Airport until December 2015 – just before the semester came to an end – when I was approved for the Emergency Residence program at Bridge Over Troubled Waters, a service center for homeless youth located in downtown Boston. There are many positive things about the program that I was able to take advantage of, namely, the opportunity to rebuild my savings, but they were completely overshadowed by the fact that its leadership consistently refused to consider my education a priority. The director of the program at Bridge Over Troubled Waters was openly opposed to my full-time status at Bunker Hill, and made the baseless claim that my enrollment was an impediment to seeking a higher-paying job. As a result, I was involuntarily removed from the program in August 2016.

I have been denied from several transitional living programs – such as the Carey Program of the Cambridge Multi-Services Center – due to my lack of income and my status as a full-time student, and, for all of its valor, my refusal to compromise that status has been a source of great frustration in my continued search for affordable housing.

Meanwhile, at Bunker Hill, I have repeatedly qualified for the Dean's List, earned membership to the Commonwealth Honors Program and Phi Theta Kappa, and had my savings replenished by the institutional scholarships and federal financial aid grants I have received during my time as a student. I am projected to graduate this year, and I am in the midst of the frenzy of the transfer admissions process, something I must constantly balance in addition to my job, my coursework, and my overall well-being.

For my success I must thank Single Stop, my professors and advisors, as well as other resources at Bunker Hill that have guided me and been a source of invaluable support. Their support has been so effective, I believe, because they have transcended whatever negative or unjustified perceptions of homelessness in order to help. And I hope now that, within your own positions, you will take action and find the urgency to do the same – because while housing and food insecurity may be most visible on the sidewalk, it strikes far too many of this state's young men and women who understand that their education can lead them to success which benefits not only themselves, but their communities and the Commonwealth as a whole.

Thank you.

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