

February 11, 2019

Chairman Dohrman and members of the House Higher Education Committee:

On behalf of St. Louis Graduates, the Active Advocacy Coalition and The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis I am pleased to testify today in support of House Bill 498 which would strengthen the A+ Scholarship program.

By making A+ a first-dollar program, HB 498 will provide eligible students attending two-year institutions predictable resources for tuition, fees and books *upfront* so they can begin their post high school studies knowing our state is committed to funding their first two years of postsecondary education.

For low-income students this could be a game-changer. Presently, students who are Pell-eligible must apply these limited federal dollars first before accessing the A+ scholarship they have earned through academic and personal achievement during high school.

For these students the A+ promise of “free community college” does not ring true; it’s only a promise to students whose family income is high enough to make them ineligible for a federal Pell grant. The average family income for A+ recipients is \$85,000. Missouri is leaving out of its calculus the students who need A+ the most: those who have worked hard to earn it and have significant financial need. According to the Missouri Department of Higher Education (MDHE) this represents approximately 18% of A+ recipients – those whose family income is less than \$40,000 per year. The message we are sending these students is clear: we’re glad you worked hard and earned A+, but you’ll never get to use it because we are going to draw down your federal aid first.

Over the past year, MDHE convened committees to review the state’s student aid programs. The task force made a critical observation during its review: *Timely completion needs to be balanced with ensuring that students who can’t move at an accelerated pace aren’t left behind.*

Representative Windham’s bill will provide that balance.

Missouri’s goal is to *graduate* students with postsecondary credentials to provide the workforce our state needs. For A+ to meet that goal, it needs a boost. Only 35% of A+ recipients graduate. We would contend that these low rates are indicative of insufficient funding, allocated without sensitivity to students with the greatest financial need.

While some portion of the low graduation rate in A+ can be attributed to the fact that students transfer to four-year schools before completing an associate’s degree, lowest-income students are now required by our state to spend down their limited Pell funds *first*, dollars that could be used to help them complete a degree at a four-year institution.

Once the Pell clock starts ticking, it’s critical to keep pace to graduation. Today’s students are typically working to support themselves while balancing school work. We are requiring them to forego the A+ scholarship they earned and use their Pell grant at the community college level when we know many

will transfer to a four-year institution. In other words, we *are* leaving behind the students who cannot move forward without financial support from the state.

Changing A+ to a first-dollar program will change this. It will provide an incentive for students to enroll in community college using the A+ scholarship they earned, knowing they will have their Pell dollars available to help them complete a four-year degree later. It will give them the time they need to complete their degrees at the same time they are supporting themselves and their families. It will give them the financial resources to meet the expectations we have of them, and, more importantly, they have of themselves.

As Missouri puts in place a multi-pronged strategy to become the Best in the Midwest, producing the talent our state needs for today and tomorrow, it has rightly prioritized increasing educational attainment. Making A+ accessible to more Missouri students will set us on a path to reach that goal and ensure that students who earn A+ eligibility see the benefit of their hard work.

Laura Winter
Project Director
St. Louis Graduates
laura@stlouisgraduates.org
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