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Written Testimony

My name is Alex Katz. I graduated from UConn in 2014, the University of Rhode Island with a Masters in Higher Education in 2016, and now work at the Jordan Porco Foundation.

While I will be talking about systemic, structural, and personal barriers I faced as an at-risk student at UConn, I also wanted to note that I know some of these processes have changed since my time there.

I started college at age 17. Escaping an abusive household, I had virtually nothing, so I immediately found a job on campus and began working 40 hour weeks. Unlike many of my peers, I didn't have help with things like clothes, a laptop, books, school supplies, and other personal needs.

Aside from the financial burden, I also had nowhere to go over school breaks. I spent my first Thanksgiving break sneaking in and out of buildings, couch surfing, and sleeping in the library. You could pay to stay for the winter, but although the option was available, it was not financially accessible. I luckily had an on-campus job that provided me housing for part of my first summer there, but I still found myself with nowhere to go for a few weeks.

Scholarships I received from high school ran out after freshman year. Since I am estranged from my parents, I was unable to provide parental information on my FAFSA, which made it difficult to get aid. This resulted in unpaid fee bills, late fees, and not being able to register for classes or housing on time.

I tried to apply for independent financial status, but this application process required documentation that I couldn't get. Proving that there had been abuse was incredibly challenging since few people knew of my situation growing up, and my own letter, along with letters from friends, was not considered enough. I was shuffled back and forth between departments looking for help and solutions to my roadblocks for over a year.

Around this time I moved off campus due to the cost, the vacations, and my unpaid fee bill. Not knowing that renting would be nearly impossible without a cosigner, or three times the amount of first month's rent for a deposit (which is difficult when living paycheck to paycheck) I ended up back on couches and in my cheap junkyard car for a few months. During my time between housing, I found it difficult to not have an address – not just for mail, but for things like credit card applications, taxes, car registration, and more. I didn't feel like a real person.

I got additional jobs off campus, began working 80 hour weeks, and eventually got an apartment 8 miles off campus. I had to work at least 65 hours a week just to afford rent, never mind any other expenses. I worked between classes, until 8 pm, went to another job at 10pm, worked until 4 am, and then went to 8am class. I often found myself choosing between rent, food, or books. My situation also made it impossible for me to focus on being a student.

My junkyard car broke, and it took me an hour to get to school in the morning and I got out of work so late that I didn't feel safe or was too tired to walk back. I once again found myself

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sleeping in the library.

I was lucky to meet a few amazing administrators my junior year, who were able to help me access the things I needed to be successful but many students are not so fortunate.

My story is just one story. There is no textbook definition of homelessness or hunger among college students. I think students sometimes get painted with a broad brush of being irresponsible or lazy, and my story fits in a nice box of trying so hard but still struggling so much, so I get asked to tell it a lot. Many students face housing insecurity and hunger for so many reasons, and their voices need to be heard.

As a Master's candidate, I focused my research around the needs, existing resources, and potential supports for this population. Through my research I have found that my experiences were not atypical of other students who are at-risk in similar ways. Recently schools have been increasing conversations around first generation students and students in foster care. The needs of independent students, and students facing hunger and homelessness are not that different.

I recognize that each university needs time to examine their existing structures to respond in the manner that simultaneously best suits their students as well as their campus structure and needs, however, it is clear that something needs to be done.

It has been my dream for the past five years to see changes and additional supports come to fruition for these students. I believe that with the proper time and communication, we can make this a reality.

We use terms like student-athlete, student-worker: we know being a student should come first, but for students in my situation, this is impossible. Let's provide the structures so they can succeed.