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US Higher Education and Workforce Investment Subcommittee  
Testimony on the Pell Preservation and Expansion Act of 2021  
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Good Morning Chair Wilson, Ranking member Murphy and members of the US Higher Education and Workforce Investment Subcommittee. Thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony today. My name is Darleny Suriel. I am a first-generation Dominican immigrant and college student at the City College of New York a public four-year university, where I am currently pursuing my bachelor's degree. I am also the Youth Council coordinator for Goddard Riverside's #DegreesNYC, a data-informed collective impact movement co-led by young people and professionals to move to equity in education in New York City. I am here to speak to you today about my college experience and how the Pell Grant has contributed positively to my road to success.

I have had an unconventional postsecondary journey through three public academic institutions: Purchase College where I started my college journey, the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) where I attained my associate's degree, and City College, a four-year university, where I am currently pursuing my bachelor's degree. My academic journey has included many challenges--some personal, some financial, some systemic, and some pandemic-related--but through it all, there have been many more triumphs than challenges. My experience is similar to a third of college students nationwide who have transferred during their college career. The Pell Grant has supported students like me as we navigate through these institutions. Thanks to the Pell Grant, I have had access to high-quality education without worrying about accumulating significant debt. The Pell Grant has made it possible for me to afford tuition, pay for books, and even receive meal vouchers when I was dorming at SUNY Purchase College.

When I began my college career at SUNY Purchase, I was fortunate to be eligible for the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), which offers students academic guidance, career counseling, and financial assistance for non-tuition costs. However, even with help from EOP and the Pell Grant, I did not have enough did not fully cover my room and board. I still had to take out a loan of over \$5,000 while struggling to afford costs above tuition. At the time, my family could only afford to give me \$40 for my fall semester, so I had no choice but to get a part-time job at the local AMC theatre in addition to my work-study job. Starting college as a first-generation freshman was a challenging and intimidating transition for me. I have always been thankful for Pell, but I do believe that if it were to increase, it would alleviate a lot of the financial burden students like me face and it would allow us to focus solely on academics.

After my first year at SUNY Purchase, I transferred to Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York City. While attending BMCC as a commuter, I no longer qualified for an Opportunity Program which meant that my school books would not be covered by CUNY. I relied on Goddard Riverside's Options Center - a community-based organization that helps first-generation college students get into and through college by providing one-on-one counseling - to help me purchase the books I needed for my classes. As a BMCC student, I also encountered costs above tuition that were significantly higher than at Purchase. I had to buy weekly MetroCards that would cost me over \$500 a semester. I remember feeling frustrated because in high school I was eligible for free school MetroCards due to my socioeconomic status, but that changed once I entered college even though my financial circumstances did not. I found myself making difficult decisions such as missing class on days when I could not afford a MetroCard. In addition to being a full-time student, I had to take on a part-time job at Best Buy to afford transportation costs, food, and the digital devices I needed to complete my work. I worked almost 30 hours weekly and got paid bi-weekly. Half of my paycheck went to these non-tuition expenses while the other half went to help support my family. College students need to focus on their education without having to stress about working long and strenuous shifts to be able to afford transportation, their next meal, or the books and digital devices they need to excel academically.

The pandemic has shined a light on the food insecurity, digital gap, and other basic needs that college students are experiencing at alarming rates. When I transferred to City College, I was alleviated from many of the costs associated with being a commuter student due to remote learning. My school cafeteria was now my refrigerator and my school transportation was a zoom link. However, if the Spring 2021 semester would not have been remote, my Pell grant would not have been enough to cover my food and transportation expenses. The Pell amount I received for the 2021 Spring Semester was barely enough to cover my tuition. I still had to pay \$300 out of pocket for tuition. If I had gone to school in person, my expenses above tuition would have exceeded \$1,000. I am a full-time student, part-time worker, and a caretaker for my two siblings with disabilities. I do not have the privilege of being able to solely focus on my academics. My mother and I are the sole financial providers of our household. Doubling the Pell Grant would allow me to pay for educational costs beyond tuition, and use my work wages to help my mother pay rent or buy groceries for our home. As I prepare to go back to in-person learning next month, I worry that my Pell Grant will not be enough to cover my tuition, let alone the additional costs of being a commuter student. I also worry that I will run out of Pell before I can attain my bachelor's degree due to my non-traditional college journey. Expanding Pell would allow college students the opportunity to trust their academic journey, instead of treating college as a race that they must complete in four years or risk losing their financial aid.

The Pell Grant must be doubled so that it can reflect the current needs of college students. Almost half of the college student population in this country deals with food insecurity. The percentage of college students that are affected by the digital divide, housing insecurity, and unemployment is



equally as jarring. These financial obstacles can negatively impact a student's academic performance and ability to graduate on time. About 30% of college students graduate at the traditional four-year rate compared to almost 60% at a six-year rate. Expanding the Pell Grant acknowledges this reality and can support students as they pursue a post-secondary degree.

Education is supposed to be the great equalizer in this country, but how can that be so if every student does not have an equal chance at affording a college education? The cost of college is far more than tuition. Therefore, the amount of Pell college students receive should cover more than just tuition. Passing the Pell Grant Preservation and Expansion Act can lead to an increase in degree completion amongst college students. These students are potential CEOs, Doctors, Lawyers, Congressional leaders, and even Presidents who just need their national leaders to believe in them enough to invest in them. We are the future of this country's economy and workforce. Doubling the Pell Grant would not only be an investment in the education of young college students, but it would also be an investment in the future of this country.

Thank you for your time.