

## White Paper: The Importance of Supporting Low-Income Students

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My name is Hillary Steinberg and I am a doctoral student in the Sociology department. I also serve as vice president of the United Government of Graduate Students. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide feedback about an issue I feel is of the utmost importance to the CU community.

I am from a low-income background, and I would like to speak about the gap in addressing students who have experienced (or still do experience) poverty. I feel this is integral as we move toward a more diverse campus. However, I am concerned that the systematic supports in place for students from a multitude of backgrounds do not explicitly address students from low income backgrounds. While I applaud the growth in supporting students of color and first generation students in particular, and certainly there is overlap among all these groups, I believe more specific attention is needed to help students from low-income backgrounds overcome adversity they may experience in their unique positions at CU.

For a little background, I grew up in New York. I started working when I was eleven years old in an effort to support my family. I was my family's sole provider beginning when I was seventeen. I attended Stony Brook University for my undergraduate education after a year of absence. I had a wonderful experience there and I am grateful for the option to have earned a degree there. The student population at Stony Brook is different than CU; it is the seventh most racially diverse school in the country and many low-income students were able to attend because of a price tag of about \$6,000 for in-state students. While I was able to utilize financial aid and

scholarships, I worked as many as three jobs at a time to stay afloat financially and cover my cost of living.

I was delighted to be accepted to the PhD program in Sociology at CU. The move itself was a very difficult transition. I moved with my family from New York to Boulder with very little money. In addition of the months of financial hardship when I first started at CU (which has since evened out), I also experienced culture shock. The students I taught were very different than my peers at Stony Brook and I was barely prepared for the level of privilege I would encounter. My peers cited my clothes as unprofessional when I had held on to the same wardrobe since my teen years since I could not afford new ones. Many expressed working undergraduates did not deserve to be at CU.

I was able to acclimate because I had a number of wonderful members in the sociology department who helped me navigate the transition. They, too, had grown up in financial hardship and could relate to me and give me tips to succeed. It's my assumption that there are other students like me were not so lucky.

My proposition is simple but two-fold. I would like to encourage the university and its structures to think about addressing low income students directly. This may look slightly different for undergraduate and graduate students, but both groups have this need currently. Students like me lack direct resources. I cannot utilize most resources for students of color or for first generation college students. I do not want to, as I believe these spaces and services should be specifically preserved for those groups.

There are many steps that could further ensure the success of undergraduate and graduate students from low income backgrounds, the first of which starts at the beginning. Expansions of programs that ensure that low-income students have access to CU in terms of admissions would

benefit such students greatly. GPA has been proven to be a classed phenomena, and some students cannot afford extra-curricular activities. A holistic approach to admissions in addition to generous scholarship and financial aid packages can ensure that undergraduate students specifically can get into and subsequently attend CU.

Social supports are needed once students arrive here. Targeted help from offices such as Off-Campus Housing, Tutoring services, and CAPS would ensure more resources for retention of low-income students. I, for example, utilized CAPS upon arrival to CU but did not attend the support groups put in place for graduate students. My therapist felt it would be an added stressor for me because my problems stemmed from acclimating to CU as a low-income student. I know other graduate students who feel this way. Being from poor backgrounds can be stigmatizing at CU. I have often heard professors, peers, and students express opinions that “working students are lazy” and “poor students shouldn’t come here if they can’t afford it.” Ensuring that especially those in power such as professors or graduate students teaching know the unique challenges low-income students face, such as balancing a work schedule or lacking access to internet, could help to alleviate the strain for these students.

For graduate students (but also possibly undergraduates), more specific guidelines on mentorship and expectations of graduate students could ease the transition here to graduate school. Building a community of low income students who could share tips about finding housing, food, or clothing could also be impactful. More widespread mechanisms for summer funding may be necessary for this population.

As always, diversity and inclusion is one of the chief ways we can elevate CU. Low income students and their unique experiences add immeasurable value to the university as a whole. We are well served to create opportunities for success for them here.