



NEW JERSEY

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QuickTakes!

Barbara Harmon-Francis Articulates Passionate Support for NJ Educational Opportunity Fund Program

An alumna of The College of New Jersey's Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Program, who now heads Ramapo's EOF program, testified on Tuesday, March 21, 2017, at a NJ Senate public hearing (held at Rutgers University, Newark) on the budget proposed by Governor Christie in February. Below is her compelling story and argument for restoring the \$3.6 million in EOF funding that was cut in the governor's proposal.

March 21, 2017

I would like to start by thanking the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee for taking the time to hear my testimony. My name is Barbara Harmon-Francis and I am an alumna of The College of New Jersey's Educational Opportunity Fund's Program and the current Director of the Ramapo College of New Jersey EOF Program. The Educational Opportunity Fund, also known as EOF, was started in 1968 to help people like myself attend and graduate from New Jersey's colleges.

The National College Access Network states that the biggest determining factor as to why an individual will or will not attend college is a student's zip code. A zip code. It's really hard to believe, but it's true. A student like myself, who was attending Orange High School, was less likely to attend college, simply because of where I lived, my income level, and my school district.

EOF changes this narrative. Every person who enters college through EOF has the opportunity to graduate with a college degree and improve their future. Today, I speak on behalf of the over 40,000 alumni who can attest to what a college degree can do. I also speak on behalf of the over 12,000 students who are currently enrolled at New Jersey colleges through the Educational Opportunity Fund Program.

EOF is life changing. I never thought I would ever go to college. As a first generation college student, I'd only seen college on television. I never thought about attending college until my junior year in high school. I was born to parents who married young and stepped into conventional 1970's gender roles. Unfortunately, when my dad left my mother with 3 young

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girls to raise, our income situation declined. I went from a secure environment to a very scary environment. At times, my mother sacrificed eating so that her children could eat. Day by day, I watched how hard my mother struggled and I knew one thing I hated being poor. In order to make ends meet, my mother went on public assistance and cleaned people's homes. My mother, grandmother, and great grandmother moved together so that they could support and help raise us. Every day, I would watch these women get up and go to work. All of them were maids. They cleaned people's homes. They were very proud of what they did, however they would have loved to have had a different career.

Whenever I had school breaks, my mom would take me to work with her. It was at these times that I knew I was different. It was blaringly clear how poor we were. I would go to these beautiful homes and wonder why we couldn't live like this? While helping to clean kitchens, I would open the food cabinets and wonder why we didn't have food like this. I knew I wanted better, but I had no idea how to make this happen. I didn't know any way to change my situation. That is, until my high school advisor told me about attending college through a program called EOF.

When my high school guidance counselor talked to me about having a better life, through college, I was completely on board. I wanted better for myself and my family. I wanted to go to college, but I didn't understand how to make that happen. Thankfully, Orange High School had a college acceptance night and many staff from the Educational Opportunity Fund attended. I was thrilled about the thought of a better future. EOF came into my life and gave me the academic and life skills that were needed to be a successful college graduate.

EOF does not buy into the thought that students from under achieving high schools and low SAT scores cannot succeed in college. They take chances on students like me. They provide a summer bridge program that gives students the skills to do well in college and then they work with them for the next 4 to 5 years to help them graduate. EOF was my support. EOF became my family. They made sure I did all the things I needed to do to thrive in college. They helped me to realize my full potential. It was always there, I just needed them to help me actualize my dreams. If it were not for EOF, I would not be sitting before you today. Not only did I graduate from The College of New Jersey with honors, I went on to earn a master's degree.

So that leads me to my final point. EOF adds to New Jersey's economy. For every low income first generation student that goes to college and does better economically, the State of New Jersey profits. We are teachers, doctors, judges, accountants, engineers, lawyers, managers, actors, politicians, professors, home owners, and business owners. We contribute mightily to New Jersey's economy. People, like myself, who grew up on public assistance are now the very people that pay taxes that benefit all New Jersey residents. For example, my mother's desire to purchase a home was made possible because I was able to give her the money for a down payment. In addition, in my family, going to college is no longer a dream. Since I was able to attend college, all of my nieces, nephews and cousins have gone to college. The cycle of poverty is being broken. My niece will graduate with an engineering degree from the New

Jersey Institute of Technology this May. She is a product of NJTI's EOF program. My nephew is an airline pilot for American Airlines, he entered the aviation program at Mercer County Community College ... through the EOF Program. So as I stated in the beginning of my testimony, EOF changes the narrative. EOF changes lives. EOF changes families.

In my career working for EOF, I have witnessed thousands of lives being changed. The Ramapo College of New Jersey EOF Program is trying to break the cycle of poverty by giving our students the skills and resources they need to succeed. If EOF is cut, it would adversely affect the academic and financial services we offer to students. For some of our students, they have maxed out on their loans. A \$300 balance on their bill can be the difference between a student finishing college or stopping out. They need all the funding and services that EOF can provide.

Please do not allow the \$3,565,000 cut. There are thousands of first generation low income students, throughout the State of New Jersey, who need this program to have a successful future and to become prominent tax paying citizens.