

My name is Maria Kelley and I am an undecided major from New Britain, CT. At the age of thirteen, I would have never thought I would be where I am today. Growing up in foster care guarantees complexities, hardships, systematic disparities, and inconsistencies. Like many other foster youth, I had moved numerous times- from shelters, congregate care, and foster homes. The constant changes also meant new people, schools, and environments, which inevitably made my mental health, sense of safety and self, and quality of education deteriorate. For a long period of time, I had felt dehumanized by the unfortunate gaps in the system, feeling like another number and client, struggling to find my individuality and purpose.

Then at the end of my Junior year in high school, I learned about UConn Rising Scholars (formerly UConn First Star Academy), and was introduced to one of the most beneficial and life-changing opportunities I have ever experienced. This dynamic 4-week program allowed me to experience what a post-secondary environment was like while obtaining college credits. I received a high-quality education, participated in intellectually intensive classes, surrounded myself with influential mentors and found hope that I could go to a 4-year university like UConn. UConn Rising Scholars changed my life and allowed me to establish the confidence, connections, and practical academic skills to excel. Not only did this program help me grow in the past, but because of its invested and dedicated staff and the opportunities that I was given afterward, I continue to flourish.

Since I participated in URS, I was recommended to attend Student Support Services, which was a similarly designed summer program, except it is geared towards UConn Freshmen and ensures one's enrollment into the University of Connecticut. For a first-generation, Latinx woman in foster care, the SSS program helped me succeed during my first year at UConn. Having the ability to be surrounded by a diverse community, while also receiving many of the benefits similar to URS, has provided me a stable foundation for my incoming first year. SSS continues to support, empower, and uplift its students, meanwhile creating fundamental steps towards success.

After attending URS and SSS, I am now at UConn with a 3.8 G.P.A, working alongside Alex Katz, URS Program Coordinator, to develop additional supports for students in foster care to help them persist to graduation. I am the President of Creating Caring Communities, a student organization that provides mentorship and resources for students from foster care and students experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, or independent status, which could have not happened without the continual encouragement and support that these programs had given me.

While I know that I have worked hard to get to where I am, it was these programs that opened the door, gave me the tools and provided me with the continued support and mentorship to succeed. Due to these programs, I have been able to rise above my circumstances, and strive to help other students in difficult situations.

The impact of these programs on people like me would not be possible without funding. I urge you to invest in Connecticut by investing in UConn so that we can continue to make these strides. Thank you for listening to my story.

- Maria Kelley