

Kayla Garner
Gateway Community College
Engineering Science A.S.

Good evening, Members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Kayla Garner, and I am representing Gateway Community College to encourage sustainable funding for our students. Thank you for allowing me to tell my story tonight.

I came to Connecticut three years ago from Georgia. I went to college there, but dropped out for personal reasons, including a difficult childhood and abusive home situation. When I became homeless --- it became my defining moment. I moved to Guilford to live with my stepfather and my six younger half-siblings. I worked at Dunkin Donuts, but knew I wanted more. One particularly stressful day, I went home from work and went online...looking at the home page for Gateway --- I knew that is where I wanted to be.

Throughout my journey at Gateway, I received a great deal of help and encouragement from the faculty and staff. I am in my final full-time semester, majoring in Engineering Science. Prior to being the current acting President of the Student Government Association, I also established the Engineering Society and the Mental Health Advocacy Club (MHAC) on campus. Working alongside the Student Activities Director, SGA has been able to focus on developing student programming to keep us connected. Activities range from fun trivia nights to student leadership development opportunities such as sending students to virtual conferences.

The Family Economic Security Program (FESP) has been my largest advocate for staying in school. This program looks at the whole student and identifies our needs without judgement. My counselors have assisted me in learning financial independence, career focus, and how to advocate for myself in my academics when struggles inevitably arise. In addition to FESP, my academic scholarships from the Foundation, and my work study job in the Engineering department and the Wellness Center got me to this point in my education.

When the pandemic hit last March, I found myself, like so many other students, struggling with the new normal. All my siblings and I were studying from home and having difficulties with internet connectivity. This made it challenging for to complete my classes successfully. Then --- my laptop crashed. I applied and was awarded a laptop scholarship from Gateway's foundation. Having my own laptop enabled me to continue working toward my goals, which include graduating and political activism.

As the President of the SGA, I have been able to learn the importance of monetary appropriation in our school system. It is my hope that you continue to support community college students at a funding level that allows us all to achieve our educational hopes and dreams, and to transform us from dreamers into doers.

I am learning the importance of community. "I have drive and ambition, but this Gateway 'village' is fashioning me into the woman I want to become."

Thank you.