

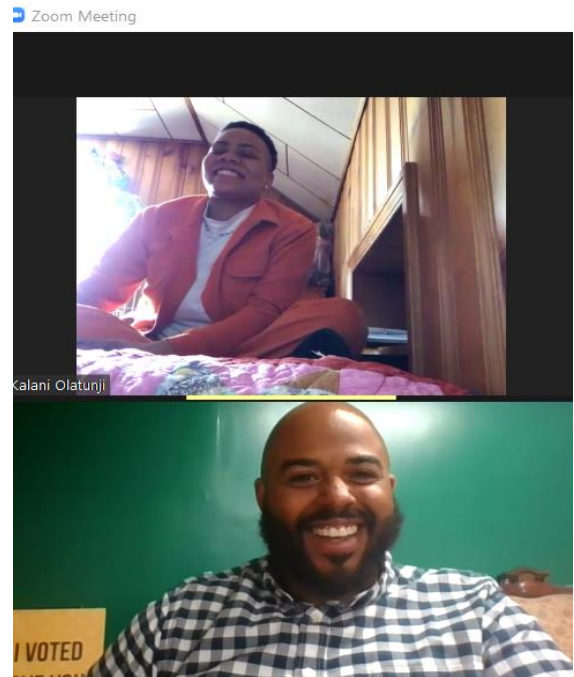
Students Share Experiences over College Affordability and Other Barriers to College Access at Virtual Advocacy Day

Emily Kalani Olatunji is a self-supporting, full-time college student with two demanding jobs and a tight, tight budget. When bus fare from her home in Detroit to Henry Ford College in Dearborn rose by \$2, Olatunji worried, calculating her annual public transportation costs would grow to \$723. Along with hundreds more for textbooks, the English major found she was going to be strapped to pay \$2,000 a year for out-of-pocket education expenses on top of living costs.

Olatunji is a recipient of a federal Pell Grant, a needs-based college funding program for students from low-income families, and is in her last year of a two-year Detroit Promise scholarship that covers funding gaps, but not transportation. She raised the issue in a meeting with 10th District state Rep. Mary Cavanagh's chief of staff Steele Hughes, who like Olatunji is a first-generation college student. He vowed to carry the message of adding a transportation stipend to the Promise scholarship program to Lansing. Olatunji was among nearly a dozen students who told their story at the first-ever [Youth College Access Advocacy Day](#), held virtually on Monday (May 10, 2021), to discuss the major challenges students face accessing college and their ideas for improving the system. "Loan forgiveness, college affordability, doubling Pell is a stress reliever that could expand opportunities and resource to Detroiters," she said.

The college affordability gap is in crisis, just as research shows that postsecondary education is a necessity in today's workforce and economy, according to advocates. [The Capital Area College Access Network](#) and the [Detroit College Access Network](#), sponsors of the event, define college as any postsecondary degree or credential, trade school or apprenticeship experience. The network has aligned their priorities with the Governor Whitmer's 60-by-30 plan to ensure 60 percent of Michigan residents complete a postsecondary certificate or degree by the year 2030. Besides Steele, legislators and participating staffers included Member of Congress Rashida Tlaib, D-Detroit; state Rep. Stephanie Young, D-Detroit; state Rep. Karen Whitsett, D-Detroit; state Rep. Sarah Anthony, D-Lansing; and Detroit Councilmember Raquel Castañeda-López. Michigan's Children, the Michigan League for Public Policy, and Michele Strasz, the CapCAN Executive Director, provided advocacy training with Patrick Brown and Stephen Wallace from Michigan's Children focusing on how to tell one's story for advocacy.

The high school and college youth described in personal detail their challenges with college access and affordability, along with issues such as scarce and unavailable school counselors, complicated admissions processes, and complex financial aid applications. The pandemic has worsened already fragile family finances, they said. "I was scared to go to college because I couldn't afford it," said Olatunji, a Detroit



College student Emily Kalani Olatunji (above) details her financial challenges to Steele Hughes, a legislative aide to state Rep. Mary Cavanagh.

Cass Tech High School grad who always did well in school though wasn't able to achieve merit-based academic scholarships. She had witnessed an older sister drop out of college and face limited career and employment opportunities because of climbing college debt. "We need the support of government both regionally and nationally," she added.

To make college more affordable, a number of initiatives are needed, advocates said. Among them: Doubling the maximum award for the Pell grant program. Congressional appropriations for the program have declined since 2017, and so has the grant's purchasing power. The current Pell grant maximum covers just 28 percent of the cost of attending a public four-year university versus 79 percent at its historic high in the mid-70s. Nationally, only 25 percent of public four-year institutions were affordable for the average recipient in 2017-2018 with the affordability gap doubling to \$2,406 from 2014 to 2018.

Out of 48 states, Michigan ranks last for dollars spent for public student aid. In addition to increasing need-based financial aid, the Michigan College Access Network's policy priorities include:

- Increasing the number of school counselors to a 1:250 ratio. That level has been proven to significant impact student attendance, SAT mathematics, SAT writing and SAT verbal schools.
- Supporting FAFSA (Free Applications Financial Student Aid) as requirement for high school graduation, as some states such as Louisiana have done. Students who complete the FAFSA are 84 percent more likely to enroll in higher education, and low-income students are 127 percent more likely to be enrolled after completing it, according to the National College Access Network. The requirement has been tied to improved graduation rates for Black students, now above the national average.

Sydney Smith, 18, is a Detroit high school senior who plans to attend Michigan State University's nursing program in the fall and one day become a midwife. She's passionate about working to help close health disparities that impact high infant mortality rates among women of colors in Michigan. Smith echoed a common theme among students when she described the particular challenges of first-generation college students like herself who don't have family members with experience with college applications or completing financial aid applications. "Errors are made by families not familiar with the process. It's a difficult and stressful time and a lot of families just give up," she said of the FAFSA application process. Help from college advisors and counselors is needed. "It's a big issue affecting everyone, but students from families from low incomes need encouraging help from advisers to fill the applications out adequately," Smith added.

Rep. Young said she shared Sydney's observations of the FAFSA process. "We are on the exact same page on FAFSA, Sydney," Young said. She is the mother of two sons, one in college and the other approaching college. Like Smith, Youth said her parents didn't attend college. Her father had an eighth grade education, and Young's mother achieved her GED when Young was in high school. They often did their homework together. Young vowed to stay in touch, and offered to continue to help and promised to advocate before the Legislature for funding more school counselors to help students like Smith. HB 4156, currently before the House Education Committee, would do just that, requiring one school counselor for every 450 students in Michigan. The state has one of the worst records in the country with one counselor for every 691 students. "We have got to equip you with a better future so that you can reach back and help someone else because that's what we do," Young said.

Afterward, Sydney said she was initially nervous to speak with the representative. "But she had such a warm and inviting way, I really felt like I was talking to a family member."