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As I sat in the second row of a dimly lit meeting room in the basement of Florida's capitol building I heard the chairman rap his gavel three times. The State Universities and Private Colleges Policy Committee was now in session. I anxiously awaited the moment when my name would be read. This morning the committee was considering a proposal to drastically alter Florida's Bright Futures Scholarship program and I was there to speak on behalf of 50,000 of my fellow students from the University of Florida. I heard my name called and I rose to address the dais.

I was appearing before this committee not only as an undergraduate student, but as the University of Florida's student body lobby coordinator. Each May, UF's student senate appoints one individual to serve a year long term as lobby coordinator. The lobby coordinator is responsible for advocating on behalf of the entire student body before local, state and federal government. My appointment to this post was the culmination of more than two years of passionate service within student government.

My experiences as lobby coordinator were both rewarding and deeply enriching. During the summer of 2008 I was presented with the opportunity to travel to Washington DC to meet with all 27 members of Florida's Congressional delegation. At these meetings I spoke candidly with the legislators about the challenges and opportunities facing Florida's public higher education system. Throughout my term I set ambitious goals to improve the quality of life for the student body. I worked with the Gainesville City Commission to improve the recycling options at off campus apartment complexes. I also worked extensively with the Gainesville Responsible Hospitality Partnership, collaborating with local business to improve safety and reduce unsafe drinking at local nightlife venues.

Despite these successes, my term as lobby coordinator brought with it a significant challenge. During the years 2007 and 2008, tax revenues in Florida declined significantly, leaving state legislators to address a budget shortfall of over \$6 billion. Among the options considered by the legislature were widespread cuts to public education funding, reduction of scholarship benefits, and increases in tuition. As this crisis unfolded, I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to do everything I could to protect the future of quality affordable education in Florida. With that in mind, I applied to spend my spring 2009 semester in Florida's state capital

participating in the Bob Graham Center for Public Service semester in Tallahassee. My responsibilities with the Graham Center program included attending a 7am class with Senator Mike Haridopolos, as well as working full time in a legislative office. Despite these commitments, I continued to work diligently and passionately as lobby coordinator. I regularly attended and appeared before the higher education committees in both chambers of the legislature. I also collaborated with UF's administration and government relations office, lobbying state legislators to continue investing in higher education.

During this semester I developed a strong passion for and belief in the power of education. Speaking with students from less privileged backgrounds made me cognizant of how crucial affordable tuition and scholarship programs such as Bright Futures are. I came to realize that education is and must be the great equalizer in a successful society and that cost should never be a barrier to the end. Ultimately, Florida's legislature did make marginal cuts to education funding and voted to increase tuition over the next five years. We were successful however in ensuring that a portion of this new tuition revenue will be used to fund need-based aid. While I would not consider my term as lobby coordinator a complete success, I am grateful for the role it played in shaping my convictions.

After my term expired, I sought opportunities to continue working to expand access to education. I spent my 2009 summer in New York, interning with the Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund. The mission of the Scholar Rescue Fund is to provide teaching fellowship grants for academics from around the world that have been targets of violence and discrimination because of their work. My primary responsibility as an intern was to participate in an ambitious research project tracking demographic data about over 2000 scholar applicants from the last 10 years. Reviewing their applications and reading their stories had a deep and lasting impact on me. I came to realize how lucky I have been to enjoy academic freedom and opportunity. My experience with the Scholar Rescue Fund, like my term as lobby coordinator reinforced my belief in the awesome power of education. I know that my commitment to public service, and particularly education, will continue to be my lifelong passion and cause.