

March 9, 2023

Members of the Higher Education Finance and Policy Committee
House of Representatives
100 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Dear Committee Members,

I write today regarding HF1435- appropriation of funds to College Possible. I deeply appreciate the authors' dedication and excitement towards preparing Minnesotans for the pursuit of higher education. Minnesotans of all zip codes and socio-economic backgrounds deserve the opportunity to obtain a college degree.

However, as a former College Possible Coach, I have concerns around appropriating money to the organization. I served as a coach in the 2019-2020 school year, and noticed major faults as well as unethical practices in the program. While talking with my fellow coaches, we learned that none of our concerns were new- they had been present since 2015. My last contact with members of the organization (in May of 2021) showed that the issues had not been resolved, but exacerbated. We saw College Possible use practices that unethically skewed the data of how their services impacted students, continue to support systems of white supremacy, and stretch coaches beyond their capacity to effectively support students.

One of the ways College Possible assists students is by teaching test strategies that will help students perform better on the ACT. The organization "proved" its impact by having students take a practice ACT towards the beginning of the school year, and another one in January. What the organization doesn't make public is they did not allow junior coaches to tell students what they would need for the exam. Since students didn't know what to bring, they did not show up with calculators to the first exam. When students have access to the necessary resources, their scores increase. Therefore, the score increase between the two tests is often not indicative of the testing strategies they have learned in the program, but because they have a calculator to use.

Secondly, we saw first hand the way College Possible's systems upheld white supremacy, especially white saviorism. College Possible is a predominantly white organization that primarily serves students of color. The organization's dynamic, whether intentional or not, encouraged the coaches to pity their students. At the time, they also did not prepare coaches on how to combat racism if it appeared in our cohorts. Current AmeriCorps members are not allowed to discuss politics or partisan stances, but racial justice is often treated as a partisan topic. Because of this, coaches were not sure how, when, or if they could intervene to halt racist actions or dialogue.

Lastly, College Possible should not focus on expanding into more schools if they are still structured the same as they were in 2021. Coaches were suffering from burnout and exhaustion

from large workloads, and we often could not provide the level of support the students deserved. I worked with 40 students. Each of my students applied to at least 5 schools and 2 scholarships. That math breaks down to helping with 39 FAFSAs (over half of which were selected for verification), 1 Dream Act application, 200 college applications, and 80 scholarship applications. Many of my students were high achievers and applied to even more colleges and scholarships, and it became difficult to assist all of them. Students will often approach coaches as the first person they ask to write letters of recommendation, write letters of circumstance, discuss financial aid with, and talk through final college decisions. I was overwhelmed while facilitating one of the smaller cohorts- some coaches were working at 3 schools and had 120 students to support. While I was in the program, College Possible's coaches were stretched too thin to be able to support all of their students effectively. I have great concern that the quality of the program will suffer further if College Possible uses the funds to expand their program to more schools. If College Possible's practices have not changed since 2021, they should not use the funds for expansion, but for increasing the quality of the program.

Again, I deeply appreciate the authors' commitments to students pursuing a college education in Minnesota. I know that each of them cares deeply about making higher education accessible to all. But I strongly believe that the committee and authors should hear from previous coaches about College Possible's practices before allocating funds to the organization. Again, they have unethically skewed their data, upheld systems of white supremacy, and have historically sacrificed the quality of the program in order to increase the quantity of students and schools served. Because of these reasons, I ask that you please table HF1435 until College Possible is able to create and document a plan to change their program, or show that it has changed, so that it truly supports the students they serve.

Thank you,
Alexis Milton
Former College Possible Coach