



The Honorable Chairwoman Maggie McIntosh
Appropriations Committee
House Office Building
6 Bladen St., Annapolis, MD 21401

March 4, 2022

RE: HB 1098/ SB 832

Dear Chairwoman McIntosh,

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony. I am Natasha Bhagat. I have lived with epilepsy since I was 8 years old. Like my brothers, friends and classmates, my life was school. I was a gifted and talented student when I got sick, and that's who I always thought I was. I went to Montgomery Community College and then to American University for almost 10 years. I could only take 1-3 classes a semester because of my health. It was very hard for me to go to college for so long, but it's the only path I knew.

I can't tell you how many times I had to ask for an incomplete or medically withdraw from a class. And even take a semester off for medication changes or hospitalizations. I was very isolated. I never got to live on campus like the other college students.

The only support I received at each college was from Disability Support Services. They gave me some accommodations like extended test time taking, which was of some help, but nothing to help with my chronic condition issues. They told me I had to set up a meeting with each professor individually, preferably before classes started – which was very hard to do – and explain my situation. When professors worked with me, I did very well. When they didn't, I got very stressed and tried to do well in the class – but could not because of my health. This caused so much anxiety that my seizures got worse. Then, I would have to drop it late and lose money and get a bad grade or ask for an incomplete.

I went to the campus health centers but they just referred me to security. I have a medical condition and need health care, but they just wanted my information and made me feel like a security risk. No one ever cared about my physical or mental health and there was no support for students like me.

I tried to do things on campus but always felt like an outsider. I am a second-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do and am trained to persevere. But, at one point, when I was on medical leave of absence and my mother and I drove by American University, I told her that it made me feel scared. That was a turning point. My mother never knew I felt that way – and maybe I didn't either. We had a long conversation and I finally had to make the very difficult decision to drop out. I was a junior with a 3.5 GPA and had been on the Dean's List. My health has been better but I am at a loss as what to do with my life now.

My entire experience could have been different if I had a case manager to help me navigate college and campus life. I believe passage of this bill can help so many other students with chronic health conditions to succeed in college and not have to give up like I had to do.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Natasha Bhagat

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Invisible Wave

<https://www.invisiblewave.org>