



HB539 Public Institutions of Higher Education - Student Withdrawal Policy - Reimbursement of Tuition and Fees (Cameron Carden Act of 2024)

Position: Favorable

2/13/2024

The Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes, Chair
House Appropriations Committee
Room 121
House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Economic Action Maryland (formerly the Maryland Consumer Rights Coalition) is a people-centered movement to expand economic rights, housing justice, and community reinvestment for working families, low-income communities, and communities of color. Economic Action Maryland provides direct assistance today while passing legislation and regulations to create systemic change in the future.

I am writing to urge your favorable report on HB539, which would require public colleges and universities to reimburse tuition for students who withdraw during mental health crises.

As someone who was recently a student at the University of Maryland, College Park, I know several people who would have greatly benefited from this bill. During the spring semester of 2022, one of my closest friends, another student at UMD, who grew up in a low-income household with a single mom, was facing severe mental health challenges as they began their journey through gender affirming care. Once a straight A student, their grades began to drop due to their mental health combined with the stress of working full time to afford school. Although they would have benefited greatly from withdrawing for a semester, they had already taken out the loans and paid tuition with no option for reimbursement. Instead, they received several failing grades, plummeting their high GPA, and thousands more dollars added to their debt.

There are a number of reasons mental health issues can be exacerbated by college, from social anxiety, to the pressure to make good grades, to financial instability, to discrimination from peers. In fact, suicide is the #2 leading cause of death amongst college students¹. College is already incredibly costly, having to repeat a semester due to failing grades brought on by mental health issues means paying thousands more. At the same time, withdrawing from university for mental health related crises with no reimbursement is a luxury granted only to wealthier students with financial support.

And even when students seek support on campus, campus mental health resources are understaffed and overbooked. When I was experiencing a mental health crisis freshman year of college and went to the university counseling center, I was told the wait time to see an on-campus therapist was eight weeks. I was fortunate enough to find an off-campus therapist that accepted my insurance, but this is not the case for many low-income students.

¹ <https://caps.umich.edu/article/facts-and-statistics-0>



Students of every socio-economic background should be given the opportunity to prioritize their mental health without the burden of debt from classes that they could not complete. As most universities already have procedures for physical injuries and illnesses, it only makes sense to extend these policies to mental health crises.

For these reasons I urge your favorable report on HB539.

Sincerely,
Zoe Gallagher, Policy Associate