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Prior Award Essay

“I acknowledge and consent to my essay and photograph being posted online if I am chosen as the winner.”

I am grateful to be graduating from a public liberal arts college—Northern State University. To receive a degree at all is no small feat for a first-generation college student, but to have an education that allowed me to take risks, explore multiple interests, and thrive in an environment of support and unbridled growth was life altering. I was granted immense freedom academically and received ample encouragement in a college community that emphasized being a brilliant mind but also a confident and industrious member of society. It is through attending a public liberal arts college that I discovered my love for law and was allowed to explore it in refreshing and thought-provoking ways. In reflection of this freedom, I am receiving a bachelor's degree in criminal justice while also completing minors in legal studies, entrepreneurship, business, and sociology. My family history and circumstances tell me that I was supposed to be a statistic contributing to the college dropout rate. Yet, I will graduate as a student-athlete with a 4.0 GPA in Honoribus, accepted into law school, and with zero debt. I am an anomaly in a normally unfortunate reality for students like me in higher education. Yet, because of the financial opportunities provided me through a public liberal arts education, and faculty that not only allowed but encouraged interdisciplinary knowledge, active learning and citizenship, and community relations, I prospered into a person realizing my full potential.

I conclude my time at my university excited for my future in law school. I will build upon my future with a plethora of interests, charismatic ideas, and critical thinking skills that help me evaluate different perspectives and analyze complex solutions to various societal challenges. The amazing opportunities that have led me to forge these capabilities over the past four years allowed me fully to embrace an active learner lifestyle. These opportunities led me all over the country such as becoming President of Speech and Debate. Just this year I competed and earned first place at a nationally ranked tournament in New York and held on to my title as a regional

tournament champion in SD. As a softball player for my university, I have been able to travel the country and have been grateful to learn skills such as time management, professional communication, teamwork, and diligence. The opportunity to travel and compete in both settings was amazing; moreover, so was the academic challenge to strengthen my ambition and tenacity. I would not have gained these qualities without being a part of an institution that prioritizes students taking the reins of their academic careers, and athletic and academic teams that teaches you how to handle hard every day with grace, maturity, and composure. Not only have I had the chance to succeed in team settings, but I additionally received the opportunity to attend the National Collegiate Honors Conference in Dallas, Texas last fall. I won the national Sloane Prize for Undergraduate Research. To be accepted into the conference, share my research, and be rewarded with intellectual discourse on leadership, research, and praise in my abilities are a memory that goes unmatched when I reflect over my time at my university.

Further contemplating my time as an undergraduate, leads me to think of the countless experiences that allowed me to utilize my interdisciplinary studies, community resources, and relationships. As before mentioned, I am a criminal justice major, but I have a great deal of passion and interest in exploring financial security and business operations as well as understanding people. By receiving a liberal arts education, I was able to pursue those interests with ease, and much success. I was inspired by faculty to follow my love of both business and people, and it manifests in many ways in school competitions, community events, and legislative activism. This past year alone I have won first place in business pitch competitions and entrepreneurship showcases earning not only financial prizes but mentorships and business relations to help me along my way. This spring I will be competing in my states Giant Vision Entrepreneurship competition for students and have been studying under business owners and

start-up centers alike. The idea I initiated came from my blended knowledge and passion for understanding crime statistics, marketing, and human response. Receiving an education from universities that allow their students to use interdisciplinary learning and methods really set me up to release my potential and become the driver of my life and ambitions. This has not only put me in positions to be a successful business owner and confident, capable woman, but also drives me to network and grow in my community. I utilize our community's small business start-up center, work to market and receive data from local businesses around the city, and, in gratitude for all the support they show me, I spend my time volunteering in my community. I've volunteered in the car shows, YMCA events, and local attractions and traditions over the past four years. This education goes much further than a test score or GPA. It encourages me to test my limits, reach out and respond to my community, and emboldens me to use my voice to represent me and connect with people.

This brings me to the next instrumental experience I have gained while in college—being an active citizen of ethical and critical reasoning. I am a member of my university's Student Government Association. During my time I have lobbied for legislation at our state's capital, written resolutions over the expansion and funding of mental health (specifically noting the need for state funding and awareness of the 988 campaigns in South Dakota) and played an active role in reforming and expanding the school's policies and strategic action plan that reflect the voice of students. My time in student government let me form my voice, participate in the power of democracy, navigate ethical and critical thinking, and work to build an inviting environment built on meaningful discourse and collaboration. These skills, and relationships, I have learned in higher education, along with my major's lessons, have prepared me to go after what I want,

execute my goals with precision, and remain versatile in my experiences and responses to adversity.

My time in college did not stop at simply providing me with a unique skillset to use to my advantage in society. It went further by enriching my character development so that I could ultimately leave having confidence in not only my intelligence and tenacity but my voice and moral compass. My opportunities, experiences, and personalized education here have set me up for countless amazing pursuits in my fast-approaching future. The reward of graduating from a public liberal arts institution is something that will last me a lifetime as I continue utilizing all that I have learned and move forward boldly in my life endeavors, confidently and resiliently. To earn a degree is a remarkable achievement, but what you did to earn it and how you intend to use your degree could lead to a lifetime of success. It is with complete certainty that I know I am leaving college as a lifetime learner, a creative problem solver, and a dedicated citizen.