Transcript of speech given by Jennifer Moreno, winner of the 2013 Student Speaker Competition, at the Scholarship & Fellowship Dinner held on Friday, September 20, 2013.

Good evening, my name is Jennifer Moreno.

My parents would constantly tell me, “You’re going to college.” For many families, this is a fact, but to my family this statement served more as a motivation since I am the first person in my family to attend college. Education is valued greatly within my family, and they understand that education is a gateway to a world with endless possibilities.

Although my family and I were confident I would attend college, several questions remained unanswered: Where would I attend? Should I study in another state? What would my major be? But the terrifying question was: How are we going to pay for it?

My family and I knew college was expensive, but reality hit when I received acceptance letters that offered minimal to no financial aid. I was glad that my long hours of studying and extracurricular activities led to my acceptance into multiple colleges; however, I would be unable to attend them because I wasn’t able to afford it. Despite the loans I would have potentially taken, along with the work-study, my family’s expected contribution was much more than what my parents could have managed.

For a few days, I was worried; heck, I was a wreck. I was going to college. It was a fact....Right?

It wasn’t until I received Duke’s large envelope, read the acceptance letter, and then saw the financial aid packet that I knew I was going to college. Not just any college—Duke University, one of the best universities in the world. I was incredibly excited!
Attending a prestigious university is a privilege. For a girl like me, with a middle-income family and living in Southern California, attending Duke is rarely heard of. However, reading the acceptance letter and financial aid packet was just the beginning of my story.

At an early age, I knew I wanted to make the world a “better place,” even though I didn’t have the slightest clue of what that encompassed. Since freshman year at Duke, my ideas about creating a better world have dramatically developed. I know I have a better understanding of the role I want to play by taking classes at the Sanford School of Public Policy. I purposely took my first public policy class because I wanted to take classes in the Sanford building.

Although I stumbled into public policy, my first class taught me an appreciation for public policy and what it entails. I became fascinated with the framing of issues and the power each individual has. I continued taking public policy classes throughout my semesters, and I was even fortunate enough to be accepted to Sanford’s program named Service Opportunities Leadership, also known as SOL. At the end of the course, I was awarded a research grant to visit Buenos Aires, Argentina for two and a half months. In Buenos Aires, I created and recommended strategies to an immigrant daycare center to help facilitate the integration of immigrant children into their local community. I created great memories with Argentinians and learned about a different way of life.

Most importantly, I learned a valuable lesson from the least expected person, or might I say, kid. Alex was an eight-year-old troublemaker with the kindest heart. He was the first to start cleaning up, and he laughed when he was embarrassed. Alex also loved drawing. Give him a piece a paper with a few colored pencils and he’d be a happy camper. Alex had a difficult childhood, yet he came in with a smile. One day I asked him what activity he wanted to do, and he said, “I really want to draw!” I asked him why he enjoyed drawing so much. “Drawing makes everything better. You can draw anything you want,” he replied with a smile.

This simple response made an impression on me: Drawing makes everything better. I can draw my life the way I want it to be. I have that ability. However, I did not realize that until I came to Duke.
I have also learned not only to become a better leader but also a better version of myself through the service projects and retreats Duke offers. I attended LeaderShape and Common Ground, which taught me the commonalities I have with others despite our differences in our race, gender, sexuality, and/or socioeconomic status. I have also had the pleasure of being on various councils, such as Mi Gente, where I am now the current vice president, along with Center for Race Relations, WHO (Women’s Housing Option) Speaks, the Catholic Center, and Students for the World.

Last year, I was a site leader for an Alternative Spring Break concentrating on arts and activism. Unlike other spring breaks, this had three components. One of them was going to Chicago and implementing an identity, arts, and activism curriculum we created at a local high school.

At the local high school, I met Sabrina. She was a junior. Despite her young age, she was mature and had a radio voice. I remarked on her speaking abilities and suggested that she pursue communications. She was shocked because she thought she would attend her local college and couldn’t imagine herself attending graduate school and possibly having her own radio or talk show. Similarly, as I introduced different careers to Sabrina, Duke has opened my eyes to new possibilities as well.

Through these experiences, I am drawing my life the way I want it to be. With these retreats and campus commitments, I have learned about my identity and am growing confident in who I am. In my two years at Duke I have not only become aware of where I come from and who I am, but also how I define my future, now knowing that there are no limitations.

During my first semester freshman year I rarely spoke in class, but this has changed throughout my semesters at Duke. Duke continues to push me past my limits and makes me become aware of my potential. I now understand that I shouldn’t limit myself, because I’m constantly reminded of what I’m able to do and how powerful my voice is.
At Duke, I am not judged by how much money I have in my bank account, but more so on the potential that I hold within and what I will do with it in the future. At Duke, I have become the person I want to be, the person I was meant to be, and the person I will strive to be. The person I am today would not have existed if it were not for the financial aid packet I received.

As I previously mentioned, I am the first member in my family to attend college, and with the aid Duke provided me, I was offered new and unbelievable opportunities and experiences. One of them was being able to attend the UNC and Duke game my freshman year after tenting for months for the game. Coming from Los Angeles, I bled purple and gold for the NBA team, the Lakers, but now I bleed blue for Duke basketball. Moreover, Duke has allowed me to travel across the U.S. and meet extraordinary people. Duke has opened my eyes to a future I wouldn’t have imagined three years ago, and for that I will always be grateful.

Thank you for sustaining the need-blind admissions policy that proves Duke’s mission statement to be true: Selecting students of “character, determination and application.”

Thank you for giving me the tools and knowledge to be capable to draw my life. Alex was right. Having the ability to draw makes everything better.

My parents told me, “You’re going to college,” and thanks to the generous individuals in this room, that has become a reality.