

Thank you President Dell’Omo and good morning, everyone. Welcome to Rider University!

As President Dell’Omo mentioned, I am Duygu Erzurum, a senior healthcare management major at Rider University and a proud first-generation college student from Florence Township. Beyond the classroom, I was the President of our Rider University Greek Council and have served as the Head Manager for our Women’s Division I Basketball team for the past three years. I also serve as a campus tour guide, which means I spend a lot of time telling people why Rider is such a special place. But today, I’m here to talk about why I was able to be here at all.

I transferred to Rider at the end of my freshman year, leaving a college in Pennsylvania in search of a place that felt more like home. And I found that at Rider — a place where I could grow, lead, and begin building a future I never thought possible.

But none of this would have been possible without the support of the New Jersey Tuition Aid Grant program. For me and for thousands of students across New Jersey, TAG is more than just a line item in a budget. It’s the difference between dreaming of college and actually going. Between surviving and thriving.

As a first-generation student, college was always something I wanted — but also something I feared. The costs seemed overwhelming, especially at a private institution like Rider. And to put things in perspective, I actually ended up in *more* debt from just one semester at my previous school in Pennsylvania than I've accumulated over nearly three years at Rider — all because of scholarships and other financial aid such as the Federal Pell grant, the TAG funding that New Jersey offers and Rider University gift aid. That kind of support doesn't just help students; it changes the entire financial trajectory of their futures.

For me, TAG didn't just help me afford tuition; it gave me peace of mind. It gave my family hope. It opened the door to opportunities I never imagined I'd have.

Through Rider, I've been able to serve in leadership roles across campus, intern in healthcare systems such as RWJBarnabas Health, and pursue a career path that will allow me to give back to my community. I've grown academically, professionally, and personally — and TAG played a vital role in making all of that possible. Even during my summer sessions last year when I needed to focus on a couple tougher courses without such a heavy workload, TAG was able to help make that possible for me financially.

When we talk about the future of higher education in New Jersey, I hope we remember stories like mine, and the thousands of others who don't

always have the loudest voices in the room but whose futures are forever shaped by this support. TAG isn't just funding, it's a foundation. And taking that foundation away, or weakening it, would close doors for students who are just beginning to believe in themselves.

Beyond the individual stories, TAG gives New Jersey colleges a competitive edge. It allows our state to retain students, support its workforce, and grow its communities from the inside out. When students choose to stay in New Jersey, to learn here, lead here, and eventually work here, it's a win not just for the student, but for our state as a whole.

So I'm here today not just as a student, but as a product of your advocacy, your institutions, and your belief in access and equity. I urge you — please continue to fight for TAG. Protect this program for the students who need it most. For the future leaders, nurses, teachers, entrepreneurs, and citizens of New Jersey.

Because when we invest in students, we're not just changing individual lives — we're transforming entire communities.

Thank you so much for listening — and for continuing to believe in students like me.