To the SREB selection committee,

You probably have not heard of my hometown—Ludlow, Mississippi. It is a small place, with small opportunities and small success stories. People’s lives are stunted and weighed down by so much: lack of employment opportunities, underfunded and poorly staffed schools, inadequate healthcare, and more. My life was no different. From that small place, even if I knew what it meant to go to college or graduate school, I had no roadmap to get there. What I did have was family, friends, and teachers who supported and believed in me. They believed that, despite coming from a place that was so small, I could be big. And, for as long as I can remember, that has been my foremost goal and aspiration: to be big, to dream big, and to try and be a model for others like me to be big too.

Believing that the odds were against me, I attended vocational school to obtain a carpentry license. I still wanted something bigger, so I applied to the University of Mississippi. The final results of my admission and scholarships were landmark accomplishments from someone with a Morton High School diploma. My first steps on campus were an overwhelming nightmare. Wandering to classes, staring at so many faces, being lectured to and surrounded by hundreds of people that I thought were so much better, prepared, and more intelligent than me. Because of these feelings, I longed for the feeling of home. Overtime, I found faculty who made my world easier each day and helped me find my home away from home. Now, I hope to follow in their footsteps and become a faculty member in order to influence the lives of other lost and scared students as they push to dream big.

My path to a career in academia is unusual; however, it stems from my personal experiences with faculty at UofM. Dr. Scurlock, the director of the Luckyday program, once called me into her residence within the building to sit me down and tell me that my great-grandmother had passed away just months into my freshman year. For a professor/director of a program to take her time out of her day to console and deal with my personal grief was my first touching encounter with a faculty. Following that experience, I became extremely close with my Latin professor, Dr. Hilary Becker. I was fortunate to study abroad with Dr. Becker after my freshman year. She was truly there for me especially guiding me to prepare to leave the United States for the first time. Dr. Becker knew my personal background; therefore, she took it upon herself to help me find funding to afford the program including spending money and my plane ticket. I also gained two faculty mentors through my associations with Greek life; Dr. Ryan Upshaw and Dr. Brian Foster are my advisors, my brothers, and life-long mentors. With both of them coming from similar backgrounds as myself and both being African American men on this campus, they were essential to helping me become the student that I am today. Both of these men defeated the odds and are now changing lives such as mine through being faculty at the higher institutional level. The faculty member with the largest impact in my life is Dr. Nicole Ashpole. Becoming her research assistant soon after she was hired as an assistant professor was the start of a lifetime relationship. Dr. Ashpole has been a consistent motivator, predominate investigator, mentor, role model, but most of all a friend. For three years, Dr. Ashpole has been a rock in my life by pushing me to love science, to love research, to learn, to experience, to not be afraid to fail.

Faculty jobs are very specific to your field of study yet broad in that the overall goal is to teach the future generations. I have been fortunate enough to create everlasting relationships with faculty of the University of Mississippi. Mentors like these make me want to pursue a career at a higher institutions and are the reason I am applying to the SREB Doctoral Fellowship Program. Because of the exceptional faculty of the University of Mississippi, they have inspired me to work toward becoming a faculty member to touch the lives of young people in ways that I can honestly not even imagine right now. Creating motivation, formulating dreams, building confidence, urging persistence, providing guidance, being a mentor, being a parent, and being a friend are few of the aspects of being faculty at a higher institution that I hope to experience one day.

The SREB Doctoral Fellowship Program is perfect for students from backgrounds such as mine. The program recruits students who are itching to change the world in their own way and through others. I think that because of my background, my story of attending college, my undergraduate accolades at the University of Mississippi, and my goal of obtaining my Ph.D. makes me an ideal candidate to be selected for the SREB Doctoral Fellowship Program.

Cellas Hayes