



Testimony of Mark E. Ojakian
President
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Before the Higher Education and
Employment Advancement Committee
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Representative Haddad, Senator Bye, Senator Linares, Representative Staneski, and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on a bill of great significance to the students of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU). For the record, my name is Mark Ojakian, and I am the President of CSCU.

HB 5031 AN ACT EQUALIZING ACCESS TO STUDENT-GENERATED FINANCIAL AID

This is the third year I have come before this committee to testify in favor of legislation opening up institutional aid to undocumented students and I sincerely hope this will be the last time. Our students, their peers at the University of Connecticut, and their allies have been fighting for years to right a basic wrong. These students pay into a fund which they are legally prohibited from accessing.

Currently a portion of every student's tuition dollars go into an institutional aid fund to be used to provide grants for Connecticut residents on the basis of financial need. Documented immigrants, and citizens who are Connecticut residents are eligible to access not only institutional aid, but federal financial aid such as Pell Grants, and state financial aid such as the Roberta Willis Scholarship. These forms of financial aid are not accessible to undocumented students, the only form of financial aid that can legally be opened up to these students is institutional aid. This lack of access to any form of financial aid is often the determining factor in whether or not a student can attend one of our institutions.

However, 8 U.S.C. § 1621(d), gives states the authority to provide undocumented immigrants with eligibility for public benefits such as financial aid. If HB 5031 passes, Connecticut would join several states, including California, Minnesota, New Mexico, Texas, and Washington, which have all enacted similar policies to open up their financial aid to undocumented students.

These students are Connecticut residents, who have graduated from Connecticut high schools. They are our friends, our neighbors, and our family members who have been part of our community almost all of their lives. In almost every case, Connecticut is the only state that they have called home. Our undocumented students have and will continue to have our unwavering

support and we will continue to unequivocally advocate for our undocumented students and provide whatever legal or other services are available during this uncertain time.

As the March 5th expiration date for DACA is fast approaching, we continue to see the future of our undocumented students held up in partisan politics in Washington. When recent polls show up to 87% of Americans support legal protections for undocumented immigrants brought here as children, it should not be this hard for our students to fight to stay in the country that they love.

Connecticut has the opportunity to show that not only do we want our undocumented students to stay here, learn here, and thrive here, but that we want to give them the tools to make it possible. When our schools are facing declining enrollments, and our state is facing one of the fastest aging populations, we should look at this as an opportunity to invest in and retain driven, and ambitious young people who want to be a part of our state's future. I strongly urge this committee and the entire General Assembly to support this bill and future of our students deserve.