



Testimony of Mark E. Ojakian
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Before the Higher Education and
Employment Advancement Committee
March 8, 2018

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 HB 5371(RAISED) AN ACT ESTABLISHING THE FREE 2 START SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM AND THE FREE 2 FINISH SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM.

I want to thank the legislature for introducing this bill, which seeks to improve access to higher education for Connecticut students. Access and affordability are core to the missions of all of our institutions, and motivate us all to keep tuition and fees as low as possible. This is why we have made a conscious decision at CSCU not to translate our budget cuts into tuition hikes, and why last year we set tuition on a two-year basis so families could plan.

I am not here to argue the merits of this bill. Few people would disagree with the premise behind this bill, that no student in Connecticut should be denied the opportunity to pursue a degree because they cannot afford it. Nor am I here to argue about where the money to fund this initiative will come from. What I am here to do is to offer my views on the mechanics of how this program will work, and how we can work to improve it.

Currently in-state tuition at our community colleges is \$4,276 and \$10,526 at our state universities. At the same time, the current maximum Pell Grant award is \$5,920. While maximum Pell does not cover all of the costs of tuition and fees at the state universities, for the community colleges, a student receiving the full award will be able to cover all of their tuition and fee costs, as well as books and supplies. For the Fall of 2017, a total of 24,103 (48.8%) of our 49,377 community college students received a Pell grant of some kind, while 15,283 (31%) received the maximum award. This means that 31% of our community college students are already going to school completely covered by Pell.

One of the most critical pieces of this legislation is the Free 2 Start Scholarship that would cover the first two years of a community college education for students. Research demonstrates that the majority of students who fail to earn an associate or bachelor degree leave college within the first few semesters of enrollment. Finding ways to incentivize and support students through their first two years is critical to ensuring that they make it across the finish line to a degree.

Covering the expenses of the first two years of community college will also improve the outcomes for students pursuing a bachelor degree at our state universities. Through our Transfer and Articulation Policy (TAP) program, students can seamlessly transfer from an associate degree at one our community colleges, to a bachelor degree program at one of our state universities, saving them time and approximately \$14,000 in tuition costs.

The successful completion of a student's first year of study is one of the most powerful indicators that student will complete their degree. This is why increasing first year completions has been one of the strategic goals of the Board of Regents. While the bill recognizes the importance of the successful completion of the first two years for community college students, it would be great to see the Free 2 Start or the Free 2 Finish Scholarship extended to cover the first two years at a state university as well. This will ensure that students who begin and end their studies at a university will be equally incentivized to complete as those who begin at a community college.

While affordability is a critically important factor in whether or not a student is able to attend college, the supports that are in place to help that student complete are even more important. Having sufficient resources available to students like academic advisors, counselors, tutoring, and student success centers is vitally important to promote retention and completion. Without these supports, students can end up falling through the cracks and dropping out. On-time completion initiatives such as Guided Pathways and 15 to Finish, paired with technological supports such as DegreeWorks, will help guide our students to and through the process, but we must improve our advisor to student ratio to truly make a difference.

One way this bill can be improved is by providing funding for our public colleges and universities to hire additional student advisors and support staff to help improve student outcomes. We currently have an advisor to student ratios of 842 to 1 at our universities and 923 to 1 at our community colleges. If we had funds to hire additional advisors, we would be able to help reduce the time and credits taken towards completion, and help all our students thrive. While these scholarship programs provide a financial incentive for students to complete, having the staff available to support our students is equally as important.

This bill helps promote completion by requiring students to take 12 credits per semester and complete 30 credits per year to qualify. Additionally, the bill would apply to summer and winter session courses, which have also been shown to increase the probability that students earn a degree. Students who earn less than 20 credits by the end of the first year of enrollment are 30% less likely to graduate than students who earn 20 or more credits in their first year.

While part time students are less likely to complete a degree than their full-time counterparts, it is hard to overlook the fact that approximately two-thirds of our community college students are enrolled part time. We must recognize that part-time enrollment doesn't mean these students are only partially interested in their studies. They often have other responsibilities, such as working a full time job to support their families. Increasing funding for student support services and advisors will help these students, but finding ways to incorporate additional supports for our part-time students can help ensure that they are not disadvantaged simply because they have additional responsibilities beyond school.

Finally, it is hard to pair an expansion in access for students with continued cuts to our institutions of higher education. Since 2015 we have lost \$61M in state support, or 17% of our funding. If this continues, it will be difficult for our colleges and universities to support the students we currently have enrolled, as well as those new students this bill would help incentivize to attend. Just to remain financially viable and avoid eroding all of their reserves, starting in FY19 our community colleges need approximately \$9M of additional funding, our universities need approximately \$4.5M, and Charter Oak needs \$600K. I would ask that any consideration of this bill come with the recognition that our institutions need to be adequately funded if we want our students to succeed.