



Testimony of Mark E. Ojikian
President
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Before the Higher Education and
Employment Advancement Committee
February 7, 2017

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 on two bills significance to the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU). For the record, my name is Mark Ojikian, and I am the President of CSCU.

SB 17 AN ACT ASSISTING STUDENTS WITHOUT LEGAL IMMIGRATION STATUS WITH THE COST OF COLLEGE and HB 7000 AN ACT EQUALIZING ACCESS TO STUDENT GENERATED FINANCIAL AID

I strongly urge the Committee to support these two bills, and the countless students in our system who will be better served through their passage. The central mission of our institutions is to provide quality, affordable, and accessible higher education for all students. These bills are an essential part in strengthening that mission and improving our ability to serve all our students equally.

Our institutions welcome all students regardless of their immigration status, race, age, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, or physical abilities. We support their educational goals and dreams, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because investing in all our students improves the sustainability of our communities and the economic competitiveness of our state. Our system supported similar legislation last year and will fervently do so again this year. This is fundamentally an issue about fairness and equity for our students.

All this legislation seeks to accomplish is to give all our Connecticut residents equal access to critical financial aid to support their education. Currently a portion of every student's tuition dollars go into a pot of institutional aid 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, since these populations of students are eligible to complete a FAFSA. These forms of financial aid are not accessible to undocumented students since they are not eligible to complete a FAFSA. 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.

This injustice is only exacerbated by the fact that these students are currently paying into the institutional aid fund that helps provide financial support for every other needy Connecticut resident but not for themselves. In some cases, these students may be subsidizing the cost of attendance for students who have much less financial need than they do. All they are asking for is the opportunity to access a fund which they are currently supporting with their own hard earned dollars.

Several states, including California, Minnesota, New Mexico, Texas, and Washington, have all enacted similar policies to open up their financial aid to undocumented students. Connecticut would be far from the first state to open up institutional 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.