



Testimony on House Bill 5048

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On behalf of the University of Saint Joseph and our thousands of students, I am submitting testimony on HB 5048: AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2025 and in support of funding for the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program. In particular, I want to bring attention to Section 15 of this bill. Section 15 attempts to resolve a longstanding issue related to the timing of the disbursement of funds to institutions to ensure that scholarships can be promised in a timely fashion.

We appreciate the legislature's continued support of the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program, which provides scholarships for Connecticut students to attend in-state public or private, non-profit colleges. At the University of Saint Joseph, 138 Connecticut resident students received a Roberta Willis grant in the 2022-2023 academic year and for many the funds were critical to their ability to begin or complete their degree programs. Of these 138 students, 83% were Pell-eligible and 86% were students of color.

An important component of the financial support that USJ students receive, Roberta Willis grants supplement aid from the federal government and from the University itself. Almost all of USJ's undergraduates receive aid from our own scholarship funds, and last year close to 38% of our students were eligible for federal Pell Grants based on their family incomes. In addition, while 138 USJ undergraduates received Roberta Willis Scholarship funds, because of the limited allocation to USJ, two-thirds of students who were eligible for the grant could not be awarded. Students attending Connecticut's non-profit independent colleges, such as USJ, receive approximately 26% of the total funding from this program, although they represent 33% of all undergraduate students in Connecticut and earn 46% of the bachelor's degrees awarded each year. These are students who are critical to meeting workforce needs in the state. In a recent graduating class, 11% of USJ students earned degrees in the sciences, 49% earned degrees as health care practitioners, 13% as social workers, and 10% as teachers.

In addition, Roberta Willis funds encourage students to stay in Connecticut for college. Nearly 40% of Connecticut's high school graduates leave the state to attend college, which is twice the national average. The program helps to keep USJ students – and all Connecticut students – in state for college, ultimately making them more likely to join the Connecticut workforce once they earn their degrees.

We appreciate the significant level of ARPA funding that has been allocated to this program over the past three years, and we would ask the Committee to please consider increasing the General Fund appropriation for this program now that the ARPA funding must be spent by December 31, 2024. Additionally, the timing of the disbursement of the institutional allocations continues to be a challenge, and we would highlight that section 15 of HB 5048 attempts to resolve that. The Office of Higher Education typically does not send our allocation until after the budget has passed and paperwork is signed. This year, that was not until after the semester started and students were already enrolled. If it had been possible for Roberta Willis scholarship dollars to be awarded in the spring as part of each student's total financial aid package, the higher awards would have incentivized more students to attend USJ or other colleges and universities in the state.

The state will be well-served by increasing funding for Roberta Willis Scholarships. Connecticut's current investment in need-based student grant aid – at just two percent of higher education funding – is among the lowest in the nation, putting us in 45th place among the 50 states in the allocation of such funding. Moving up this list by increasing state-funded grant aid to students will support degree attainment and completion and help in meeting Connecticut's workforce needs.

In summary, I hope that the Committee will support increased funding to the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program. We also would ask respectfully that the General Assembly work with the administration to address the issue of timing once and for all, with input from Connecticut's public and private institutions, as necessary. Thank you for your continued support.