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**Testimony for the  
Appropriations Committee of  
Jennifer Widness, President  
Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges  
February 20, 2024**

On behalf of the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges, I am submitting testimony on **HB 5048: AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2025** in support of funding for the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program as well as **Section 15 of this bill, which 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 would ask the Committee to please increase the general fund appropriation for FY 25, as ARPA funding must be spent by December 31, 2024.

By way of background, the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program (RWSP) is the state's need-based financial aid program administered by the Office of Higher Education that provides scholarships to needy Connecticut students attending Connecticut higher education institutions, both public and private, non-profits.

We greatly appreciate the legislature's support of RWSP and the generous appropriation of significant ARPA dollars to this program over the last three years. Unfortunately, the general fund appropriation for RWSP has not seen an increase in more than ten years (Figure 1) and ARPA funding expires on December 31, 2024.

Additional funding is needed:

- Connecticut ranks 46<sup>th</sup> in the country for the percent of state funding for higher education allocated to student aid at just 2%. (Figure 2)
- The state spends only \$268 in student aid per student enrolled, while the national average is \$1,058 per student. (Figure 3)
- In FY 22, grants from RWSP were only awarded to 31% of eligible students. (Figure 4)
- In FY 23, students attending Connecticut independent colleges received 50% less scholarship funding than they received in FY 15. When ARPA funding goes away, that allocation will go down another 30%. (Figure 5)

In our state and across the nation, demographics are changing and increased investment in need-based aid at public and private, non-profit colleges through RWSP is needed to address equity gaps and workforce needs:

- Connecticut has a nearly 30 percentage point difference in post-secondary enrollment rates between students that are eligible for free and reduced-price-lunch and those that are not. (Figure 6)
- While the percentage of low-income students and students of color has decreased, the *number* of students going to college from those demographic groups, has actually increased. (Figure 7)
- Many low-income Connecticut students are choosing to enroll at a private, non-profit college. Seven of CCIC's member institutions enroll a higher percentage of Pell-eligible students than UCONN Storrs. (Figure 8)

- Our state needs a highly skilled workforce to support the long-term economic growth of key industries such as Advanced Manufacturing, Healthcare, Finance, and Life Sciences as well as to foster innovation given rapid growth in Artificial Intelligence and Quantum Computing technologies.

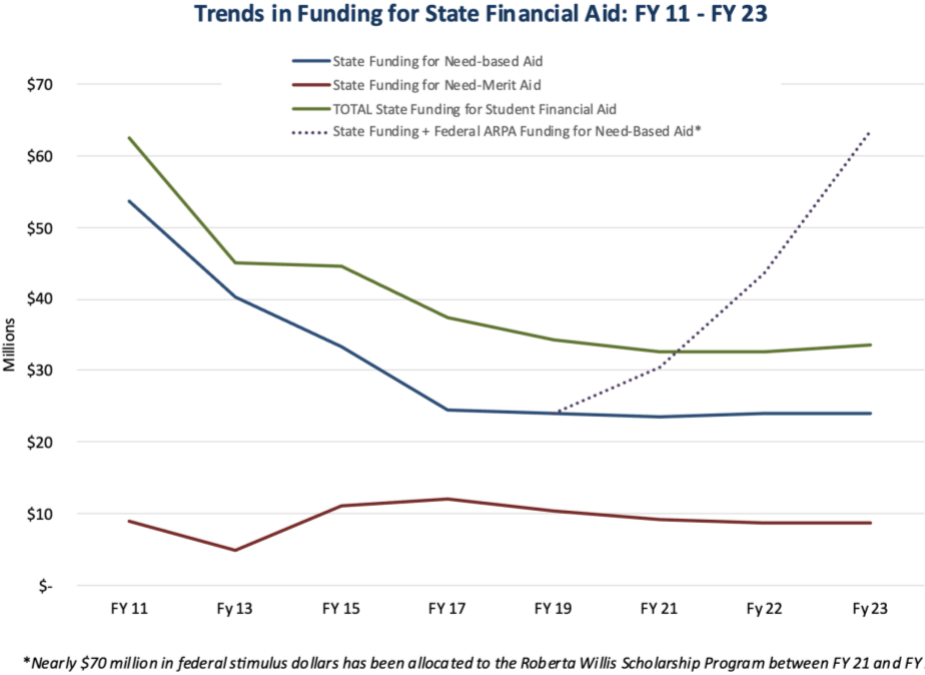
Both our public and private colleges need to be leveraged to close equity gaps and expand the talent pipeline. Funding robust student financial aid will help support those goals.

As an aside, 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 although it only allows for a carry-forward of some of the annual appropriation, not all. The Office of Higher Education does not send the institutional allocation until after the budget has passed and paperwork is signed. This year, that was not until after the fall semester started and students were already enrolled, delaying the ability of institutions to award these funds. We would ask that the legislature please work with the administration to address the issue of timing, with input from public and private institutions in the state, as necessary.

In summary, we hope the Committee will increase funding to the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program and support the Governor’s proposal to address the timing issue once and for all.

Thank you for your continued support.

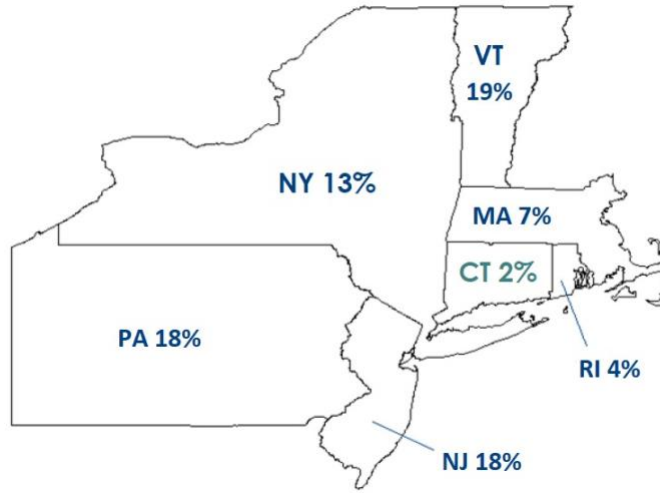
**Figure 1.**



**Figure 2.**

**Percent of State Higher Education Funding Allocated to Need Based Aid**

Source: NASSGAP Annual Survey, 2021-22

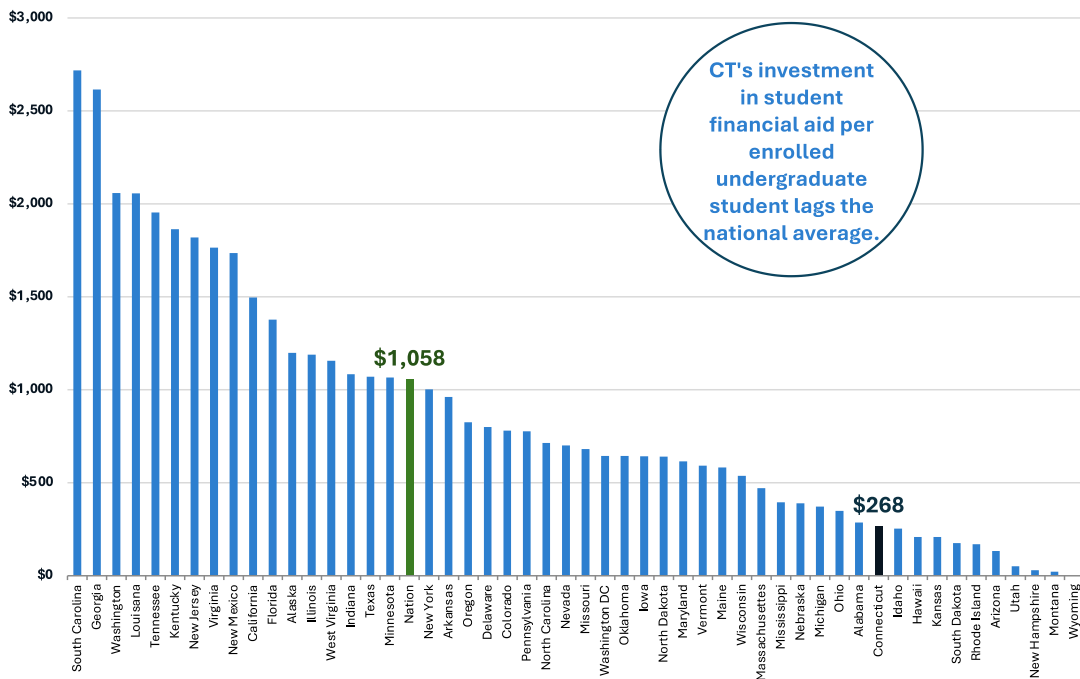


*Connecticut's investment in need-based aid is among the lowest in the region and in the nation. In fact, forty-five other states in the US spend a greater percentage of state funding for higher education on student aid than CT.*

**Figure 3.**

**Estimated Undergraduate State Grant Dollars per Undergraduate Enrollment, by State: 2022**

Source: National Association State Student Grant Aid Program (NASSGAP)



**Figure 4.**

## High Percentage of Unmet Need in CT

	CT Students Eligible to Receive RWSP	Total CT Students Awarded RWSP	% of Eligible Students Awarded RWSP
CT State Universities	9,507	3,259	34%
UConn	7,639	2,139	28%
CCIC	6,102	1,757	29%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>23,248</b>	<b>7,155</b>	<b>31%</b>

Only 31% of eligible CT students received a state need-based grant in FY 22.

**Figure 5.**

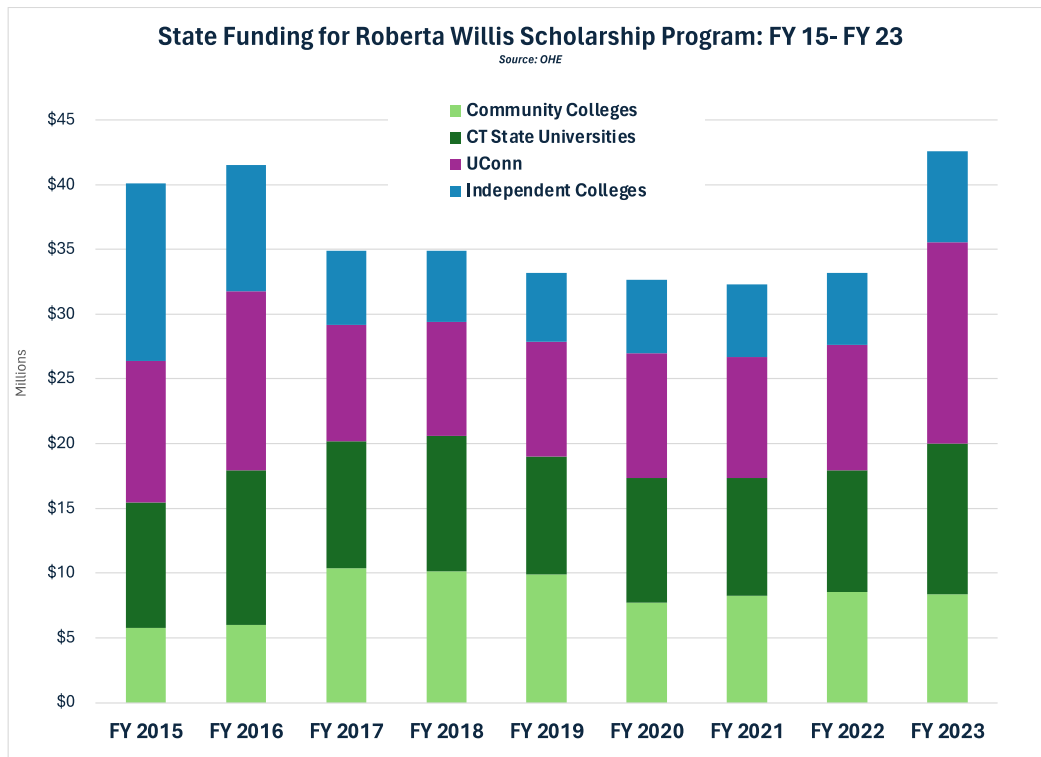


Figure 6.

**Percent of CT High School Students Enrolling in Post-Secondary, by Demographic Group and Graduating Class: 2017-2022**

Source: EdSight

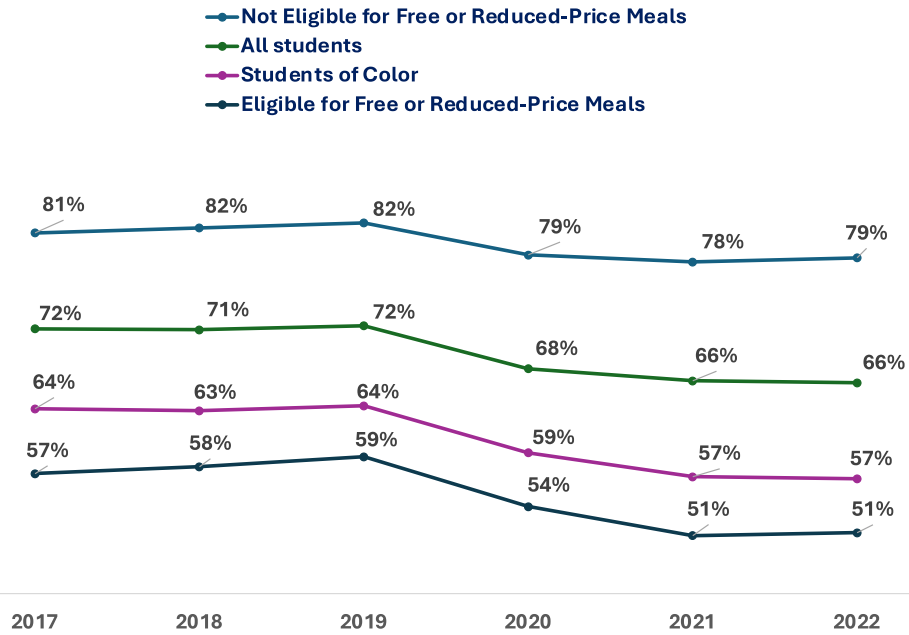
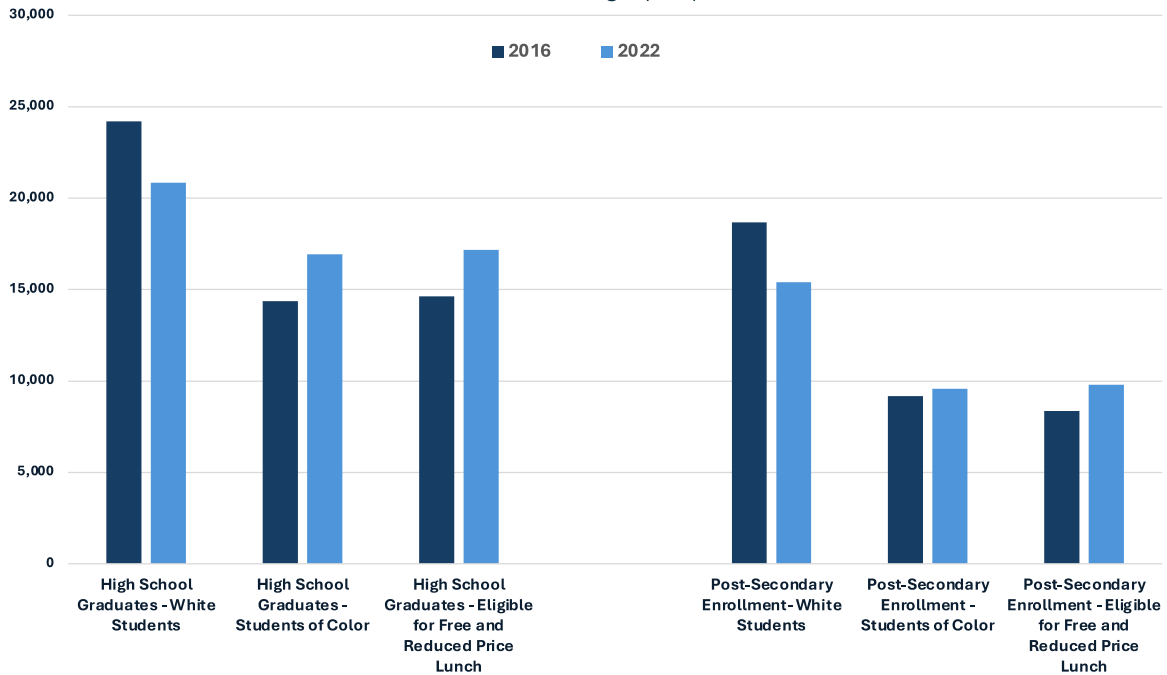


Figure 7.

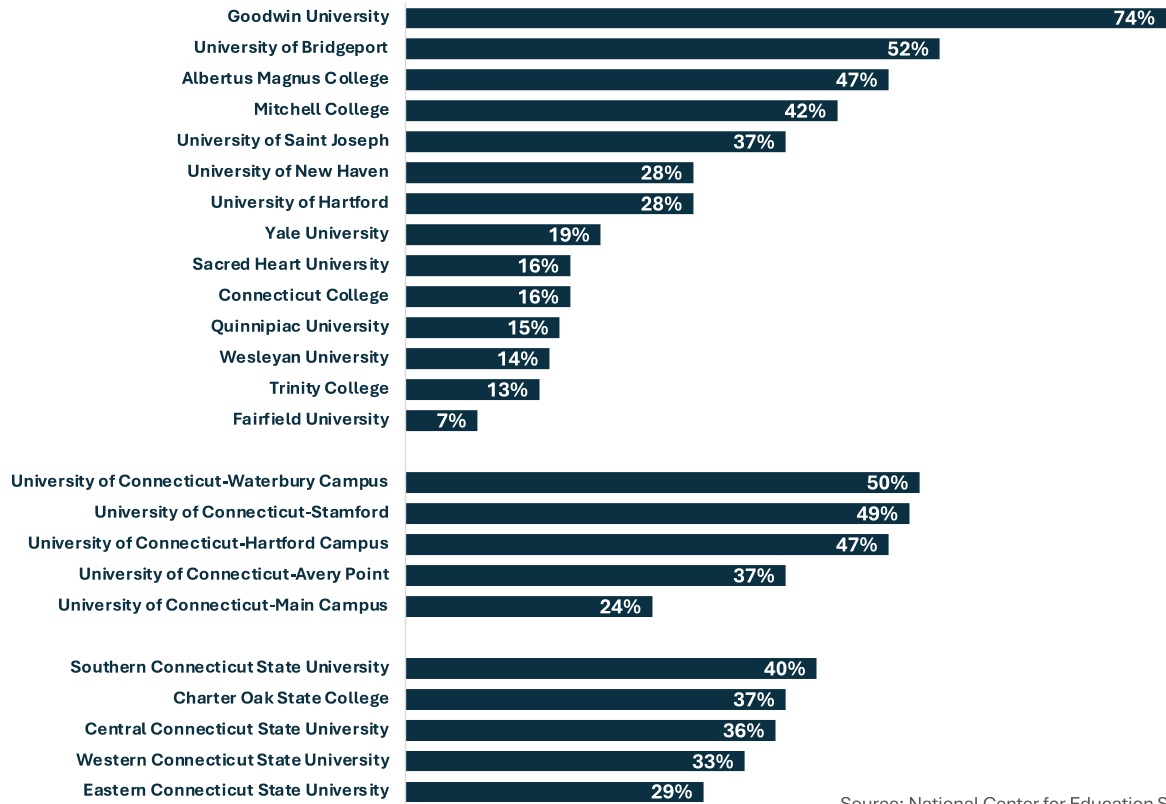
**Trends in Student Count of High School Graduation and Post-Secondary Enrollment by Demographic Group**

Source: EdSight (SDE)



**Figure 8.**

**Percentage of Undergraduate Students Awarded Pell Grants at CT 4-Year Institutions,  
2022**



Source: National Center for Education Statistics