



**Testimony for the
Appropriations Committee
Rhona Free, President
University of Saint Joseph
February 15, 2023**

On behalf of the University of Saint Joseph (USJ), I am submitting testimony on **H.B. 6659: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2025, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR**, pertaining to funding for the **Roberta Willis Scholarship Program**. Governor Lamont has proposed to increase funding for this program by \$4 million, 12%, in both FY 24 and FY 25.

By way of background, the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program (RWSP) is the state's financial aid program administered by the Office of Higher Education that provides need-based scholarships to Connecticut students to attend Connecticut institutions—public and private. Students attending non-profit independent colleges receive approximately 17% of the total funding from this program although the independent colleges enroll 33% of all undergraduate students in Connecticut and award 46% of the bachelor's degrees earned each year. The general fund appropriation for this program has been flat for over ten years and therefore we strongly support the Governor's proposed increase.

The RWSP is a critical component of the financial support that USJ students receive, supplementing their 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 40% of our students were eligible for federal Pell Grants based on their family incomes. In addition, last year 131 USJ undergraduates received RWSP funds but – because of the limited allocation to USJ – almost three-quarters of students who were eligible for the grant could not be awarded a RWSP scholarship. These are students who are critical to meeting workforce needs in the state. In a recent graduating class, 11% of students earned degrees in the sciences, 49% earned degrees as health care practitioners, 13% as social workers and 10% as teachers.

While USJ students graduate with below-average debt and have earnings that allow them to pay their loans, resulting in one of the lowest default rates of any college in the state, they need these grant dollars to make college affordable. In addition, offering them RWSP funds encourages students to stay in Connecticut for college. Nearly 40% of Connecticut's high school graduates leave the state to attend college; the national average is closer to 20%. The RWSP 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.

In addition, I want to comment on CSCU's proposal to expand the PACT program to the Connecticut State Universities to make certain 4-year in-demand degrees free. Independent non-profit colleges and universities in Connecticut account for half of the minority students enrolled in a 4-year public or private, non-profit undergraduate institution; they account for a larger share of Pell Grant recipients in Connecticut than any sector except for community colleges; and they have completion rates that are as high or higher than the public 4-year institutions, including for Pell recipients. Connecticut Conference of Independent College (CCIC) institutions award 56% of the state's bachelor's degrees in health professions, 55% of Computer Science degrees, and 46% of

Engineering degrees; they have low student loan default rates (UConn, at 2.6%, is the only public institution with a lower student loan default rate than USJ's rate of 3.4%); and Connecticut students who attend CCIC institutions are just as likely to remain in the state (74% CCIC v. 75% CSCU) after graduation. The state would be well-served by increasing funds that go directly to students to take to whichever college in the state, whether public or private non-profit, best meets their needs, preparation, and career goals. 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.

In summary, we hope the Committee will support the Governor's proposal to increase funding to the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program, and that any additional funding to expand the pipeline for certain in-demand degrees such as teaching, nursing, and engineering/manufacturing, will include opportunities for students to attend both public and private, non-profit colleges in Connecticut.