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**Testimony for the
Appropriations Committee of
Jennifer Widness, President
Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges
February 15, 2023**

On behalf of the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges, 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 \$4 million in both FY 24 and FY 25**, which we strongly support.

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 institutions – public and private. Connecticut students attending independent colleges received approximately 17% of the funding from this program in FY 22.

The general fund appropriation for RWSP has not seen an increase in more than ten years (Figure 1). We greatly appreciate the legislature's strong support of RWSP and the generous appropriation of significant ARPA dollars to this program over the last two years. However, the ARPA Willis funds have different, more restrictive terms for their use than the general fund dollars and they are short term in their longevity. **We hope legislators will support the Governor's proposed increase in their budget.**

Connecticut lags the nation in its investment in student aid, ranking 45th in the country for the percent of higher education funding allocated to student aid at just 2% (Figure 2). Connecticut spends only \$259 in student aid per student enrolled while the national average in 2021 was \$1,024 (Figure 3).

The Governor's proposed investment in need-based aid comes at a critical time for Connecticut students. In our state and across the nation, post-secondary enrollment has declined over the last two years at both public and private non-profit colleges. **In Connecticut, post-secondary enrollment by students that are eligible for free-and-reduced price lunch has dropped 8% in just two years.** This subset of students already lagged the post-secondary enrollment rates for students that are not eligible for free-and-reduced price lunch by 28%. They do not have ground to lose (Figure 4).

Bold investments in financial aid are needed to help address these equity gaps that have only grown through the pandemic. Financial aid is effective at providing access and opportunity to Connecticut residents. The RWSP recipients at CCIC institutions are 69% non-white (Figure 5) and have an average estimated family contribution (EFC) of \$5,338, which is *lower than* the threshold of eligibility for a federal Pell grant. State financial aid helps students persist when combined with federal and institutional aid. The average completion rate for RWSP students at CCIC institutions is 72% and, according to P20 WIN, these students stay in-state upon completion at virtually the same rate as RWSP graduates from the CSCU.

CCIC must express concern about the CSCU’s proposal to make certain 4-year in-demand degrees free through an expansion of the PACT program to the Connecticut State Universities. CCIC institutions play a significant role in educating our state’s citizenry and award a large percentage of the in-demand degrees that are earned in this state each year. We must be a part of the state’s workforce strategy.

In addition, a proposal to make one sector “free” would severely impact many of our member institutions that enroll a large percentage of Connecticut students and who have also struggled to maintain enrollments and a balanced budget post-pandemic.

If the state is truly looking to address the demand for graduates in nursing, teaching, engineering and manufacturing, the legislature should invest in existing programs like RWSP and expand programs like [CT Health Horizons](#) to ensure that tuition assistance and funding for faculty and innovative programs is available at both public and private non-profit colleges across the state.

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

Figure 1.

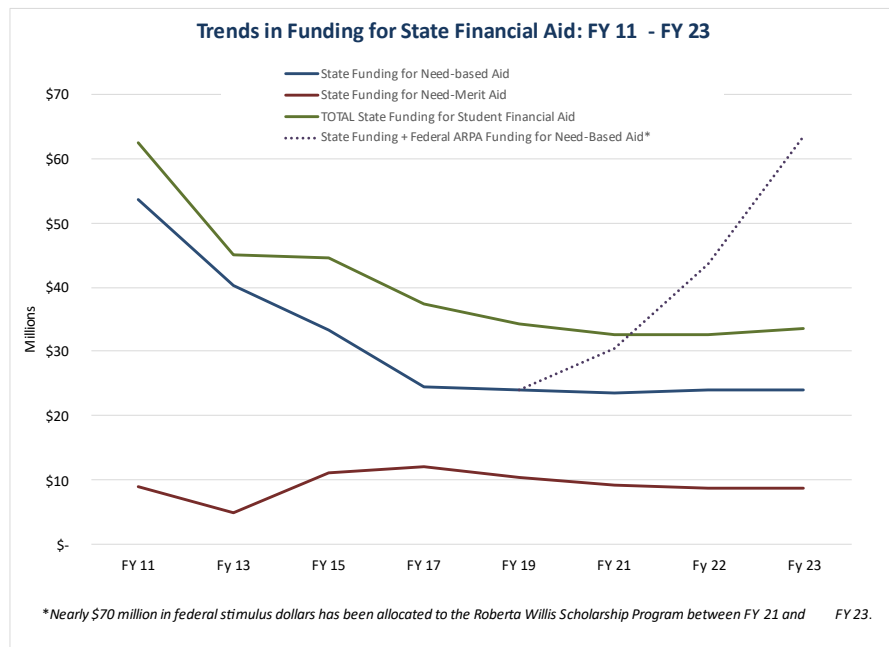


Figure 2. (Source: [NASSGAP](#) ; See also: [College Board](#) (p. 47))

Percent of State Higher Education Funding Allocated to Student Aid
 Source: NASSGAP Annual Survey, 2020-21



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

Figure 3. (Source: [NASSGAP](#) ; See also: [College Board](#) (p. 47))

Estimated Undergraduate State Grant Dollars per Undergraduate Enrollment, by State: 2021

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

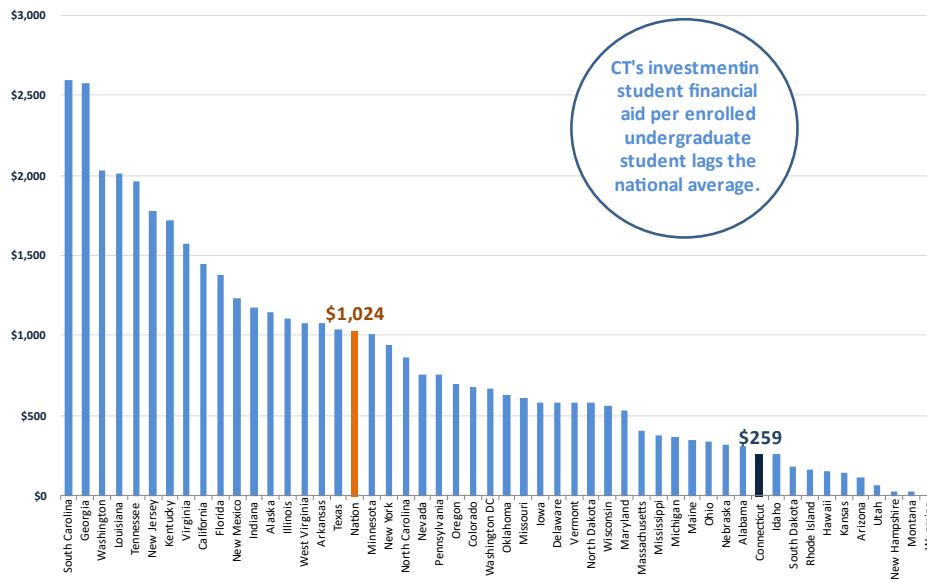


Figure 4. (Source : EdSight)

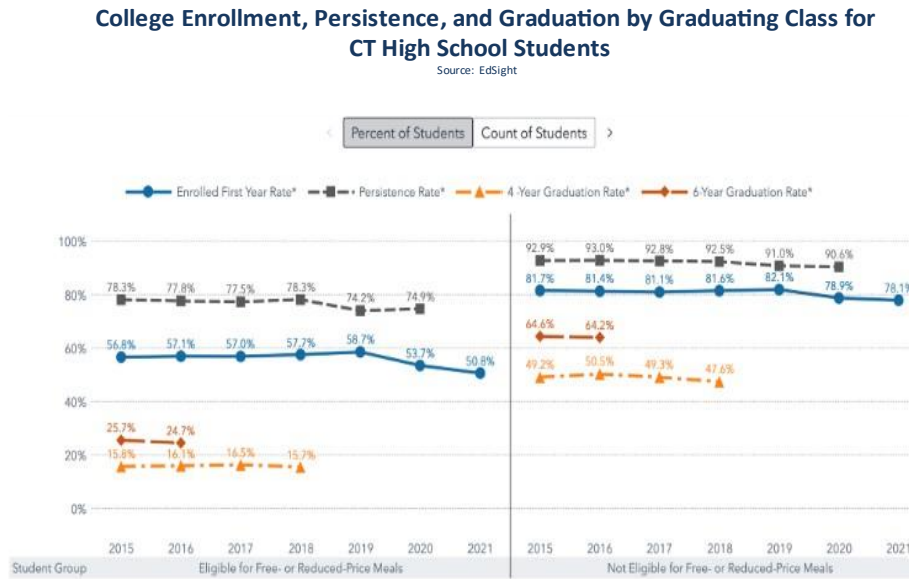


Figure 5.

