

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-6885

Title: AN ACT EXPANDING THE DEBT-FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROGRAM.

Vote Date: 3/13/2025

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/7/2025

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Higher education and employment advancement committee

Sen. Gary A. Winfield, 10th Dist.

Sen. Sujata Gadkar-Wilcox, 22nd Dist.

Sen. Herron Gaston, 23rd Dist.

Rep. Sarah Keitt, 134th Dist.

REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill would expand the Mary Ann Handley Award, formerly PACT, to include students enrolled in a state university. The expansion of the Mary Ann Handley award would mean those students who were able to go to community college debt-free college would also be able to go to a state university debt-free. This would make attending college to achieve a bachelor's degree more accessible for low-income students who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford to do so.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:

The substitute language expands eligibility to students enrolled in the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities program. It also requires the Board of Regents of Higher Education and the University of Connecticut Board of Trustees to establish a finish line scholar's program that provides awards to qualifying students who have complete a minimum of sixty credits at a Connecticut State Community College and are transferring to a Connecticut State College and Universities school and be used toward their first seventy-two credit hours or toward their bachelor's degree. This substitute language would also require the boards to report on their finish line scholar's program by November 1, 2025 and March 1, 2026, and every semester after.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

[Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, Presidents, Eastern Connecticut State University, President, Dr. Karim Ismaili, Southern Connecticut State University, President, Dwayne Smith, Ph.D., Western Connecticut State University, President, Dr. Manohar Singh, Central Connecticut State University, President, Dr. Zulma Toro:](#) Supports. State that they meet with students who are balancing school with jobs, personal responsibilities and dealing with financial instability. State that expanding the Mary Ann Handley Award (MAHA) would help students take the next step in their education without crippling debt. State that this bill could have significant increases to the workforce and strengthen our public institutions. States that the Upjohn Institute estimates that expanding the MAHA to Connecticut State Universities would "increase the number of community college students transferring to our four-year universities by at least 7%" which would mean thousands more students transferring to state universities. They state that this would be an investment not just for students but for the entirety of the state, by breaking the cycle of financial hardship for some students they may get higher educational degrees and stay in Connecticut, strengthening our communities, economy, and businesses. not only. They state that this is a model that has proven to work, as the initiative at CT State Community College has, which covers tuition and fees but also provides up to \$1,000 for basic needs has "boosted retention rates by 17% and increased graduation rates by 9%". They believe that by passing this bill, students can achieve their full potential despite their financial status.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

[Central Connecticut State University, Professor of Sociology and President of the Faculty Senate, Stephen Adair, Ph.D.:](#) States that students are experiencing an affordability crisis fueled by income inequality and that "the rate of change in the degree in inequality is about 30 percent greater than any state in the nation". States that the cost of a Connecticut State College and University is "between 67 to 100 percent of total family income for students in the lowest income quintile. Suggests to expand language to fund students through 120 credits.

[The Upjohn Institute, Senior Researcher, Dr. Michelle Miller-Adams:](#) States that 25 states have created tuition-free college for a large portion of their population, and that tuition free college helps reduce uncertainty of financial aid and brings new resources to students. States that tuition-free college also improves the workforce by producing more educated workers. Found that tuition free college are most effective in producing more local graduates when programs are more accessible, students with greater financial need receive new resources, and when there are partnerships with in state employers to hire the students post-graduation. States that adding Bachelor's degree to the college free program Connecticut would give students more choice over where to best use their interests and skills, and could have a spillover effect where the state's job and wage growth would increase as education levels do. States that for this program to be successful, schools must support students to ensure that they complete their bachelor's degree and create strong public messaging so that this program is easily accessible.

[Student, Ella Adebonjojo:](#) States that the Mary Ann Handley Award program has been proven to increase enrollment and graduation rates amount students. Believes that this is a necessary step for investing in the future of Connecticut's students, workforce, and economy.

[Central Connecticut State University, Student, Jahna Agolli](#): States that this could give more Connecticut residents access to the benefits of a bachelors degree, including higher income, better health and family and job satisfaction, as well as causing a reduction in inequality by providing residents with the change to advance. States that as a nursing student, they understand the financial barrier to completing a degree, and that expanding this program could improve our healthcare system through the training and hiring of more healthcare professionals. Suggests that this program expand to include eligibility for transfer students as they can have more student debt.

[Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, Chancellor, Terrence Cheng](#): Supports this bill because it would in effect fill gaps for many persons affected by the revocation of CT State Community Colleges from the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship, by giving them the financial aid needed to succeed. And, with the increase of funding for all CT residents in need of the funding at state institutions of higher education, it would increase their access to financial gains post-graduation, as it is said that with a bachelor's degree, a person is on average likely to earn, " \$40,000 more annually than those with an associate degree, with salaries averaging \$108,000 compared to \$65,000, respectively." On average.

This bill's increased funding to students would also result in increased college completion rates, increased access to essentials like food, childcare, mental health care, and transportation, etc., and increased community college transfer enrollment, would create an overall benefit to our state's student population during and after their college experience and our state's equal access to enrollment in education for all persons, no matter their, and/or their families background or financial status.

[Evelyn Alonso](#): Supports this bill because it supports our state's residents in achieving a bachelor's degree, with all the trappings and benefits therein, at a lesser cost and higher net gain through improved economic earnings, higher job satisfaction, better quality of life for student and family, and less amassed debt.

[Student, Anonymous, Anonymous](#): Supports this bill because it would expand the Mary Ann Handley (Formerly PACT) financial aid program to many more Connecticut residents who need this funding to cover their collegiate careers in our state, due to the unmanageable cost of said education to many students.

[Anonymous, Anonymous](#): Supports this bill because it will in essence support our state's young people and their families by offering them a financial option to attend university, many of whom are from low-income households. These individuals many times, cannot even afford to eat, let alone pay for their college education without relying heavily on private/university provided grants and scholarships, meaning many are restricted from achieving the education they are driven to complete. Expanding this program would therefore reduce the reliance on said scholarships and help our states young people attain a bachelor's degree, no matter their financial background, and focus more on academic exploits, rather than that of worrying about how they will pay for their college education.

[Adjunct Professor, Professor CCSU 45 YEARS, Ali Antar](#): Supports.

[CSU-AAUP, Testimony Supporting HB6885, Syafira, Azzahra](#): Supports this bill because it would assist in decrease the amount of inequality that affects those wishing to get a college

degree via increased tuition assistance for those in need of it. Increased levels of debt decrease the amount of success a person will be able to achieve post-graduation/affect their chances of said graduation, and this legislation would, according to this petitioner, eliminate that paradigm, if only in small part, and increase access to higher education and these prosperous pursuits post-graduation for all in our state.

[Support PACT expansion, Clare Beggan.](#): Supports this bill as this expansion of the Mary Ann Handley (PACT) program would make education in Connecticut more affordable, maintain it's high quality, and thus grant more people success in graduation. These increasing number of graduates would eagerly enter our state's workforce, providing a boon for it, and the state's economy.

[CSU-AAUP, Mary Ann Handley Expansion, Sara Baker Bailey](#): Supports this bill as, specifically at CSCU, tuition rates have increased 68% over the last ten years, while wages have not risen to offset the cost. This bill would aid those who need support financially in their college education attainment, reduce debt, and improve overall graduation and post-graduation success rates to the students in greatest need.

[WCSU, Sociologist, Carina Bandhauer](#): Supports this bill given the great impact it will have in supporting those students, mainly from low income and historically marginalized communities, that heavily rely on the State Community College system to achieve a degree. This would financially benefit those students, and the state by having a higher graduation rate with less overall debt.

[CCSU, Michael Bartone](#): Supports this bill will help students and their families navigate and cope with the ever-increasing costs for attending college on a needs-based system. Hence, debt will be lowered, and success rates increase.

[AAUP CSCU, Associate Professor, Polly Beals](#): Supports this bill because it would improve quality of life and further job opportunities for all college students in the state and community college system in this state.

[CCSU, Student, Christina Bean](#): Supports this bill because it would assist students like herself in perusing a college career, no matter their financial situation. In essence, this bill acts as an investment in the futures of all students, increasing their ability to find good jobs, and thus benefit the state with their ensuing work and decreased amount of debt accrued in attaining their degrees.

[CCSU, Student, Hailey Becquey](#): Supports this bill because it would allow students to achieve greater prosperity, thus causing business in the state of Connecticut to boom with an influx of highly educated college graduates and increase general quality for all of life as a result.

[CCSU, Student, Destiny Benejan](#): Supports this bill citing the importance and benefits of achieving a bachelor's degree, and how this bill, by reducing debt and increasing aid to those students attending state and community colleges in and for Connecticut residents, would be a boon for all.

[CCSU, Jack Benson](#): Supports this bill as it would improve the ability of financial aid to be based on merit, supporting those who need it in getting a degree and benefiting our state by becoming gainfully employed with greater alacrity than without this bill and the expanded funding therein.

[Shea Berry](#): Supports this bill citing the importance of higher education in this state and the need for more skilled workers, such as those in healthcare and other vital sectors, which this bill will help bolster the levels of by making education more accessible to all and job fields filled with skilled and eager professionals.

[Clara Biesel](#): Supports this bill because it given the extreme financial strain students face in this state, and country when it comes to education. And compared to other nations like the Netherlands, which offers affordable education, these systems, as written in this bill, would bring our state closer to an affordable education system, greatly aiding our state's students, and benefiting our workforce as well.

[New Haven Federation of Teachers, President, Leslie Blatteau](#): Supports this bill because it would provide a clearer vision for those students attending secondary education as to how, and where they should apply to go to post-secondary education by making all state and community colleges less expensive via these increases in financial aid, and therefore, less of a barrier to the attainment of a degree, and future financial and job success post-graduation from said colleges.

[SCSU, HB 6885, Laurie Bonjo](#): Supports this bill because it creates many increases in markers of academic success and financial stability in students who need these programs for financial aid. And as year-on-year increases of these benefits are seen from the existing program, it is posited that with these expansions, as detailed in HB-6885, it will create even more benefit and growth as time goes on, thus benefiting not only the students and their families, but the state of Connecticut as a whole.

[AAUP, Associate Professor, Cameron Brewer](#): Supports this bill because it would support those students who need such financial aid, many of whom struggle to balance collegiate work with part-time work, raising of family, and financial worry, which makes their lives much more difficult. This bill would help alleviate these struggles, and let students focus on their academics without needing to worry about the financial means needed to attain their degrees in Connecticut.

[Wesleyan University, Katherine Brunson](#): Supports this bill because it would remove roadblocks to Connecticut residents in attaining degrees, which would benefit their quality of life and increase their ability for career advancement with said degrees attained in an affordable manner.

[Freelance Teacher and artist, Tyler Bunch](#): Supports this bill because it would help reduce debt, increase career advancement, increase general quality of life, and benefit our state with an increase of highly educated persons working within its workforce.

[CSU-AAUP, CCSU-AAUP Chapter President, Thomas Burkholder](#): Supports this bill because it would help alleviate the pressure on those students working half or full-time jobs to pay for college during their enrollment at said institutions. The hours they work have increased, along with the cost of education, while the minimum wage has not risen enough to stabilize these

costs, even given the increased working hours. Mr. Burkholder provides statistics and resources citing said raising of cost and hours since the 1950's, and claims that with this bill, the strain on students would reduce and these statistics would trend down, with continued financial support.

[SCSU, Professor of Political Science, Keven Buterbaugh](#): Supports this bill because it is claimed that, according to research by the Upjohn Institute, the \$20 million raised over 5 years by this expansion, would heavily benefit students. In addition, this bill would help decrease inequality in collegiate education as time goes on, allowing everyone, regardless of background, access to merit/needs-based financial aid and focus on their academics, not financial costs.

[Central CT State University, Assistant Professor, Natalie Catasus](#): Supports this bill because it would provide stability to those students in greatest need and help them focus on their academics and not need to work an inordinate number of hours during their education to fund it. And this bill would provide evidence that elected officials are supporting their constituents in achieving these degrees and helping bolster their futures economically and educationally.

[People's Center, Volunteer, Thomas Connolly](#): Supports this bill because it would help alleviate financial burdens and risks from those attending college and open opportunities for greater career advancement after attaining their degrees in the state of Connecticut. This petitioner also expresses great importance on the great aid this bill will render to those in financial hardship from our state's poorest cities and communities, helping them, and all student, succeed in their collegiate careers, no matter their background or financial status.

[Wesleyan University, David Constantine](#): Supports this bill citing this state's residents increased need and the benefit businesses will have with an increase in graduates entering the workforce.

[Shaniece Conyers](#): Supports this bill given evidence of her own personal indebtedness, which would be aided by the implementation of this bill, and the important step this bill would take in addressing the debt crisis facing our state's students when it comes to higher education.

[HB 6885, Madison Daigneau](#): Supports this bill because it would prove the intent of elected officials in addressing the debt crisis and the ensuing inequality and poverty created by this paradigm, which would be, if not be the start of, a means by which this would be ended in the state of Connecticut.

[Glorimar De Jesus](#): Supports this bill and hopes that with these expanded financial aid programs, young people who are in the current system unable to attend university due to the immense cost, would be able to achieve their dreams by being able to go with the support of the Marry Ann Handley Award program at their backs.

[AAUP, Yahelyn De Leon](#): Supports this bill because it provides greater access to higher education to all residents of Connecticut and alleviates students worries about finding a college, they can attend due to financial struggles by giving them stability and an opportunity to advance their careers post-graduation. This petitioner also believes that higher education is to be considered a right, and this bill would be a means to an end, making education easier

to attend for all and thus, fulfill, if only to a small degree, the definition of higher education being a right granted to all residents of the state of Connecticut, given the increasing costs of education and the lack of minimum wage increases to meet the financial strain.

[CSU-AAUP, Associate Professor, Maeve Doyle](#): Supports this bill because it would help support students who work long hours, in addition to 45 hours weekly on schoolwork. The benefit a bachelor's degree gives a student is great given the ability to advance one's career without needing to drop out of or reduce time in higher education.

[AFT CT, Field Representative, Daniel Durant Jr.](#): Supports this bill because it would make college more affordable for all and reduce inequality faced by financially needy and historically marginalized persons. And with these in place, the economic future of Connecticut is benefited with the increased amount of college graduates entering the workforce.

[AAUP, Higher Education for All, Emmaline-Hope Ebbeling](#): Supports this bill because it provides greater stability to those wishing to gain a bachelor's degree and benefit their post-graduation life with increased income, better health outlooks, and a greater satisfaction of self and family.

[Student Loan Fund, Current Student, Jordan Fabry](#): Supports this bill because it would help lessen student loan debt and address the greater debt crisis caused by these heightened loan costs for students across our state. This would act as an investment in our students and residents and better our state's economic future.

[CCSU TRiO, Student and Part-Time Employee, Tyler Farnsworth](#): Supports this bill given the great dividends of benefit a bachelor's degree gives those who attain them, and that this bill, in increasing access to these degrees, therefore benefits all residents in the state of Connecticut who wish to get a degree and improve their lives.

[CT CPUSA, Chair, Joelle Fischmann](#): Supports this bill as it allows expanded enrollment to those students who are currently barred by financial difficulties from attending university and allow those students to achieve their goals while lowering the inequality inherent in the financial barring of access to said higher education for those who need this financial aid most.

[Student Loan Fund, Current Student Rachel Fournier](#): Supports this bill and expresses ardent support for this bill due to the support it will give to those attending higher education amidst the year-on-year cuts seen to said institutions funding. This expanded funding to students in need will support the state financially as it will serve to help end the student debt crisis that threatens students, who are uncertain whether they are going to be able to attend and/or graduate from Connecticut's institutions of higher education.

[SCSU, Mikaela Franklin](#): Supports this bill as it increases our state's resident's financial freedom by keeping our state's educational prowess high and said educational affordable and accessible to all people, especially low income and historically marginalized individuals who need these expanded financial aid programs.

[CSU-AAUP, Visiting Assistant Professor, Ricardo Friez](#): Supports this bill as it would reduce the debt incurred by students and make college more affordable for all. With more graduates, this petitioner states that with higher critical thinking skills gained in universities, these

students would be a great asset to the state of Connecticut's workforce and hence, a boon to all parties if passed.

[Rakeem Fuller](#): Supports this bill citing a personal experience where the PACT program was vital in funding his experience at Gateway Community College. But he stresses that the current funding granted to the PACT program is insufficient, and limits education to only such community colleges and bars him from transferring to a more intensive Connecticut State University, which he wishes to do. The expansion of these programs to all CSU's would make this dream a reality for him and many others, and make their experiences overall more affordable and thus, increase the rates of graduation and future success post-graduation.

[Timothy Gabriele](#): Supports this bill citing prior attempts at making Connecticut's higher education system freer and more affordable which were met with great success. This bill would build on those attempts and make Connecticut on the whole benefit greatly from a highly educated populace in a more equitable and fair way pursuant to lessened barriers to enrollment and financial aid in this state.

[Hartford Federation of Teachers, President, Carol Gale](#): Supports this bill because it ensures higher education affordability, provides benefits of a bachelor's degree to more residents, improves quality of life, decreases inequality, and is an investment in the state's economic and educational future.

[SCSU, Support PACT Expansion, Litzzy Garcia](#): Supports this bill as it will allow them, and countless other students pay for their education and get good, well-paying jobs after they graduate with less debt to service.

[SCSU College Democrats, President, Tom Gilbertie](#): Supports this bill because it would help many seek and achieve a degree with little or no debt. And is effective, citing research by the Upjohn Institute, showing that with a \$20 million investment of funds by this bill, a great magnitude of persons will be benefited and graduate with degrees, joining the workforce, and benefiting our state as a result.

[Mrs. Ashley Gilbey](#): Supports this bill because it allows greater access to those in need of greater financial aid to a bachelor's degree, that statistically benefits them greatly in the future compared to only receiving an associate degree or no degree at all.

[Ms. Pearl Granat](#): Supports this bill and positing that, by supporting our students, many of whom are working class and/or from working class backgrounds, it serves as a boon for the state of Connecticut itself by providing more graduates and giving our young people a better chance of attaining these degrees at an affordable rate, compared to their current situation without this legislation.

[Student Loan Fund, Current Student, Ava Grano](#): Supports this bill citing it as an imperative investment in the future of our state's young people and all who wish to go to college and get a degree, and therefore work in better paying jobs, many of whom will stay in state and provide a boon for our economy.

[CCSU, Assistant Professor, Asley Green](#): Supports this bill as it provides greater affordability to all those who wish to get a bachelor's degree in our state.

[Sikorsky Aircraft, Senior Hardware Engineer, Thomas Grimes](#): Supports this bill because it will benefit those in need of these funds in getting better jobs, higher quality of life, and overall, a better outlook for future life with a bachelor's degree, made affordable by this bill.

[Leslie Gross Wyrzten](#): Supports this bill due to the heightened cost of higher education and this bill's intent of alleviating such stress for the betterment of all students in this state.

[Student Loan Fund, Current Student, Camden Haid](#): Supports this bill because it acts as a buffer to the constant cutting of resources to institutions of higher education and makes them more affordable to attend by all residents, but also especially providing support to those in need of financial aid.

[CCSU, Student, Kiara Hamblin](#): Supports this bill as it expands opportunities to all residents of the state of Connecticut and alleviates the threat debt has on those attending university by making the pursuit of higher education more affordable.

[Annie Harper](#): Supports this bill because it makes education more affordable for all and lessens the strains of debt accrued during that pursuit.

[AFL-CIO, President, Ed Hawthorne](#): Supports this bill as it will help increase the current 38% of students attending Connecticut Community Colleges who go on to achieve a four-year degree. And with such an increase of four-year college and community college graduates, all sectors will benefit from their higher knowledge level and greater acumen as they become employed in the workforce.

[WCSU SGA, Ian Hendrie](#): Supports this bill based on the efficacy of the bill and in it's aims to reduce the average \$110,000 of debt, and total \$18.3 billion dollars of student debt owed by Connecticut residents.

[CCSU, Student, Jackson Jones-Hill](#): Supports this bill as it grants students like them the ability to support their family and parents better and be more financially sound compared to not having access to these financial aid programs.

[Traci Ianni](#): Supports this bill, positing that higher education access is a right for all persons, no matter their background or financial means.

[Owen Ibey](#): Supports this bill and grant access to the more than 13,000 persons the Marry Ann Handley (Previously PACT) program in attaining a bachelor's degree without the crippling debt many go into to achieve such aims.

[Kate Jackson](#): Supports this bill because it opens access to education to those in need of financial aid and grants them the ability to achieve a bachelor's degree, helping them succeed statistically more post-graduation than without these programs in place and mounting debt.

[SCSU, Library Faculty Member, Amy Jansen](#): Supports this bill because it alleviates financial burden on students who need this financial aid and allows them to focus more on their academics and not worrying about how they are going to pay for their education.

[Shyhiem Jones](#): Supports this bill because it allows students to focus more on academics and not having to work multiple jobs during their collegiate careers to pay for their education.

[Student Loan Fund, Stefan Keller](#): Supports this bill citing the support it gives to all students in financial need, reduces debt accrued in attaining a college degree, and the bulwark it provides against the reduction of funding found in recent years leveled against vital institutions of higher education.

[Student Loan Fund, EHS Coach, Debra Kelly](#): States that they would like to get a master's degree so that they can advance in their career but they are unable to afford it as they are trying to pay off their current loans. States that the high cost of Connecticut state universities are causing people to look for schools out of state thus losing them from the state workforce and that access to the PACT fund could prevent that. States that this would ensure that Connecticut state university students complete their education without crushing debt.

[CSU-AAUP, Member, Audra King](#): States as a professor she knows students who are having issues with working to support themselves and their families while trying to earn their degrees and for that reason the Mary Ann Handley Award expansion would change lives. States that currently only 62% of community college graduates go on to earn a bachelor's degree. Claims that the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics "projects that two-thirds of the nation's fastest-growing jobs will require a Bachelor's degree in the next decade". Believes that PACT can be the solution to keeping students in school while alleviating their financial stressors and strengthening the state and it's economic future.

[Susan Klein](#): States that funding students who can least afford higher education is a crucial step to improving their futures.

[Charter Oak State College, President, Ed Klonoski](#): Suggests that the expansion extend to include Charter Oak State College. States that Charter Oak State College serves students who require flexible schedules and affordable options as many of their students are working professionals seeking career advancement. Believes that expanding the Mary Ann Handley Award to include Charter Oak State College would provide direct benefits to the state's workforce and help people access higher education needed to thrive in today's economy.

[Southern Connecticut State University, Assistant Professor, Joshua Knickerbocker, DNP, MBA, FNP-C](#): States that as a nurse educator they see students unable to afford basic living expenses while going through the rigorous required course work and clinical hours and because of this financial instability, some students drop out. Believes that this is particularly concerning because of Connecticut's nursing shortage, and major employers require a Bachelor of Science in Nursing or a four-year degree to consider applicants, but community colleges do not offer these degrees. States that expanding the Mary Ann Handley Award will "allow more students to graduate on time, pass licensing exams, and enter the workforce prepared to meet Connecticut's growing healthcare demands". Believes that this would be an investment in students and the public health of our state.

[Central Connecticut State University, Student, Henry Krawski](#): States that they currently work for minimum wage and is only able to pay for everyday expenses. Believes that expanding the Mary Ann Handley Award will help the future students to pursue higher education.

Student, Baden Krisst: States that the Mary Ann Handley Award expansion would help students to complete their education without crippling debt.

Central Connecticut State University, Student, Julissa Lacen: States that this bill would give more residents opportunities to advance themselves.

Eastern Connecticut State University, ECSU-AAUP Chapter President, Dr. Lyndsey Lanagan-Leitzel: States that as a professor they have seen students try to balance being a full-time student and work and that it has consequences for their learning because it can cause them to burn out. Believes that the widespread use of food pantries on campus shows that many students need food assistance. Believes that the prospect of acquiring student loans may turn students away from low paying career paths like behavioral health. Believes that this bill could improve the future of our state for student's outcomes and the economy.

CT State Tunxis, Student, Natalia Lopez: States that before receiving PACT funding, they were a full time student and worked full time, but since receiving funding in their second year, they were able to work less and spend more time on their studies. They state that they are transferring to a four-year university but are unsure how they will do without similar financial assistance.

Henry Lowendorf: States that they attended the University of Michigan in 1960 and that their tuition was \$400 a semester, and they were able to study without working all year round or taking out loans. Believes that higher education should be funded by the state.

American Association of University Professors, national Vice President, Rotua Lumbantobing: Believes that "every Connecticut resident deserves to get a four-year college degree without going into debt". States that majority of students at Connecticut state universities are black, brown and white working class individuals who have been historically disadvantaged in education and this bill could uplift first generation college students and lower-income students. Believes that this bill could reduce equity and improve the quality of life in our state.

Central Connecticut State University, Student, Keysa Mateo: States that many people can't afford college and that they would not have gone this far into their educational career without financial aid. States that they know students who take time off to save money for the next semester, and some don't end up coming back. Believes that with this bill more residents can receive the benefits that come with earning a bachelor's degree, including "higher income, better health, longer lives, and family and job satisfaction". They believe that this bill could help the state's workforce shortages and better the economy thus strengthening our communities.

Wesleyan University, Librarian, Rebecca McCallum: States that bachelor's degrees bring the benefit of higher income, better health outcomes, and better family and job satisfaction. Believes that this bill would reduce the amount of residents who amass large debt and improve their lives.

CSU-AAUP, Member, Michelle Stoehr-McCarthy: States that as a professor at Southern Connecticut State University they see students working full time to get their degrees. States

that as an adjunct professor, they work largely with freshman who are eager to learn but fearful of not being able to afford to complete their degrees. They relay an anecdote of a student who was unable to afford to live on campus or purchase a laptop so they worked in the library after class and bussed into town everyday which has made it so she is unable to participate in campus life and "severely reduced her ability to see herself continuing at Southern". Believes that this bill would improve educational outcomes for Connecticut's future tax payers.

2025 Connecticut Teacher of the Year, Julia Miller: States that as a high school teacher in New Haven, many of their students are first generation college students that could use the support of the expanded Mary Ann Handley Awards, especially with the current threat against the federally subsidized loans. States that the state has a teacher shortage and these programs providing greater access to bachelor's degrees can help fix it.

Yale School of Public Health, Graduate Researcher, Campbell Mitchell: States that they had chronic health issues during their time in college but does not believe they were the hardest working student due to their classmates holding multiple jobs, carrying for family members or re-establishing themselves after serving in the military. States that this bill would be a step towards ensuring equal access to higher education, and makes Connecticut a competitive place for business and research as they can personally attest to the value of the state university system as a launching point for careers in research.

Eastern Connecticut State University, Student, Kaleb Mlynarski: States that they work as a waiter to support themselves but took out numerous student loans. States that they come from a low income family with a single mother who is a teacher who utilizes food assistance. States that this bill has shown to help increase enrollment graduation rates among participating students, and that it could be the first step toward investing in a "world-class higher education system".

Eastern Connecticut State University, Student, Richard Mongero: States that this tuition assistance would be a public good and believes it should be offered to anyone trying to obtain a degree. States that this undergraduate financial assistance would be greatly beneficial to them as they want to attend law school after. Believes that this bill could encourage more students to pursue graduate degrees and higher.

Southern Connecticut State University, Student, Kiara Morris: States that as a student they are on a payment plan and working around class times, but typically choose work over school. Believes that if this bill passes it will help them in many ways and allow them to have a future.

Southern Connecticut State University, Student, Alex'Cia Murphy: States that they worked a full time job and a part time job during their first semester as a freshman with a full course load, which caused their grades to suffer. Believes that this bill would improve the lives of students going through similar situations.

Southern Connecticut State University, Adjunct Professor, Allison Murphy: States that their students suffer financially, with their grades, and have health impacts from trying to juggle school and work. States that education works best when basic needs are met and when students face two or more economic hardships they have increased incentives to drop out.

States that in 2023, nearly 50% of Central Connecticut State University students stated in a survey that they were "worried that their food would run out before they had money to buy more". Believes that students would be able to concentrate more on their studies if this bill were to pass, and that they could complete their degree in a timely fashion.

[Southern Connecticut State University, Student, Natalie Ney:](#) Believes that Gen Z struggles with finances for many reasons which make saving money difficult compared to other generations at the same age. Believes that the benefits of a bachelor's degree should be attainable.

[CSU-AAUP, Member, John O'Connor:](#) States that this bill could increase enrollment at our higher education institutions and benefit our state through opening doors for students who were unable to pursue a bachelor's degree due to cost. Feels that the worst part of their job as a professor is to see students struggling with costs of education and states that they have seen many students leave due to inability to keep up with costs. States that with students who have food and housing insecurity issues, they usually have to work full time leading to lower GPA's. States that "According to the Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, implementing a tuition assistance program would bring about a 7% increase in CSU enrollment". States that our workforce shortage includes healthcare engineering and education, so helping students obtaining higher level degrees will help the economy.

[CSU-AAUP, Member, A. Fiona Pearson:](#) Relays an anecdote about a student who had to drop out and join the army since he was a caregiver for his nephew and not able to afford school from his full-time job. Believes that this bill would help students continue in their education and not have to drop out and help the state make higher education more accessible.

[Tania Peralta:](#) Believes that College should be affordable to all who work hard for a degree. States that many young people leave high school without thinking of college because it is unaffordable, and if they work to save money first, they may become committed to a job and not able to leave to go back to school. States that they know of people who have left the country to study medicine in other countries and stay there to work as doctors.

[CSU-AAUP, Member, Paul R Petrie:](#) States that as a professor they often see students attention on their studies affected by their personal and family obligations and the costs that force them to work. States that this bill would relieve current students of some financial stress and enable more students to pursue college education and to "to overcome the obstacles posed by CT's fourth-highest-in-the-nation in-state tuition fees". Believes that as a matter of social justice Connecticut needs to provide equal opportunity for higher education.

[Eastern Connecticut State University, Student, Yeinmy Pinales:](#) States that without scholarships they would not have been able to get their degree at a community college, but some of their friends aspired to go to college but their grades made them ineligible for scholarships. Believes that expanding the Mary Ann Handley Award will help students access affordable higher education.

[Eastern Connecticut State University, Student, Bill Probst:](#) States that their parents are unable to fully fund their education so they worked as a cashier and since their father passed

away they are unsure if they will be able to pay for their education. States that "only 15% of Connecticut community college students transfer to CSUs, and just 38% complete a bachelor's degree". Believes that the high cost of Connecticut State Universities are pricing student's out.

[Central Connecticut State University, Student, Cat Proper](#): States that this bill would have helped them when they were younger and figuring out what they wanted to do, and believes that this will help those who need more options after high school. States that when they transferred to Central Connecticut State University from Tunxis Community College they had more opportunities for financial aid, work study and had more access to faculty and thus more support.

[Southern Connecticut State University, Student, Janae Reid](#): States that without financial aid they wouldn't have been able to attend college. States that as a graduate assistant they work at the University Access Program Office with students who are navigating significant challenges on their education journey and they have seen how policies shape their opportunities and futures.

[Wesleyan University, Professor of Religion & Science, Mary-Jane Rubenstein](#): Supports.

[SCSU-AAUP, Council Representative, Kristie Rupp, PhD, ACSM-CEP](#): States that "this past fall semester ('24), CT State Community College reported a 4% increase in year-over-year growth, the first since 2012" and that "Approximately 67% of CT State students benefit from the PACT program, demonstrating the reach of the PACT program and its success in increasing accessibility to a high-quality community college education". Believes that Connecticut should follow New York and Massachusetts' in establishing debt-free college for their most in-need residents.

[Student, Nate Ryzak](#): States that with tuition and other fees it is hard to go to school and that many of his peers get jobs that interfere with their education or have their education deferred and that this bill would help students in similar situations.

[Mabel Saccomanno](#): Believes that like their own family, many families in Connecticut have not had an income increase proportionate to the increase in higher education. States that the economic future of the state will improve if more people have access to higher education.

[Central Connecticut State University, Student, Milton Salmon](#): States challenges that they have faced with the higher education system.

[CSU-AAUP, Member, Timothy Scott](#): States that having a bachelor's degree is a determining factor in one's financial and health outcomes, and because student who are low income must work while accumulating student debt contributes to a public health crisis. States that as a professor they see students leave without completing their degree due to financial constraints.

[Connecticut For All, Organizing Director, Constanza Segovia](#): Suggests that these types of programs include students regardless of immigration status in the future. Believes that this bill will help students who otherwise wouldn't consider pursuing higher education.

[Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, Senior Policy Officer, Chris Senecal](#): States that this bill could help infuse our state's economy with educated and talented young people. States that their organization also has scholarships for college students.

[Southern Connecticut State University, Coordinator, B.A. in TESOL with Teacher Certification, Anastasia Sorokina, PhD](#): States that as an educator they see first hand the financial barriers for students pursuing higher education, "particularly in high-need fields such as TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)". States that there is an urgent need and a shortage of teachers with such certification and that this affects multilingual learners but this bill could help fill that critical need.

[CT For All, Organizer, Obed Sierra](#): Supports this bill because it would invest in the future of students, and address widening racial and socioeconomic wealth gaps in Connecticut. It is argued that Connecticut is one of the wealthiest states in the country and thus has the resources to provide students access to debt-free, high quality public education.

[Eastern Connecticut State University, Student, Grayson Snyder](#): Supports this bill because it would provide crucial funding to the state college system, which is essential for the state's workforce and wellbeing. The petitioner highlights his financial challenges as a student at a higher education institution in Connecticut, a crisis that is many students face, and which is growing in the state. The bill would provide students the opportunity to engage in their studies without added financial strain and increase enrollment and graduation rates statewide.

[Eastern Connecticut State University, Student, Tyler Simao](#): Supports this bill because it would reduce the financial burden of student loans on both students and parents. The petitioner emphasizes how the debt from his undergraduate education has impacted both him and his family negatively. Student debt remains an ongoing crisis, and this legislation would provide much-needed relief by making higher education more affordable and accessible.

[Brad Sheridan](#): Believes this legislation would increase access to education benefit and improves society, even though he would not directly benefit.

[Student, Tremain Stephens](#): States that as a first year student in the Connecticut State University system, they have faced challenges, especially with finding a part time job because of the competition with other students and because the jobs available are not enough to make meaningful contribution to their tuition and fees. States that this expansion to the MAHA program would be beneficial for students like them who want to balance their educational success with financial responsibility.

[Southern Connecticut State University Chapter of AAUP, Treasurer, Stephen Monroe Tomczak, Ph.D., L.M.S.W](#): States that Connecticut State Universities have been relying more on tuition for funding, tuition costs have gone up and more students have been priced out of them. States that tuition was affordable when they attended southern in the 1980s. Believes that this bill would help students have better access to higher education and the economic future of Connecticut.

[Central Connecticut State University, President, Zulma R. Toro](#): States that this bill would be a critical step toward making higher education more accessible and equitable. States that if

this legislation passes it could mean 40 low income students are able to attend Central Connecticut State University for their Bachelor's degree without debt.

[Southern Connecticut State University, Christopher E. Trombly, Ph.D.](#): Believes that the students who study at the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities stay in Connecticut after they graduate, and that they then earn more and pay more in taxes, thus helping the state economy. States that this bill could help alleviate the shortage in education and healthcare.

[SCSU-AAUP, Professor, Christine Unson](#): Supports this bill given its support for students, especially those caring for families while paying for university. And specifically, at SCSU, this petitioner reports that the expansion of this program would increase enrollment in their Public Health Program, which will thus help the state in its own public health workforce when they graduate and become employed, many of whom in the state of Connecticut.

[Student Loan Fund, Member, Borrower, Fahd Vahidy](#): Supports this bill because it would provide a bulwark against increasing cuts to education funding and increasing course overload by supporting students financially, making sure they can focus on learning and not on finances to pay for their education.

[Student Loan Fund, Current Student, Gabriel Villalba](#): Supports this bill citing the threat of education funding cuts and the debt crisis that has ensued for college students.

[CSU-AAUP, Wendy Wallace](#): Supports this bill because it will allow more students to get a bachelor's degree with less debt, and in effect, improve their quality-of-life post-graduation by increasing their earnings and financial stability with less student loans to service. In addition, this bill will also decrease inequality and promote economic growth and community life through more active and engaging working residents who are highly educated in our state.

[Student Loan Fund, Current Student, Elijah Waring](#): Supports this bill as it provides affordability for students and supports education as well as reducing the threat posed by the increasing student loan debt crisis.

[AAUP-WCSU, WCSU, Vice President WCSU, Wynn Wilcox](#): Supports this bill due to the support it will give folks in our state at completing their education, and the state itself, as 90% of students at WCSU stay in Connecticut post-graduation for work, all with much less debt.

[CSU-AAUP, Professor, Louise Williams](#): Supports this bill as it is vital for the stability and financial support of our state's residents to attain a degree at an affordable rate. Many universities, including the CSU's, are facing financial hardship from increasing inflation and funding cuts, which makes them less able to provide scholarships and financial aid on their own to students in need. The expansion of the Marry Ann Handley program to all state institutions of higher education would alleviate these problems and provide a pathway to a degree and better career advancement for all resident students of this state, and therefore, according to this petitioner's research, the state will see a \$6.2 billion increase in taxable income from current CSU graduates, with an increased rate of graduations given the expansion of this act, that number will only rise, benefiting the state's coffers and the workforce as this influx of graduates become employed locally.

[CCSU, Student, Tyler Ye](#): Supports this bill citing the benefit to students in completion of their college careers without the need of worry regarding finances, and the boon an increase in highly educated graduates will be to our state's workforce.

[SEIU CT State Council, Deputy Director, Stacy Zimmerman](#): Supports this bill because it will help to lower inequality and poverty in our state by providing higher affordability to the attainment of a bachelor's degree for all residents, especially those coming from low income and/or historically marginalized communities. The benefit of a bachelor's degree also is important as, according to research provided by this petitioner, it is much less likely (only 10%) for those with a bachelor's degree, specifically for a case study of Hartford residents, to be impoverished, compared to 16% with associate degrees, 24% with only a high school diploma, and 40% of those without a high school diploma.

[Anonymous, Anonymous](#): Supports this bill due to the evidence it provides that our state elected officials are listening to their constituents who constantly express worry regarding the increasing cost of higher education, the constant cutting of support funding to said institutions, and the resulting overwhelming debt accrued by students in furtherance of their goal to achieve a degree. This bill would alleviate these concerns to a degree and be seen as a start to a larger goal of making higher education in the state of Connecticut affordable and attainable for all residents, no matter their socio-economic background.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None expressed.

Reported by: Megan Villanova

Date: 4/2/2025