

# Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

## JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No.:** SB-5

AN ACT CONCERNING HIGHER EDUCATION AFFORDABILITY AND

**Title:** ACCOUNTABILITY.

**Vote Date:** 2/27/2025

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable Substitute

**PH Date:** 2/20/2025

**File No.:**

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### SPONSORS OF BILL:

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee.

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### REASONS FOR BILL:

Committee Bill SB-5 intends to address the need of low-income college students in the state of Connecticut. This bill's expanding of access to the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship would, among other things, mandate that institutions of higher education be informed earlier in the semester as to the funds available to their eligible students, and therefore, distributing them more efficiently to those in need of them, via this increased notice.

In essence, this bill will address the needs of said students eligible for the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship and give them the opportunity to attend post-secondary education with adequate

state-provided financial aid, and it is theorized, with the increase of in-state college graduates, the employment pool within the state will be filled by these persons, providing a new and highly skilled workforce, which will widely benefit both our state's overall employment and economic sectors.

### **SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:**

The Substitute Language proposed for SB-5 also provides general grammatical edits and corrections to the committee bill.

It also specifically provides a clarification in Section 1, subsection (d) that the Office of Higher Education shall, no later than November the first of each year, adequately inform each institution of the specific amount of funds that their eligible students are entitled to under the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship program, compared to the previous deadline of April the first in the committee bill.

### **RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:**

[CSCU, Chancellor, Terrence Cheng](#): Supports this bill as it aligns with the Universities wish to provide affordable education to low-income students from Connecticut. However, he states that with the current fixed amount of \$4,500 per student designated by the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship could affect access to funding including its total, cost of programs, and unique financial circumstances faced by students. And it is emphasized that the Committee could find ways to uphold an equitable balance between funding and a student's individual demand.

[Office of Higher Education, Commissioner, Timothy Larson](#): Supports this bill because it can facilitate the early diffusion of funds to students as needed. However, it is professed that need-merit scholarships need certain safeguards put in place require earlier notice to students about their scholarship eligibility, ensuring that students are aware of their award status well in advance of their final decision which institution to attend.

### **NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

[Anonymous, Anonymous](#): Supports this bill because it assists low-income individuals financially in their college attainment. Specifically, as a high school student, this individual has reservations knowing the cost of college, and hopes that the scholarship fund will assist them in achieving their goals.

[University of Saint Joseph, President, Rhonda Free](#): Supports this bill because it is a help to students at the University receive funds, about 60% of whom are eligible to receive said funds from this scholarship yet did not receive it in FY23. Importantly they also mention the financial hardships the University has gone through lately, and how this bill will help ease the burden on not only on the student's benefiting from the bill, but the institutions teaching them as well. And finally, that with this increased accessibility to financial aid, it will create incentive for Connecticut residents to attend post-secondary education and ultimately stay and work in-state.

[CBIA, Public Policy Associate, Jenna Grasso](#): Supports this bill because it provides access to those who have no access currently to post-secondary education to attain a degree and help fill the 75,000 job openings in our state. And it will see a bump in funding making sure that more than the 40% of Connecticut students who were able to receive said grants in FY 23 are able to receive them now.

[Fairfield University, President, Marc Nemec](#): Supports this bill because it extends access to funding for historically underrepresented and disenfranchised members of society for a post-secondary education. He also espouses that at Fairfield University itself, usage of their own Fairfield Bellarmine program, which assists persons in need of financial aid in areas like Bridgeport to attain a post-secondary education like the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship does for those in need. It is thus posited that this bill would strengthen the bond between both private institutions, like Fairfield University, utilizing their own scholarship programs for those in need, augmented by the increased state support for those attending state institutions of higher education.

[Sacred Heart University, President, John Petillo](#): Supports this bill because a proposed hike in funding for scholarships for students would attract and retain students at higher rates than without such an increase. Also, such scholarships would reduce the financial burden on students who, having used all grant and scholarship money available to them under the current status quo, would be able to, under this bill's statutes, be less dependent on educational loans which are beyond their means.

[Hartford Foundation, Senior Public Policy Officer, Chris Senecal](#): Supports this bill because it would provide greater economic mobility for students looking to enter and complete higher education in the state, and therefore, gain better employment as a result.

[Yale University](#): Supports this bill because it makes students not only more able to pay for their post-secondary education, but also able to plan their educational journey more thoroughly due to the requirement for funding notification to be distributed to eligible parties one semester in advance.

[Anonymous, Anonymous](#): Supports this bill because it provides a path to affordable education in the state. And as the costs of education grow year on year, it seems ever more daunting to pay off debt incurred by students in higher education. This bill will greatly reduce this burden and, particularly, assist those of lower income statuses and their families in their aspiration to complete post-secondary education.

[Albertus Magnus College, Director of Financial Aid, Christina Byrd](#): Supports this bill because it will give accessibility to higher education to particularly low-income students and thus assist them in achieving their goals. At Albertus Magnus College itself, 560 individuals receive such grants, but due to the status of the scholarships addressed in this bill, they struggle to make choices regarding their education due to financial difficulty. With this bill, those shall be alleviated and invest in the future of Connecticut's students.

[Senate Democrats](#): Support this bill because it will prevent our state from missing out on funding the futures of many low-income students. With the bill proposed, the state's workforce will become higher skilled and thus strengthen our local economy and its overall health.

[4 C's. SEIU 1973, President, Seth Freeman](#): Supports this bill because it supports accessibility to higher education for our local students and promotes economic growth in our state through heightened levels of said education.

[ECSU, Student, Michael Hemmings](#): Supports this bill because it would give many students a chance to complete their collegiate careers free of worry about financial costs and focus fully on their academics and personal growth.

[Connecticut Senate, Senate President Pro Tempore, Sen. Martin Looney](#): Supports this bill because it assists our states students in need of financial aid and, through its deadline of May 1<sup>st</sup> of the fall semester, focuses the distribution of funds to students earlier and thus, in a timely manner to those students who qualify for the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship.

[Quinnipiac University, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid, Karissa Peckham](#): Supports this bill because it seeks to grant more access to students for financial aid and give universities more notice to include the Willis grants in their financial aid package. They also emphasize that Connecticut, as it stands today, is majorly lacking in state-funded financial aid support for its college students, which negatively impacts the future of students and growth and prosperity of the state. And that this legislation would be a fortuitous first step into addressing that shortcoming and invest in our students' academic and career futures.

[University of Hartford, Executive Director of Financial Aid, Katherine Presutti](#): Supports this bill because it would address a problem faced by the University, whereas in academic year 2024-2025, the University only received \$713,463 from the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship program. Due to the lack of funds provided, the University was unable to distribute the funds to all eligible students on their campus for that year, leaving them in financial need. With this legislation's mandate on a specific date no less than one full semester before the scholarship funds are distributed detailing the full amount of funds to be allotted, the University would better be able to equitably distribute said funds to those in need at the University.

[Connecticut Education Association, Education Issues Specialist, Elizabeth Sked](#): Supports this bill because it combats the heightening cost of post-secondary education and provides an ability for students to achieve a better future and develop a highly skilled and educated workforce in the state of Connecticut. Also, it demonstrates the state's commitment to providing equal opportunities for all students who need this aid.

[CCIC, President, Jennifer Widness](#): Supports this bill because it will put Connecticut on par with other states who invest in their college students, such as New Jersey and New York. In addition, currently, "Connecticut ranks 44th in the country for the percent of state funding for higher education allocated to student aid at just 3%. The state spends only \$400 in student aid per student enrolled, while the national average is \$1,180 per student." The increase of funding will help lessen the state's equality gap for those attending and after attending post-secondary education. And finally, with increased training and employing of individuals who receive funds from the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship, a new and highly educated workforce in the state which would otherwise not have completed their post-secondary education and gotten jobs in the state given their financial needs.

## **NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

None expressed.

**Reported by: Tom Atwood**

**Date: 3/18/2025**