

Justis Lopez Testimony

HB 6813 AN ACT REQUIRING TRANSPARENCY OF EXPENDITURES BY THE HIGHER EDUCATION FOUNDATIONS

HB 5484 AN ACT REQUIRING AUDITS BY THE AUDITORS OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS OF FOUNDATIONS ESTABLISHED FOR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

SB 230 AN ACT CONCERNING THE FUNDS AND RECORDS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT FOUNDATION

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

Good morning. My name is Justis Lopez, from Manchester, Connecticut and I'm a graduate student in the NEAG School of Education at the University of Connecticut. I'm honored to be offering testimony today to this legislative committee which oversees an area – higher education – for which is very near to my heart. I hope my perspective on philanthropy and the important role that it's playing in transforming my life will be of value to this committee as it considers legislative proposals which would impact the UConn Foundation.

Without philanthropy, I would not be on the verge of graduating from UConn with a Master's Degree and about to realize my dream of being a public school teacher. My family comes from humble beginnings and is not wealthy. I knew early on that I would need to work incredibly hard and earn scholarships if I were to become the first person in my family to graduate from college, let alone graduate school.

One of the happiest days of my life was learning that I had not only been accepted to the NEAG School but that I had secured the financial support from UConn to actually attend. Generous donors to the Foundation gave me this opportunity, but I understood that what I did with it was up to me.

Since I first arrived at UConn I have been determined to show those who believed in me that I was a good investment. I have facilitated the growth of more than 150 first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds like myself, served as a peer mentor advisor, experienced an 'alternative' spring break helping the disadvantaged in Atlanta, studied World War II and the Holocaust in Germany, and taught English and special education to public school students. This year I was seriously struggling to pay for a master's degree in addition to paying off undergraduate student loans, and I was offered a graduate assistantship to help alleviate this stress through the support of donors. I currently work as a graduate assistant in the Dean's Office as part of a national initiative to improve diversity in teaching.

I like to say that I am the spirit of the university, as I have had the opportunity to serve as Jonathan the Husky and train new Jonathans throughout the process.

My experience at UConn has been a dream come true, and this would not have been possible without my scholarships. This is why I feel compelled to lend my voice to the discussion over the

UConn Foundation. I am not a public policy expert or a professional fundraiser I am a student who is thankful for those who have paved the way for me to be where I am today. I am concerned that the legislation may change an organization that is successfully supporting students.

I'm just one of 10,000 students at UConn who receive some type of financial aid. We all know that the need for aid is going to increase as UConn expands enrollment while keeping its commitment to admitting top-notch students, regardless of their financial background.

I'm fortunate to have received the help I needed. Now I will continue to pay it forward and advocate for others who are still waiting for their life to be transformed. I believe in this cause and I'm helping the Foundation promote its new scholarship initiative; the goal is to double the amount raised for scholarships and fellowships over the next five years.

If donors are no longer comfortable giving to the UConn Foundation, I'm worried that they will simply choose other charitable organizations to support. I don't know what the impact would be on students, like myself, if legislation is passed that eliminates donor confidentiality or undermines the Foundation's independence. But I hope that you do. I ask that you fully understand all the potential consequences before you take any action. There is too much at stake with the future of our students to roll the dice on; I'm living proof of it.