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**Testimony for the
Appropriations Committee of
Jennifer Widness, President
Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges
February 10, 2016**

On behalf of the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges I am submitting testimony in opposition to **HB 5044, AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2017**, which seeks to cut and consolidate the Governor's Scholarship Program.

First, I want to start by saying thank you for your ongoing support of independent colleges in Connecticut by maintaining funding for need-based financial aid through the Governor's Scholarship Program despite significant fiscal challenges over the past few years.

We understand that very significant fiscal challenges remain. However, given those very challenges, maintaining funding for need-based financial aid to provide access and opportunity to higher education for low-income residents of this state is critically important and I hope that your commitment to maintain funding for this program will continue.

Our state has long been known as having one of the most well-educated workforces in the country, with nearly 50% of our residents holding an associate's degree or higher. However, according to Connecticut's Strategic Plan for Higher Education adopted by the legislatively created Planning Commission for Higher Education, projections indicate that by 2025 Connecticut's economy will require a workforce in which 70% have some education beyond high school. Hitting that 70% target will require production of 300,000 more graduates than the current rates of production will yield.

To meet that goal, we must work to close our degree attainment gap. The difference in college attainment levels between white and minority residents in this state is the third worst in the nation. If we have any chance of closing this gap, need-based financial aid has to continue to be a priority. Cuts to this program must be limited.

Albertus Magnus College
Connecticut College
Fairfield University
Goodwin College
Mitchell College
Quinnipiac University
Rensselaer at Hartford
Sacred Heart University
St. Vincent's College
Trinity College
University of Bridgeport
University of Hartford
University of New Haven
University of Saint Joseph
Wesleyan University
Yale University

Our second concern is in regards to granting the Office of Higher Education (OHE) full discretion to determine funding for the Governor's Scholarship program and the three funding streams within it by consolidating the line item with others in the agency's budget. Already, via statute, OHE has discretion to allocate funds within the three programs that comprise the Governor's Scholarship Program and this has posed significant challenges for students attending both public and private institutions of higher education. This year, the OHE used its discretion to fund the need-merit component of the program fully, grow the incentive component by 160%, and cut the need-based component of the program by \$3.6 million, from just one year to the next, despite only a small cut to the total funds allocated.

The impact on students attending independent colleges in Connecticut was significant. Need-based aid was reduced by nearly \$5 million or 40%, in just one year. To complicate things even more so, notification of these reductions was not received until early August, just weeks before the semester began. Most institutions covered these last minute cuts to students given the timing, but in the future, institutions will not be able to do so and the number of grants awarded to students attending independent institutions will be reduced dramatically.

Thankfully, the Student Financial Aid Working Group convened by Representative Roberta Willis had the opportunity to discuss these challenges this fall. Members of the Committee from both public and private institutions of higher education shared a similar desire for the program to be simplified, flexible and transparent as well as for allocations to be made earlier in the process so as to benefit Connecticut students and their families. The Governor's Scholarship Program serves the neediest of our state's population and these students and their parents need to have a sense from year to year what they can expect to receive. Providing OHE the discretion to make all decisions regarding the funding for the program and the various components it contains, will make it challenging for these objectives to be accomplished.

The independent colleges in Connecticut are committed to serving as partners with the state to provide low-income students access and opportunities. Please do not adopt the Governor's recommendations to cut and consolidate this program which will limit our capacity to do so.