



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

Office of Higher Education

Testimony
by
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before the
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
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Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Willis, Senator Flexer, Representative Lopes, Senator Witkos, Representative Betts, and distinguished members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony regarding H.B. No. 5071 (RAISED) AN ACT REQUIRING CONNECTICUT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STATE AUTHORIZATION RECIPROCITY AGREEMENT REGARDING DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS. As you are all aware, there have been lengthy discussions about this bill. We should not lose sight, however, that central to all of these discussions are Connecticut students and the Connecticut institutions that serve them. I want to be crystal clear: SARA and the for-profit education industry are inextricably intertwined. Joining SARA *will* allow for-profit institutions from across the country to recruit Connecticut students, and, at the same time, cede *all* state legal protections for these students. This is a fact.

To give a bit more background, the Office of Higher Education (OHE) has reservations about SARA for two reasons. First, SARA lowers academic quality. It provides no assurances that programs hold accreditation or that they meet the standards required of Connecticut students to obtain professional licenses. It also places no restrictions on for-profit education companies. The for-profit industry is even represented on SARA's national board. For-profit schools operating in states with little or no oversight would gain unfettered access to Connecticut students under SARA, and Connecticut's own protections would be nullified for out-of-state

schools. This is a fact, and one that those with a stake in SARA consistently push aside in favor of broad and general statements. At a time when a member of Connecticut's congressional delegation is seeking to restrict the proliferation of for-profit institutions and Connecticut's own attorney general's office is actively leading a subcommittee tasked with strengthening restrictions on for-profit education, our state cannot take a step backwards and abandon our students.

Second, SARA would require the OHE to give up its statutory obligation to protect students. Any Connecticut student harmed by a participating out-of-state college or university would be turned away from our Office and told to seek restitution in another state. Given the increasing number of predatory for-profits and "diploma mills," especially in a group of SARA states with especially lax oversight, this is simply unacceptable. The students who are most often harmed are the students most vulnerable to the aggressive online marketing and false advertising perpetuated by for-profits. Unfortunately, the weak quality assurance provided by SARA, which permits participation from institutions on probation, under investigation, or with heightened cash monitoring, increase the likelihood that these bad actors will take advantage of Connecticut students.

It is a reality that Connecticut's institutions of higher learning are facing a decline in enrollment at all levels, and this is especially felt by the community colleges. Diluting the market for our Connecticut institutions, both public and private, only helps outside institutions to gain access to Connecticut students. As I explained to you last year, data self-reported to our office by Connecticut's institutions shows clearly that any benefits to the institutions of increased out-of-state access would be minimal. Additionally, the costs to the institutions in fees paid out-of-state for participation are undergoing revision by the compact and may rise considerably when the

start-up grant funding this endeavor runs out. The costs to the state for administering the agreement, however, are not negligible and, by the terms of the agreement, could not be obtained from out-of-state institutions.

Because we fully understand the needs of some higher education institutions to participate in the online marketplace across state lines, we have developed and vetted a multistate reciprocity agreement in conjunction with other states that maintains state protections for students and high academic quality. Several states across the country share our concerns about SARA, including Massachusetts, New York, Minnesota, Maryland, Wisconsin and California. Unlike SARA, our agreement would not prevent the assessment of fees on out-of-state institutions, nor would it delegate our investigatory authority to another state. Our agreement would also allow us to target those states where institutions seek to gain access.

In our continuing conversations with Massachusetts, they shared with us this past Tuesday some recent dialogue and correspondence they have had with Michael Thomas, President and CEO of the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE). It appears that some of the concerns that both Massachusetts and Connecticut have expressed will be brought, by agreement, to SARA's national board for further discussion.

We appreciate the ongoing conversation and believe Connecticut should wait until these concerns are resolved. The residents of Connecticut deserve this further consideration.

Thank you.