



21 Talcott Notch Road
Farmington, CT 06032
860.678.0005
theccic.org

**Testimony for the
Higher Education & Employment Advancement Committee
Jennifer Widness, President
Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges
February 18, 2016**

On behalf of the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges I am submitting testimony in favor of two bills before you today: **S.B. 24, An Act Concerning Program Approval for Independent Institutions of Higher Education**, and **H.B. 5071, An Act Requiring Connecticut to Participate in the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement Regarding Distance Learning Programs**.

S.B. 24 seeks to exempt private, non-profit institutions of higher education from the academic program approval process administered by the Office of Higher Education (OHE) that:

1. maintain eligibility to participate in federal financial aid programs, and
2. have been located in the state and accredited as a degree-granting institution for ten years or more by a regional accrediting association recognized by the Secretary of the United States Department of Education and maintains such accreditation status.

By way of background, four of Connecticut's sixteen independent colleges have always been exempt from oversight by OHE because of the date of their charter (Yale, Wesleyan, Connecticut College and Trinity). This bill would impact the remaining twelve.

Public Act 13-118 passed by the General Assembly sought to streamline the program approval process for private institutions of higher education. CCIC's Member Institutions appreciate the expedited review timelines that OHE has put into place for independent colleges since that time. However, the process still consumes considerable time and resources. It continues to add costs and delays to curriculum development and reform. These costs diminish the opportunity for independent institutions to respond to student demand and to be responsive to the needs of our state's employers.

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

In addition, the 2013 law changed the process for our state's public colleges by no longer requiring any outside review of their new programs. Approval is required only of their own boards -- UConn and the Board of Regents, as applicable-- before starting new programs. Therefore the process for public institutions, who receive significant public support for their programs, have less outside oversight of their programs than the independents. This bill will level the playing field.

Connecticut's Strategic Plan for Higher Education, adopted by the legislatively created Planning Commission for Higher Education, recommends elimination of academic program approval by OHE. The Plan also recommends that Connecticut should move toward a system that reshapes state accountability requirements from control of inputs to clear expectations for performance related to state goals. We agree. The Planning Commission is in the process of establishing benchmarks and objectives for *all* of our state's higher education institutions, including CCIC Member Institutions, to ensure that we remain on track to respond to state goals and to compete in the regional and global economy. Therefore, CCIC Member Institutions will not be operating in a vacuum if this bill is passed.

CCIC Member Institutions are committed to being partners with the state in educating our future workforce and working with our state's employers to develop programs that will fill and grow higher paying jobs. Removing this regulatory barrier will help us to do so.

H.B. 5071, seeks to require Connecticut to join the nation-wide state authorization reciprocity agreement known as SARA. Joining SARA would then allow our state's colleges and universities the option of participating in SARA. It does not *require* that any Connecticut institution participate in SARA; it simply provides a much-needed option to do so.

Thirty-six states have joined the SARA agreement, including our neighbor, Rhode Island. New York has passed legislation to enable joining. The process to seek approval in all fifty states is both cost prohibitive as well as time consuming. Each state has different rules, policies, forms, fee structures and institutions need to spend significant resources to gain approval in each state. In fact, the process itself may prove an insurmountable barrier to creating and launching innovative online programs for some institutions.

Non-profit and public institutions of higher education are at a significant disadvantage with the current approval process as they do not have the time or resources to navigate it. Joining SARA will ultimately lead to even higher quality online programs available in this state. It also allows institutions to reach out to non-traditional populations with high quality distance education programs. As Connecticut's Strategic Plan for Higher Education has pointed out, Connecticut needs more post-secondary credentials earned by its adult population and quality online programs is one way to help meet that goal.

We are living in a time when higher education and the state are facing great challenges. This bill will provide Connecticut's colleges and universities with the flexibility to respond.

.