



# Sacred Heart UNIVERSITY

Testimony for  
The Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee  
By MaryLou Derosa, Vice Provost for Special Academic Programs  
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Good morning Chairs Willis and Bartolomeo and members of the Committee. My name is Mary Lou DeRosa, and I am Vice Provost at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield. I am here today on behalf of the H.B. No. 5071 (RAISED) AN ACT REQUIRING CONNECTICUT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STATE AUTHORIZATION RECIPROCITY AGREEMENT REGARDING DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS.

Sacred Heart University is engaged in distance education. The process of registering in all 50 states and US territories is costly, time consuming and requires consistent oversight. In an environment where the cost of higher education is of concern to families, these additional administrative costs would be eliminated with the approval of SARA. Thirty-six states have now joined the regional compacts of SARA, and others are moving legislation to join. This national reciprocity agreement not only provides simplification and standards for high quality but also provides students with access to accredited higher education in the US that is borderless.

Distance education is an inherent part of the strategic plan for Sacred Heart University and other institutions of higher learning. Our failure to join the New England compact puts us at a competitive disadvantage.

Our online programs are equivalent in every way to our seated programs, and our student outcomes are equivalent as well. We are proud of our ability to serve our students in formats that meet their needs for flexibility. We are also doing everything possible to contain costs and minimize post-graduation debt for our students. It is imperative that we are able to compete and provide these benefits to students from all states.

In reviewing the Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education in CT, it is important to note that education attainment for the adult population is the first goal. Online students comprise the majority of nontraditional or 21st-century students.

It is my hope that you will reconsider and do the right thing for all stakeholders in Connecticut. Online programs across the country are helping our citizens to attain a quality education. The current inefficient and costly regulations across states are barriers that SARA will eliminate.



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It is embarrassing to have our website inform students from certain states that they should not enroll in our nationally recognized, accredited programs. And, it is a difficult decision to write a check for \$10,000 to the state of Michigan to offer distance education to Michigan residents while knowing that Michigan is a SARA state.

This shortsightedness is stopping Connecticut institutions from competing with other states in the online arena. I'm sure we have all seen the ads for schools like Southern New Hampshire University on the television and the billboards on I-95 from out-of-state schools. It is vital for our state's economy and for our CT schools that we have the opportunity to offer programs and courses via distance education in an environment that is not onerous. More and more students are opting for online education as they try to juggle many responsibilities while getting an education. We need to meet their needs.

Distance education is not new, and it is not "less than." The quality assurance of higher education as valued by our various accrediting agencies creates the opportunity to offer our online offerings across the country. The economic viability of our state as an ecosystem for innovation, creativity and an educated workforce is reflected in decisions made about post-secondary education access. Why would we want to be one of the last states to make a decision that is simple common sense?

To recap, adoption of this bill will:

- Provide the option for CT institutions of higher ed to join SARA and compete for students in a borderless environment
- Reduce and eliminate the cost of managing state approvals
- Keep Sacred Heart and other CT institutions from having to deny students from enrolling
- Enable the SARA standards that encompass quality assurance and consumer protections
- Alleviate the perception of CT as a state that operates with a local mindset rather than exhibiting national leadership with the adoption of this initiative

SARA is important to our students, the state of Connecticut and the institutions within our state. I can think of no more compelling reasons to support the adoption of this bill.