



Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

Public Hearing

February 25, 2016

Testimony

by

Mona Lucas, Director of Student Financial Aid Services

&

Sally Reis, Vice-Provost

HB 5332 AN ACT CONCERNING THE GOVERNOR'S SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Mona Lucas Testimony

Members of the Committee, my name is Mona Lucas and I am the Director of Student Financial Aid Services at the University of Connecticut. I have with me Sally Reis, our Vice-Provost, who will be talking with you shortly about how critical merit aid is to the University of Connecticut.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the University concerning House Bill 5332, *An Act Concerning the Governor's Scholarship Program*.

We urge the Committee to retain the current need, need-merit and performance incentive components of the Governor's Scholarship program. The Governor's Scholarship and its predecessor the Capital Scholarship have been essential and critical components of the University's overall financial aid strategies to assist students and families with the costs of education and make UConn accessible and affordable. Both the need-based element and the need-merit and performance incentive elements have served Connecticut residents and UConn students well. We are very concerned with the prospect of reduced funding or the elimination of need-merit funds, a major recruitment tool for the University. Changes in the Governor's Scholarship will greatly diminish access and reduce the number of Connecticut residents whose dream of attending our 'flagship' institution are realized with the assistance of this program.

In this current year alone nearly 1,300 Connecticut residents received approximately \$6,000,000 in need-merit scholarships from the Governor's Scholarship program. If this funding was eliminated, the University would likely be unable to replace these scholarships given our current budgetary situation and the reductions, fundsweeps and rescissions we have had to absorb in the past 4 years. While some of this need-merit funding would ostensibly be transferred back into a new larger need-based pool, it is unclear at this time how much funding UConn would receive and which students would qualify to receive grants.

The merit aid provided by the Governor's Scholarship is supplemented by the University's institutional commitment to helping students and families afford the costs to attend. This year UConn awarded nearly \$70 million in institutionally controlled gift aid/grants – funds that students do not have to repay. These funds include need-based and merit scholarships which were awarded to 10,600 undergraduate students or 47% of our total students enrolled across all campuses. Of the nearly \$42 million awarded in need-based grants, nearly 70% was awarded to 7,575 Connecticut residents or 83% of the total recipients. Also, UConn awarded \$27 million in institutional funding for merit scholarships.

Although UConn's institutional commitment to financial aid is significant, many families would struggle to close the gap between cost of attendance and family contribution if it were not for the Governor's Scholarship and other outside awards. The Governor's Scholarship is awarded on top of institutional aid and, it goes a long way to not only reducing the financial gap but also decreases the amount of loan debt that students' and families must carry. As a result, UConn's average loan debt is approximately \$26,108, almost \$3,000 below the national average debt for public universities of \$29,000.

The bill also allows students taking just three credits to access grants. We are concerned that this will be a disincentive for students to complete their degrees in timely fashion. Additionally, given that UConn's student population is predominantly full-time, we believe that this change will disadvantage our students, particularly those with high-financial need.

The University is very thankful for the financial support that you have provided to UConn and strongly urges the Committee to make no changes to the Governor's Scholarship program. The financial impact of these changes would result in hundreds of UConn students receiving significantly LESS financial aid in the years to come in both the need-based and the need-merit/performance incentive components of the program.

I would now like to have Sally say a few words about how indispensable merit aid is to UConn's mission and achieving our goals.

Sally Reis Testimony

Members of the Committee, my name is Sally Reis and I am the Vice-Provost and a Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor at the University of Connecticut. Thank you for allowing me to share with you how important merit aid is to keeping high-achieving students from leaving our state.

The University takes seriously its role of attracting and retaining Connecticut's brightest students. As we all know, prior to 1995 and UConn 2000 our state was experiencing a "brain drain," losing many of our best students to out of state schools. UConn has helped reverse this trend by using merit aid – funded through both state dollars and institutional funds. Merit aid has enabled UConn to enroll increasing numbers of high-achieving and diverse students. We are proud to report that 50% of this year's Storrs freshman class was in the top 10% of their high school class. Since 1996, the University has more than quadrupled the amount of tuition and fee revenue set aside for financial need and merit based aid from \$17.4 million to \$70 million this year. With the strategic use of merit aid, UConn has been able to more than double the number of students enrolled in its Honors Program (2015 mean SAT of 1406) and attract 2,043 valedictorians and salutatorians since Fall 1995 enrolling 172 in Fall 2015 alone, ALL FROM CT (more than triple the number in 1995).

When I graduated from Torrington High School in CT in 1969, few academically talented students came to UConn. Most chose to attend other universities and colleges, almost always out of state. I've been very fortunate to be a faculty member at UConn since the 1980's and I have watched our transformation as we have developed one of the best Honors Programs in the country. We recruit and graduate the most academically talented students from Connecticut and from out of state. After these students graduate, most CT students remain in the state to attend medical, dental, and law school. They earn MBA degrees, become doctors, engineers, principals and school superintendents. They start businesses and emerge as the next generation of taxpayers, thinkers, innovators and problem-solvers in our state. As the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, I have the privilege of overseeing dozens of programs for first generation, high poverty students, foster care students, those who speak English as a second language, and those who need extra support to graduate. But I also lead, with my colleagues, our Honors and Enrichment Programs. Our Honors students conduct research in every content area and perform public service learning how to use their talents to make the world a better place.

The Governor scholarships we are testifying about today enable us to offer a world-class education to world-class students, who, without these scholarships, will attend places like Amherst, Harvard, UPenn and other ivy league schools. That is right, each year, we attract dozens of merit scholarship students who choose to attend UConn so that they can leave debt free, to enable them to be able to finance graduate school after college.

After graduation, our CT honors students, stellar young men and women across a wide variety of fields, most often (77% in our latest survey) remain in CT. Please help us to educate our state Talent Pool and continue to provide world-class public education at UConn, while we also work with those who need extra help. All of these students will contribute to our beloved state for years to come. In closing, I would like to echo Mona's comments and urge the Committee to reject any proposal to eliminate the need-merit component of the Governor's Scholarship. We need these scholarships to keep attracting and educating the most gifted students in our state.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Mona and I would be happy to answer any questions.