

Dear Members of the Higher Education Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Bennett Cognato; I am University of Connecticut student from Danbury, Connecticut. I am an elected student senator in the University's Undergraduate Student Government and have worked with Connecticut Students for a Dream as well as my colleagues in the student government to support undocumented students chance at an affordable education.

Therefore, I write this testimony in support of SB 147: AN ACT ASSISTING STUDENTS WITHOUT LEGAL IMMIGRATION STATUS WITH THE COST OF COLLEGE. This bill would equalize access to institutional financial aid at Connecticut public universities and colleges to all students regardless of immigration status.

We live in a state and country with highly polarized views on what exactly life should be like for undocumented people within our borders, especially with the upcoming elections. When you discuss whether or not to open up a pool of the University of Connecticut's financial aid to undocumented students remember that this aid is funded by 15% of all tuition revenue, including the tuition paid by undocumented students. It is a moral outrage to me and to many that the university expects these students to pay up for financial aid they are not even able to apply for.

For me, I was born to white middle class parents in Danbury, and in my years of exceptional public schooling I've never once had to question my access to any institution because of my citizenship. I consider that to be a huge privilege; I've never had to change anything about myself to achieve my goals and plans for the future and neither have my family members. Undocumented students don't share in that same privilege, and while we all know there are many challenges undocumented families face outside of paying the cost of college tuition, allowing access to the University of Connecticut's financial aid is a necessary and important change we can make right now.

All students should have equal access to higher education, regardless of socioeconomic or immigration status. In 2016, it is still far too expensive for many families to easily afford even a public university like the University of Connecticut on their own. However, to seemingly exacerbate this already glaring injustice, low-income undocumented students in Connecticut are barred from receiving the financial aid that they help to pay into.

Next year, I will be joining Connecticut's workforce as an elementary school teacher, and so it pains me to think of conversations I may have with undocumented students of mine years down the line. I can't think of a single reason for explaining to them why they are expected to pay for the financial aid of all students other than themselves. I can't think of a single reason for explaining to them why the University of Connecticut and this state don't value them as students. I can't think of a single reason for explaining to them why they are not worthy of a good education. Please don't push our state down this path.

Equalizing access to aid for undocumented students will cost Connecticut taxpayers not even a single cent. With your vote, you can tell undocumented students and families clearly that you value them, and that you won't stand by quietly as they are priced out of the best education the University of Connecticut and others have to offer. All students deserve an education.

Thank you for work and review of my testimony. I support SB 147 and hope the committee will vote favorably on it.

Thank you for your time,  
Bennett G. Cognato