

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

My name is Carolina Bortolletto from Danbury. I am undocumented and I am a graduate of Western Connecticut State University. I am one of the co-founders of the organization CT Students for a Dream. **I write 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.

I have lived in Danbury, CT with my family for the past 18 years. I moved to Danbury from Brazil when I was 9 years old.

I was always knew I was undocumented, but I didn't see myself as different from the rest of my classmates. In high school, however, the reality of my status quickly began to put up barriers. I began to realize that many other American milestones were beyond my reach, that because of my status, my life would be limited. Soon I would feel my status begin to gnaw away at my self-worth and independence.

I knew that because of my status, I was not eligible for financial aid or for scholarships. But this didn't discourage me and I ended up graduating in the top 5% of my class. I applied to a bunch of colleges, just to see if I would get accepted, knowing full well that there was no way I could afford them. I took my college acceptance letters and kept them as mementos of a high school career well done.

I thought it was unfair. Why couldn't I have a life like everyone else? But then, my hard work did pay off, I was able to attend Western Connecticut State University. But I was disheartened and very confused that living 5 minutes away from campus for 10 years, I would have to pay out of state tuition.

See, this was in 2006, before the In State Tuition Law for Undocumented passed. I didn't know I would have to pay the out of state tuition rate until I had already registered for classes and got the bill at home. I thought the school had made a mistake. To me, there was no doubt that I was a CT resident, I had lived 5 minutes from campus for the past 10 years, I attended CT schools since 4th grade, and my parents had paid their income taxes every single year.

I promptly marched down to the admissions office to kindly inform them of their mistake. That was when I learned. I lacked a social security number, I was told, "until you get a greencard, there is nothing we can do, and maybe you should re-think pursuing a college education". I was angry, but I was also motivated. I had experienced injustice and I was not going to take it lying down.

Luckily, I had a few professors who believed in me, and fought for me to receive merit based aid from WCSU. Although my scholarships only covered the in state rate, and my parents had to bring money from Brazil to pay for the remainder of the out of state rate, I was able to start school, and graduate.

I graduated with honors in 2010 with a BA in Biology and minors in Anthropology and International Relations, with the distinction of being the "top graduating biology student of the year".

Later that year, I co-founded CT Students for a Dream, a statewide organization that advocates for the rights of undocumented students in CT. Together, we passed the 2011 In State Tuition Law, while too late for me, it has helped hundreds of students since.

I then became the College Access Program Coordinator for CT Students for a Dream, and met dozens of undocumented students and parents every semester who could not afford even a single semester at a CT Community College, despite being able to pay in state tuition.

I know the only reason why I was able to receive a college education is because of the merit scholarships I was able to receive. But most people are not that lucky. And luck should have nothing to do with your ability to pursue education. That should be determined by your motivation and skill. Sadly, too many talented, determined students face barriers they cannot overcome when there are zero options to help them get a college education. Especially when most undocumented families are low income and have little money to spare. A college education should not be limited to the wealthy.

SB 1147 would help the state of Connecticut meet its goal of educational equality. CT's achievement gap is currently one of the worst in the nation when comparing student achievement of white and minority students, low income and higher income students. All students should have equal access to higher education. **Ensuring access of undocumented students to aid will increase racial and socioeconomic diversity in CT colleges and universities.**

You as legislators should support this bill because it's important to note that increased financial aid equals higher graduation rates and increased tax revenue. A college degree raises average lifetime tax contribution by \$55,000. Similar programs in other states have not taken away seats from citizen students or been a financial drain on the state aid system.

As you consider this bill, please remember that **undocumented students pay into and contribute to the institutional aid pool of funds but do not have access to this aid.** Undocumented students should be eligible for institutional aid as are all other students who pay tuition. There is nothing in the Connecticut statutes and regulations that prevents undocumented students from accessing this aid.

We are not asking for a hand-out, but for a hand up. We are not asking for special treatment, but only the opportunity to access institutional aid on the same level as other students.

I support SB 147 and hope the committee will vote favorably on SB 147.

Thank you for your time,
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