

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

My name is Natalia Rojas from East Hartford, and I am currently a student at Manchester Community College. I stand 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 regardless of immigration status.

I am 20 years old and have been living in Connecticut for over 16 years. I was only four when I left Bolivia, my country. My parents wanted both my brother and I to grow up in a safe environment where we would have the opportunity to chase after our dreams. As we all know, the United States is the land of opportunity and since stepping a foot on this land, my parents have been working multiple jobs just to get us ahead. My brother and I knew that the only way to repay my parents for their efforts and sacrifice was by getting good grades and staying at the top of our class, which we did.

I have been wanting to attend the University of Connecticut since I was 13. I knew how hard it was becoming to get in year after year, but I had hope and faith that I was going to get accepted to UConn someday. I always kept the fact that I could not apply for institutional financial aid to the side because I believed my parents were going to have enough to get me through college without that help. Unfortunately, that was far from the truth.

Throughout my four years at high school, I took as many honors and advanced placement classes as I could just to show UConn that I could handle it all. I also joined several clubs to show them what a well-rounded student I was. At the end, I ended up in the top five percent of my class and graduated with honors. On top of it all, I was accepted into the University of Connecticut's Storrs campus for journalism and I was on cloud nine. I was so happy that all of my hard work had paid off and that I was actually going to attend UConn Storrs... or so I thought.

Sadly, all of my dedication and hard work I put into getting accepted was for nothing. A few weeks before my tuition was due for my first fall semester at UConn, my father had a serious talk with me regarding how we were going to pay for school. Financially, we were not doing too well that year. My mom had lost one of her two jobs and we were struggling a bit. I knew this and I can vividly remember spending the whole day crying because I knew I had to cancel my registration at UConn. Seeing me cry so much put my mother into tears because she knew how heartbroken I was and I remember her telling me I will get ahead no matter what. My whole situation even discouraged my brother from applying to any state universities his senior year as he did not want to go through the same heartbreak I went through.

My brother and I are currently attending Manchester Community College. Luckily, at the moment I have a job that allows me to pay for my tuition and all the textbooks I need. The only problem here is that my money is going to my MCC tuition and not my savings account for UConn. This is my second year at MCC and my last semester as well. The fear is already starting to sink in whenever I think about paying for UConn this Fall. (I also hear they are spiking up their tuition again, which does not help my fear!) I hope this summer I'm fortunate enough to find a second and third job just so I can actually have enough to pay for tuition this upcoming Fall.

If the committee votes favorably on SB 147, many students like me will have the opportunity to chase after their dreams and be able to breathe a little easier. This is such a stressful situation and no one should feel hopeless when it comes down to getting an education. If undocumented students pay into and contribute to the institutional aid pool of funds, why can't

we have access to it? As we know, institutional aid is funded by tuition revenue, not taxpayer money and if we undocumented students are paying for school, why can't we get aid like the other students who pay tuition as well? What makes us so different? We may all come from different countries, but Connecticut is our home and we wish it would treat us the same way it treats its other residents. This bill is my last hope and chance to be able to obtain my bachelors in journalism and I pray to God the committee understands how important and crucial it is to all of our futures.

Thank you for your time,
Natalia Rojas, East Hartford