

March 1, 2016

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

My name is Todd Vachon from Colchester. I am a doctoral student at the University of Connecticut and the President of the UConn Graduate Employee Union, UAW Local 6950. I stand today 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.

As both a student and an educator, I understand the value of financial aid for students pursuing degrees in higher education—particularly those from working class or low-income backgrounds. I would not myself have been able to achieve my undergraduate degree if it were not for this kind of financial aid. As President of the Graduate Employee Union, I represent over 2,000 instructors, teaching assistants and research assistants, all of whom work on the front lines of higher education. Our members know that students are able to perform their best work when they are able to focus on their studies and not be overly burdened by the economic hardships of ever-increasing tuition. We also know that students without financial assistance are more likely to drop classes, reduce their enrollment to part time, and are less likely to ever finish college. A recent study by *Complete College America*, titled “Time Is the Enemy,” shows that the longer it takes for students to move through college, the less likely they are to earn a degree.

By extending access for institutional financial aid to all students, SB 147 would create equal opportunities for some of our most disadvantaged students and likely increase the college completion rate in CT—a worthy cause in and of itself considering we suffer from one of the highest achievement gaps among the 50 states. As I am sure you are aware, college degrees translate into higher earnings which benefit not only the individual student who earns the degree, but also the state economy as well as the state budget. At a time of budget crises we should be doing all that we can to create a diverse, skilled, and productive workforce here in CT.

Before concluding, I would like to note that institutional financial aid is funded by tuition revenue, *not* taxpayer money. Thus, undocumented students currently paying tuition are contributing to the pool of funds used for institutional aid, but they do not themselves have access to this pool of aid they help to create. It is only fair that undocumented students should be eligible for the same institutional aid as all other students who pay tuition. If higher education is the engine of ingenuity and a vehicle for social advancement, then we must ensure fair and equal access to all students, regardless of their immigration status. That is why I stand before you today and urge you to please support SB 147.

Thank you very much for your time and for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Todd Vachon
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