

## **Testimony to the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee**

February 13, 2017

### **Testimony in support of HB5031**

Honorable Chairs and Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee of Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Camila Bortolletto and I am founder of and a leader in CT Students for a Dream, and I stand in support of HB5031: AN ACT EQUALIZING ACCESS TO STUDENT-GENERATED FINANCIAL AID. This bill would equalizing access to student-generated, institutional financial aid at Connecticut's public universities and colleges to all CT students regardless of immigration status.

This issue is very personally important to me. I am undocumented myself, although I am no longer a student. I came here when I was 9 years old from Brazil with my family, we came like many families, undocumented. I went to elementary, middle, and high school in Danbury, I grew up here and consider it my home. I graduated from high school in 2006, at that time there was very little support for undocumented students. It wasn't talked about, we existed but in the shadows. I was lucky in that I was able to attend and graduate from college. I went to WCSU and graduated in 2010 with a degree in biology and minor in international studies. Unfortunately, this was before the in-state tuition law last passed in 2011 that allowed students like me to pay the in-state tuition rate. I had to pay the outstate rate for all 4 years, which was expensive and especially painful as I had lived down the street from WCSU for 10 years at that time. It was tough but we made it happen.

I say that I was lucky because I was. I acknowledge the privilege I had that allowed me to be able to finish my education and get a college degree. I had parents and a community who supported me. But privilege and luck doesn't make you more worthy of a college education than others. Potential and motivation does. You will hear from that students today that have great potential and great motivation, but need help. This is the point of financial aid and of the system of set-aside funds, to help students who have potential.

I understand the importance that this legislation would have on the lives of students. Affording college is hard for all students, but it is harder for immigrant students as we are ineligible for federal and state need-based financial aid. The past legislations that granted in-state tuition rates to some undocumented students were important steps toward increasing access to higher education for all. But without access to any aid, many immigrant families remain unable to afford the high cost of tuition even at instate tuition rates.

Equalizing access to these student-generated, institutional funds, through HB 5031, will change this injustice; it would allow all of Connecticut's students to have a more equal chance at college.

"Institutional aid" is student-generated funds that colleges set aside from tuition revenue in order to support students with financial need. It student funded, it is not tax-payer money or state funds. Immigrant students are barred from accessing these funds even though they pay into it. I believe it is time to end this unfair system.

I believe this to be common sense legislation for several reasons. First, this is not a hand-out, it's not about special benefits, it's about equal access to the system of set-aside funds that we all pay into. Second, according to the Fiscal Analysis Office this legislation would have no fiscal impact. Yet it would have a huge impact to the lives of the students that this would affect, and allow them a chance to finish college. These factors combined make this legislation a common sense way increase access to higher education at

no cost to the state. This is common sense, fair, legislation. It is a matter of fairness that all students are able to access the funds to which they contribute.

We cannot wait another year. I stand in support of H.B. 5031 and hope the Committee will vote favorably on this,

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