



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

Office of Higher Education

Testimony
by
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Acting Executive Director, Office of Higher Education
before the
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
Tuesday, February 20, 2018

Senator Bye, Representative Haddad, Senator Linares, Representative Staneski, and distinguished members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the bills before you today. There are several bills on today's agenda that I wish to offer comments on. As you know, the Office of Higher Education seeks to foster and improve the high-quality postsecondary educational environment for all students in Connecticut; my comments on the bills discussed today reflect this overall responsibility.

S.B. 142 (Raised) An Act Concerning Acceptance of Institutional Accreditation of Private Occupational Schools by the Office of Higher Education

Currently, the Office of Higher Education provides oversight and facilitation for over one hundred postsecondary career schools in Connecticut. These schools prepare thousands of students for a variety of occupations in our state every year. Of this group, approximately one dozen schools maintain accreditation from third-party accreditors sanctioned by the United States Department of Education. Last year, these one dozen schools enrolled approximately 14,000 students.

Under current law, the Office of Higher Education "shall" accept third-party accreditation in lieu of applying any state standards. However, the recent collapse of a major national accreditor following a United States Department of Education inquiry highlighted lax and often

nonexistent quality and protection standards applied to these postsecondary institutions. The absence of limited discretion in Connecticut law potentially harms students and schools alike. Should a postsecondary school encounter difficulties and its accreditor does not react, the Office of Higher Education should have the ability to provide assistance to students and school administration to help facilitate solutions to these problems in the context of Connecticut's own standards. This will allow the Office of Higher Education to ensure that students and families are able to access the high-quality education they expect from an approved Connecticut school. Additionally, the establishment of a six-month timeframe for new school applications encourages an efficient review and approval process. We fully support both of these changes.

H.B. 5135 (Raised) An Act Concerning Revisions to the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship Program

The Roberta B. Willis Scholarship Program ("RWSP") is composed of two distinct components: a need-based program and a need-merit-based program. While both programs consider a family's economic need, the need-merit program is distinct in its academic criteria. Students, families, guidance counselors and institutions of higher education are often confused by the two separate programs under one broad heading; we regularly receive calls from families and through legislators seeking to understand under which program students have been awarded. We support changing the nomenclature, as described in the bill, to the Roberta B. Willis Tuition Assistance Program with distinctly-named Roberta B. Willis Need-Based Scholarship and Prudence Crandall Merit Scholarship components as this provides clarity to families and students who seek to better understand their financial aid resources.

With this in mind, I would like to point out one issue in the bill as written. At line 147 in subsection (f) (at the top of page 6), the bill requires that all aid provided to Connecticut

residents under this program “shall be designated as a grant from the Roberta B. Willis Tuition Assistance Program.” Informing families they have received an award under the broad program name without differentiating between need-based or need-merit is exactly the problem this bill seeks to fix. I would like to request that this line be changed to include both distinct program names, thereby ensuring institutions are providing families with clear information when funds are awarded. I thank you for your consideration of my request.

H.B. 5136 (Raised) An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Office of Higher Education

This bill, which we support, addresses a holdover issue from the former Department of Higher Education. Section 10a-11 of the Connecticut General Statutes requires the Office of Higher Education to formulate and enforce a strategic diversity plan at public institutions of higher education. As you are all aware, the Office of Higher Education does not have oversight of the public institutions of higher education in our state. As a result, we do not have the authority or resources to fulfill the requirements of the statute as currently written. This slight change in language preserves the opportunity for future consideration.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you for your consideration of these important issues, and am happy to answer any questions you may have.