

# Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee REVISED JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No.:** HB-5371

AN ACT ESTABLISHING THE FREE 2 START SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM AND

**Title:** THE FREE 2 FINISH SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM.

**Vote Date:** 3/15/2018

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable Substitute

**PH Date:** 3/8/2018

**File No.:**

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## **SPONSORS OF BILL:**

The Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

## **REASONS FOR BILL:**

The Planning Commission for Higher Education found that Connecticut needs to be awarding 3,300 more degrees per year than are currently being awarded to avoid financial collapse.

Substitute language:

- Changes bill title (removes "Free 2 Finish")
- Line 4: reduces minimum award for Free 2 Finish from \$1,000 to \$500
- Lines 21-24: changes income measure from federal poverty level to EFC
- Line 29: requires BOR, rather than OHE, to establish and administer the scholarship program
- Lines 45-49: allows BOR to prioritize awards if eligible students exceed available state appropriations
- Lines 65-86: Removes all components of the Free 2 Finish Scholarship Program and instead requires the Planning Commission for Higher Education to design a plan for a scholarship to cover final year of associate degree or final two years of bachelor's degree program
- Lines 87-91: \$5 million appropriation for Free 2 Start in FY 19

## **RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:**

[Mark E. Ojakian, President, Connecticut State Colleges & Universities](#)

President Ojakian testified “Currently in-state tuition at our community colleges is \$4,276 and \$10,526 at our state universities. At the same time, the current maximum Pell Grant award is \$5,920. While maximum Pell does not cover all of the costs of tuition and fees at the state universities, for the community colleges, a student receiving the full award will be able to cover all of their tuition and fee costs, as well as books and supplies.

“While the bill recognizes the importance of the successful completion of the first two years for community college students, it would be great to see the Free 2 Start or the Free 2 Finish Scholarship extended to cover the first two years at a state university as well.

“One way this bill can be improved is by providing funding for our public colleges and universities to hire additional student advisors and support staff to help improve student outcomes.

“Finally, it is hard to pair an expansion in access for students with continued cuts to our institutions of higher education. Since 2015 we have lost \$61M in state support, or 17% of our funding. If this continues, it will be difficult for our colleges and universities to support the students we currently have enrolled, as well as those new students this bill would help incentivize to attend. Just to remain financially viable and avoid eroding all of their reserves, starting in FY19 our community colleges need approximately \$9M of additional funding, our universities need approximately \$4.5M, and Charter Oak needs \$600K. I would ask that any consideration of this bill come with the recognition that our institutions need to be adequately funded if we want our students to succeed.”

#### [Kevin Lembo, Comptroller, Office of the State Comptroller](#)

Comptroller Lembo submitted written testimony in support of the original bill stating “This legislation is a creative proposal that will help accelerate our state economy, provide skilled workers for Connecticut businesses and give our young people reason to remain in state to receive their education.” He urged the committee to find additional ways to maximize federal financial aid.

#### [Dr. Noah Dion, Academic Affairs Division, Office of Higher Education](#)

Dr. Dion testified and submitted written testimony on the original bill agreeing with the aspirations of this bill, but indicated that many details are unclear and many questions need to be addressed regarding the sustainability of the original bill.

#### [Mona Lucas, Assistant Vice-President for Enrollment Policies & Strategic Initiatives, University of Connecticut](#)

Ms. Lucas testified and submitted written testimony thanking the committee for having a conversation about financial aid and indicated that it is critical to reverse the state’s “brain drain.” She stated that the University supports the original legislation which would help the state’s most needy students complete college.

### **NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

#### [Martin M. Looney, State Senator, 11<sup>th</sup> Senatorial District, President Pro Tempore, Connecticut General Assembly](#)

Senator Looney supports this bill because it will encourage “new high school graduates to go to college.” Senator Looney stated that by requiring students to complete the federal FAFSA form the State will maximize federal funds. He continued that the bill “pushes students to continue their studies beyond an Associate’s Degree by offering students a path to finish their degrees.”

Senator Looney shared the following statistics from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

“Since 2010, in other words, since the end of the great recession, 8.4 million jobs have been created for those with at least a Bachelor’s Degree. At the same time, 3.1 million jobs have been created for those who have at least some college education (Associate’s Degree or less.) But for those workers who only have high school diplomas, only 80,000 jobs have been created.”

[Bryan Bonina, President of the Congress of Connecticut Community Colleges \(4Cs\)](#)

The 4Cs support this bill but pointed out that there are many details that need to be addressed to be sure the legislation serves the needs of students fairly and efficiently.

[Liz Fraser, Policy Director of the Connecticut Association for Human Services \(CAHS\)](#)

Ms. Fraser’s testimony stated that CAHS has advocated for better access to post-secondary education. It “would address the significant barriers that the cost of college poses to lower-income residents, while also boosting enrollment in colleges and helping develop the highly-skilled workforce Connecticut needs.”

[Rhona Free, Ph.D., President, University of Saint Joseph](#)

Dr. Free supports the legislature promoting college completion, but stated that restricting it to public colleges and universities may reduce the effectiveness of the program. She pointed out that of the 10 colleges and universities in the state with the highest graduation rates, only 1 is public. She continued that allowing students at public and private institutions “would be the best way to promote college completion.”

[Stephen Healey, Ph.D., Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, University of Bridgeport](#)

Dr. Healey shared information about the University of Bridgeport’s Connecticut Promise program and discussed how the university has partnered with Connecticut’s community colleges and the University of Connecticut in support of higher education, and called on legislators to invest in need based aid for all of Connecticut’s higher education institutions which will ultimately strengthen Connecticut’s economy and future.

[Lori J. Pelletier, President Connecticut AFL-CIO](#)

Ms. Pelletier thanked the committee for raising this bill and shared that CT AFL-CIO supports it. She pointed out that our neighboring states of Rhode Island and New York already have similar programs. Ms. Pelletier stated that this will align Connecticut with businesses’ pleas regarding staffing needs. She went on to say that Connecticut cannot afford to maintain the status quo or more students and businesses will leave the state.

[Pamela Scheck](#)

Ms. Scheck supports this legislation.

## **NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

[Jennifer Widness, President, Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges](#)

Ms. Widness expressed concern that this legislation will have negative consequences. She explained that Connecticut's independent colleges enroll nearly 50,000 undergraduate students and award almost 45% of bachelor's degrees earned in Connecticut. Ms. Widness went on to say that Connecticut's need based aid program has been cut by 50% over the past 8 years and suggested that the state should support access to all institutions of higher education.

**Reported by:** Jeanie Phillips, Clerk

**Date:** March 26, 2018