

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-273

Title: AN ACT CONCERNING DEBT-FREE COLLEGE.

Vote Date: 3/12/2019

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 2/28/2019

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Sen. Looney, 11th Dist.
Sen. McCrory, 2nd Dist.
Sen. Cassano, 4th Dist.
Et al.

REASONS FOR BILL:

To financially support Connecticut community technical college students who qualify for the program, with the ultimate goal of solving our student debt crisis. This bill will increase Connecticut's students' opportunities to access higher education.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

[Mark Ojakian, President, Connecticut State Colleges and Universities](#): Mark Ojakian testified in support of SB 273. Although he agrees with the bill's efforts to improve access to higher education for students in the state, he believes that there should be revisions made to include undocumented students as well as coverage for non-credit courses, courses that enroll over 30,000 Connecticut students. Mr. Ojakian goes further to recommend an increase in funding our public institutions of higher education in order to hire more advisors and support staff for students to better the students' outcome.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

[Martin M. Looney, 11th District, State Senator, President Pro Tempore, Connecticut General Assembly](#): Senator Martin Looney testified in full support of SB 273. He states that Connecticut has the third highest accumulated student loan debt in the country, and SB 273 would directly address this issue. Our businesses and economy depends on it. Sen. Looney recognizes an important provision of this bill being the establishment of "a program for the

Board of Regents to encourage, educate and help students fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application... By encouraging more Connecticut residents to just fill out a FAFSA we can maximize federal funds AND maximize opportunities for low income students in our state.”

Multiple speakers testified in support of SB 273. The Connecticut Senate Democrats state that “student debt influences where new graduates live and what types of jobs they are able to pursue.” They believe that if this bill is adopted, it will incentivize students to not only attend our higher education institutions, but to also start their careers here and be a part of our state’s workforce. They argue that the passing of this bill will lead to a significantly stronger economy and will help support the state’s businesses.

- [Senate Democrats, Connecticut General Assembly](#)
- [Bryan R. Bonina, President, Congress of Connecticut Community Colleges](#)

[Subira Gordon, Executive Director, Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now](#): Subira Gordon testified on behalf of Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN) in support of SB 273, stating that it would make college more affordable and “reduce the financial burden of post-secondary education.” Ms. Gordon referenced a UC Berkeley study that found that “for every \$1 invested in public secondary education, states see an average return between \$3 and \$4.” By investing in our students and public colleges, “Connecticut is investing in its future, strengthening its economy, and developing more accessible, inclusive systems.”

[Patricia O’Neill, President, Connecticut State University - American Association of University Professors](#): Patricia O’Neill testifies in support of SB 273, yet expresses her reluctance to comment on the controversial issue. While she in fact supports the bill, she acknowledges that the language of the bill excludes multiple groups of Connecticut State University (CSU) students, which poses as a threat to the CSUs.

[David S. Woodworth](#): David Woodworth testified in support of SB 273. He agrees with the efforts of this bill, but then states that “If funding is available to provide debt-free community colleges, I urge you to restore funding to remedial classes that do not count toward degree programs, or consider reclassifying English as a Second Language (ESL) courses as Non-remedial.” Mr. Woodworth then recommends revising the bill, changing the language to include all Connecticut public colleges and universities.

Several Connecticut students and graduates spoke in support of SB 273. Each student shared their own personal experiences they are going through in regards to their education and the incredible student debt that followed. Timothy Bristol stated that today, “To earn a 4-year degree a student may have to take on \$100,000 in debt. Compare that to 1971, where a student could get a 4 year degree for around \$40,000 (adjusted for inflation).” It is argued that, if the cost of higher education continues to rise, most people will no longer be able to afford a college education. SB 273 has the goal in mind to reverse this pattern, thus creating more opportunity for Connecticut students and graduates.

- [Timothy Bristol](#)
- [Jeffrey Bukowski](#)
- [Angelique Lewis](#)
- [Shaun Simoneau](#)

- [Jonathan Smalls](#)

Multiple parties testified in support of SB 273, but advise a revision in the legislation to include undocumented students. Several speakers who took this stance are either undocumented students, or know someone who is. Many shared their own personal experiences of being an undocumented student in Connecticut's higher education system, and strive for an equal playing field for all students, regardless of their status. The award program that this bill establishes requires applicants to submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Undocumented students are barred from submitting a FAFSA because most do not have a social security number, a required field to be filled out in the application.

- [Kimberly Alexander](#)
- [Anthony Barroso](#)
- [Camila Bortolletto, Campaign Manager, Connecticut Students for a Dream](#)
- [Carolina Bortolletto, Co-founder, Connecticut Students for a Dream](#)
- [Najely Clavijo](#)
- [Kiara Ruesta](#)
- [Brennan Schlipphack](#)
- [Dominique Torok](#)

Multiple speakers testified in support of SB 273, but believe there should be an amendment to the bill in order to include and be mindful of financially insecure students. This bill defines a qualifying student for its program as one that goes to school full time. In the case of low-income students, many are only able to go to college part time simply because they cannot afford to go full time and not have a job. The Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS) states that 49% of college students are financially independent from their parents. These students that are paying for their own education are forced to work while taking courses in order to make ends meet, thus giving students no choice but to be part time. The demographic of part time students continues to increase each year. This significant demographic should be given the same chance as full time students and should not be ruled out of this opportunity for debt-free college.

- [Bobby Berriault](#)
- [Samantha J. Hills, Policy Analyst, Connecticut Association for Human Services](#)

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

[John Board](#): John Board testified in opposition to SB 273, and proposed a three part plan that he believes would be a more effective alternative. The first part is tuition contracting, where Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) would promise to freeze tuition at the current rate, in return for the students' promise to attend a CSCU system until graduation. The second part of Mr. Board's proposal is to implement the Learn Here, Live Here plan. The third part is a statewide student loan reform, where the state examines ways to work with financial institutions to bring down interest rates on CHESLA loans.

[John Mullane, President, College Transfer Solutions, LLC](#): John Mullane testified in opposition to SB 273, An Act Concerning Debt-Free College. Mr. Mullane states that he has worked with community college students for over a decade which allowed him to understand the true obstacles that students face when it comes to transferring their credits or graduating. "The focus should be on college completion and transfer to help more students to graduate

on time with less debt... Colleges are too focused on enrolling new students and need to focus more on retaining and graduating their students.” For many, beginning undergraduate studies at a community college is the most affordable route to take, but Connecticut’s current transfer credit system is costing students millions. Mr. Mullane believes that it’s imperative that we remove the many obstacles students have to overcome when transferring their course credits before we even begin to address the possibility of debt-free college.

Jennifer Widness, President, Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges:

Jennifer Widness testified on behalf of Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges (CCIC) in opposition to SB 273. While CCIC agrees that we need to strengthen our financial support for our students, they believe that there could be a more effective way than establishing a program to make college debt-free. CCIC believes we should put our resources towards a need-based financial aid program, the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program. CCIC argues that SB 273 would exclude a number of Connecticut students from reaping the benefits of this bill, contrary to the Roberta Willis Scholarship. Connecticut’s funding towards this scholarship program has plummeted over the past eight years, when it could be helping a significant amount of students in our state. Because of this, CCIC believes that if the state is going to be putting any resources towards a program to help with our student debt crisis, those funds should be invested into the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program.

Reported by: Beatrice O’Neil

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