Hello Leaders and Members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Marina Zoghbi and I am originally from Coventry, Connecticut. I graduated from the Honors Program at the University of Connecticut with a Bachelor’s in Science. I am currently a second year student at the University of Connecticut School of Dental Medicine and live in Farmington.

I am here today to ask you to please provide UConn Health with the funding it needs to continue to provide a top-notch education to Connecticut students like me, who want to work and live in Connecticut and contribute to the health, welfare and economy of the state.

Though I was accepted to multiple schools, choosing to attend UConn Dental was an easy decision for me. On my interview day, I could feel that the atmosphere of UConn Dental was much different than the other schools that I visited. The students and faculty seemed genuinely happy to be here and were passionate about the school. I was excited by UConn’s M Delta curriculum which encourages active, interprofessional team-based learning. Rather than memorizing content, this curriculum requires students to solve clinical case-based application questions using knowledge of basic sciences and clinical medicine. This new, cutting-edge curriculum was established by UConn Health a few years ago as part of the Bioscience Connecticut initiative, and I believe it is an approach that will greatly benefit me and my patients when I begin to practice dentistry on my own.

I feel privileged to be taught by accomplished faculty, who have pioneered research in their field. I am also grateful for the opportunity to have conducted a research project of my own this summer through the School of Dental Medicine. This State’s commitment to UConn Health, as its only academic medical center in Connecticut, makes these research opportunities possible.

Another reason I chose UConn Dental was the low student to faculty ratio, which enables me to get feedback that will make me a better clinician. Also, UConn has a real commitment to new technology, which better prepares me and other dental students to make the transition to practice after dental school. UConn Dental also has an excellent reputation for post-graduate residency programs with the majority of students being accepted into their top programs.
Of course, the in-state tuition was a big factor in my decision, given the growing student debt crisis. The affordability of UConn Dental entices top students that would otherwise choose to attend other schools. Without UConn Dental – the only dental school in the state of CT – students like me would be forced to leave the state to pursue our education and training.

As one of the Legislative Chairs for my school’s chapter of the American Student Dental Association, I have motivated my peers to become more active in government relations. I recently attended the Connecticut State Dental Association’s Council on Legislation where I was able to meet many dentists who own practices in Connecticut and learn about their legislative priorities. These conversations have afforded me insight into why they love practicing in Connecticut, as well as the issues they are currently advocating for. Through my school’s mentorship program, I have been able to shadow a UConn Dental Alumnus, which has provided me with a glimpse of life on the other side of dental school. My mentor has a beautiful practice in Ellington and sees patients with many different dental needs. I learn something new during each visit and am invigorated by the prospects of what my future may bring. These experiences have inspired me to pursue a similar path and complete a General Practice Residency before entering a private practice in Connecticut. The connections that I have made with Connecticut dentists will play a significant role as my future unfolds.

I strongly believe that everyone deserves access to health education and care. Since beginning school here in August 2017, I have participated in various outreach programs made possible by the programs at UConn Health. I am proud to be a Connecticut Area Health Education Center (AHEC) Network Urban Health Scholar. Through this program, I have volunteered with interprofessional teams of medical, nursing, pharmacy, social work, and physician assistant students in providing health education to underserved communities in Connecticut and have learned how to best serve vulnerable communities including veterans, LGBTQI, and the homeless. This past summer I was a dental student leader for the Connecticut AHEC Migrant Farm Worker Clinic, where we provided screenings to farm workers who contribute greatly to the agricultural economy of Connecticut. This year, I volunteered at the South Park Inn homeless shelter in Hartford by administering dental screenings and then presenting exam findings to the attending faculty for appropriate referral to treatment. We were able to give these patients, who were going through an extremely difficult period in their lives, an oral health goodie bag and assurance that they would receive the treatment they needed. In April, I look forward to leading my dental class as one of the student coordinators for Connecticut Mission of Mercy (CTMOM). Connecticut Mission of Mercy provides free dental care to the underserved and uninsured in Connecticut. Every year, the presence of UConn student volunteers allows for a greater number of patients to be seen and treated. This will be my seventh CTMOM clinic and I look forward to volunteering as a future dentist. I am thankful for the outreach opportunities that I have gained through UConn. Good health is the foundation of a productive, thriving community and by continuing to invest in UConn Health, the state will benefit across multiple facets.

I would like to thank the committee for holding this hearing and allowing me to speak. Thank you to the General Assembly for your past support and I hope that you will continue to support UConn and UConn Health.