OLR Bill Analysis
sHB 7161

AN ACT ESTABLISHING FINISH LINE GRANTS.

SUMMARY
This bill requires the Office of Higher Education (OHE) to establish prior to the fall 2020 semester the Finish Line Grant program that annually awards grants to full-time undergraduate students for (1) the unpaid portion of tuition and fees for the last half of the credit hours required to earn an associate or a bachelor’s degree (i.e., tuition and fee costs, minus non-loan aid awarded to the student) or (2) a $500 grant, whichever is greater. Eligible students enrolled at UConn, any of the four Connecticut State Universities, any of the 12 regional community-technical colleges, or Charter Oak State College can receive grants under this program.

The bill establishes student eligibility requirements for the program, along with program-related administrative duties and reporting requirements for OHE and the public higher education institutions.

Additionally, the bill requires any student who receives a Finish Line Grant to participate in a volunteer-based mentorship and counseling program, as outlined by OHE. (Presumably, the mentorship and counseling is academic or career-focused.)

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2019

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS
Under the bill, a student must meet various requirements to be eligible to receive an award under the Finish Line Grant program. These requirements relate to (1) enrollment status, (2) in-state student classification, (3) academic progress during enrollment, and (4) financial need. Students must meet these eligibility requirements at the time of initial eligibility and continue to meet them while
completing their degree program.

**Enrollment Status**

To be eligible for the program grant under the bill, a student must be enrolled as an undergraduate student in an associate or bachelor’s degree program at any Connecticut public higher education institution on a full-time basis, which the bill defines as carrying (1) 12 or more credit hours in a semester or (2) 30 or more semester hours in an academic year.

**In-state Student Classification**

The bill requires students to be classified as in-state students. By law, with limited exceptions, eligibility for in-state student classification is based on an applicant’s domicile, which is his or her “true, fixed, and permanent home” and the place where he or she intends to remain and return to upon leaving (CGS §§ 10a-28 & 10a-29).

**Academic Progress**

Under the bill, students must possess a minimum grade point average of 2.5 and have earned half of the credit hours required to earn an associate or a bachelor’s degree.

**Financial Need**

The bill requires students to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or an institutionally accepted financial aid application and accept all available financial aid that is not in the form of a federal, state, or private student loan. Additionally, the bill extends eligibility to only those students whose expected family contribution toward educational costs does not exceed $7,500 as determined from FAFSA computations.

**ADMINISTRATIVE PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS**

The bill outlines the type of administrative audits the public higher education institutions must perform to assist OHE’s process for allocating award funding to the institutions. Additionally, it establishes expenditure requirements for the institutions and imposes
legislative reporting requirements on OHE.

**Audits**

Under the bill, the institutions must conduct a financial and academic audit prior to the fall 2020 semester and each semester thereafter. These audits must determine the (1) number of qualifying students enrolled during the semester and (2) amount of the award to be made to each qualifying student.

The bill requires each public institution of higher education to annually report the audit results to OHE, along with the sum of all awards made to eligible students, each September 1st and February 1st.

**Allocations to Institutions**

OHE allocates annual award amounts to the institutions under the bill. The bill requires the amount of each institution’s annual allocation to equal the sum of all awards made to qualifying students enrolled at the college for each semester during the prior academic year. It is unclear under the bill how the allocation would be calculated for the initial year of the program. If this sum total is greater than the amount appropriated for the award program by the General Assembly in any fiscal year, then OHE must prioritize allocations using criteria it has developed.

**Allocation Expenditure and Non-supplant Requirements**

The bill requires institutions to spend all award allocations on direct student financial assistance, specifically to cover tuition and fees. Additionally, it prohibits the institutions from using their award allocations to supplant any state or institutional aid that is otherwise available to eligible students.

**Reporting Requirement**

Under the bill, OHE must report to the Higher Education and Employment Advancement and Appropriation committees about the Finish Line Grant program by January 1, 2021, and annually thereafter.
BACKGROUND

Related Bill

SB 273, reported favorably by the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, establishes a similar program to award full-time students (first-time students, only) the cost of tuition and fees for the credit hours required to earn an associate degree in 24 months.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

Joint Favorable Substitute
Yea 14 Nay 8 (03/12/2019)