Chairman Haddad, Chairman Haskell, Ranking Member Hall, Ranking Member Hwang, and members of the committee:

I thank you for your time and attention. My name is Benjamin Corb, and I was born and raised in Stratford, Connecticut. I am back in my home state to support HB 6072, a bill to provide resources to underrepresented minority students at institutions of higher education seeking degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields.

A number of programs provide resources to K-12 students throughout the state to help increase an interest in STEM fields, and provide resources to underprivileged students in Connecticut. Outside of the classroom, internships and programs such as the First Robotics program introduce STEM careers to a broad array of students. However, an ACT analysis done in 2016 found that while Connecticut high school graduates rank far above national averages in STEM readiness, minority students perform far worse than their white classmates. And this troubling trend carries beyond high school and into college. In 2015, White graduates were 5.4 times more likely to graduate from institutions in Connecticut more than the next closest ethnicity group.

According to the Connecticut Department of Labor, jobs in the life, physical and social sciences is projected to grow by 8.7% by 2026. These jobs will require degrees ranging from associates to Doctoral degrees. Additionally, these STEM jobs have an annual mean wage of $83,000, over $20,000 more than the annual mean wage for all occupations in the state. Ensuring that students from underrepresented groups obtain degrees in STEM will guarantee that individuals are able to obtain these good paying jobs.

The University of Connecticut is the gold standard for state university education in the northeast. While UConn does a great deal to attract minority students both, graduation rates overall remain at the national average. On UConn’s main campus, only 65% of minority students graduate within 4 years, as compared to 79% of all students. This places UConn in the 40th percentile of retention rates public research universities. We are losing talented individuals that would be vital to Connecticut’s economic future.

HB 6072 would provide resources specifically to minority STEM students at UConn and other state universities, providing retention services to ensure minority STEM students have the resources necessary to excel in their education, earn their degrees, and join the Connecticut workforce. Programs have to focus on retention, providing early-intervention resources to students before they "wash out" of
a STEM program, and provide mentorship, apprentice, and internship opportunities to help minority students build a network of support.

Support for STEM education, and understanding the impact of STEM graduates on the Connecticut’s future economic growth is already woven into this body's DNA. Last session, this legislature approved a new $500 tax credit following a student's graduation with a STEM related degree. The program is eligible to all Connecticut residents having earned such a degree and employed in the state. And last year UConn trustees approved $300 million in investments supporting Next Gen Connecticut.

HB 6072 continues on this path to ensure Connecticut is provided with a robust and diverse workforce for the future.