

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-6404

Title: AN ACT FUNDING THE DEBT-FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROGRAM.

Vote Date: 3/11/2021

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Change of Reference to Appropriations

PH Date: 3/4/2021

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

The Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

To establish a permanent Endowment Fund for the Debt-free Community College Program.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

[Sean Bradbury, Senior Director of Government Relations and External Affairs \(CSCU\):](#)

Gave oral testimony and submitted written testimony in support. Mr. Bradbury describes the brief history of the PACT program and the impacts of its current funding. He requests legislators make good on their Oct. 25, 2020, promise to reimburse that CSCU system for funds spent from their reserves, and secure additional funds to support the program. He concludes with projections for FY22 and FY23 costs.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

[Maureen Chalmers, President, Congress of Connecticut Community Colleges \(4Cs\):](#)

Submitted written testimony in support. She explains that CT's community colleges are the most cost-effective institutions in the state, and therefore attract many students that would not otherwise be able to afford, and benefit from, higher education. The 4Cs hopes that a more stable funding source will be provided and that the program will be expanded to all students regardless of legal status. She concludes with a reminder that CT's college system exists in a competitive environment; by passing this bill CT remains competitive with its neighbors and attracts tax revenues.

[Senate Democrats:](#)

Submitted written testimony in support. They state, "the lack of a long-term funding source

appears to be the only threat to this program's overwhelming success," and that this resulted in a limited, but "very positive," start to the PACT program. They believe, "Funding of this program is critical to maximize enrollment going forward."

Lillian Maisfehl, Reference & Instruction Librarian and the Information Literacy Coordinator at Gateway Community College:

Submitted written testimony in support. Lillian is "intensely, *fiercely*" proud of her colleagues and adopted home state of CT. She is heartbroken to see the BOR spend funds on expensive consultants, initiatives, and administration, in lieu of investment in resources and expertise that benefit students and staff. She believes this has gone on so long that it has created a lack of accountability, damaged trust between admin. and staff, and this results in no meaningful improvement to education, yet comes at taxpayer expense. She gives a specific example of how these practices have impacted the Information Technology (IT) department. Lillian believes "support for community college is a matter of social justice," and that "your commitment to debt-free community college is noble and to be applauded."

Eric Maroney, Professor of English, Gateway Community College:

Submitted written testimony in support with substitute language. Prof. Maroney believes the "enormous and untested structural changes" within the CSCU system need a pause to determine whether they are in the best interest of schools, students, and taxpayers. He says that this process, while labeled "Student First," has failed to place students first. His students have demonstrated that they lack not the ability, but only an educational background which has prepared them for collegiate level work. He provides an example of one student who is a refugee from Afghanistan, speaks 5 languages, and provided translation services for the UN, but does not have the English skills necessary to complete a collegiate composition course. Another student arrived in his class with an SAT score that placed him in the 9th percentile but is now on his way to completing his degree with awards. Prof. Maroney says the developmental support that allowed both students to succeed is now threatened with elimination.

Eileen Russo, Professor and Program Coordinator, Drug and Alcohol Recovery Program, Gateway Community College:

Submitted written testimony in support with substitute language. Prof. Russo says that faculty efforts to be included in shaping the one college process have been defeated, and that this resulted in a bureaucracy which has wasted funds and drained institutional resources. She says elimination of developmental education, "will set up students for failure from day 1," and that a message is growing to "water down your courses" resulting in students with a degree but no education. She explains that "offering free college to only those students who can attend full-time, excludes the students who need it most."

Colena Sesanker, PhD, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Gateway CC:

Submitted written testimony in support with substitute language. Prof. Sesanker describes the "enormity of the mess" that she believes is the CSCU consolidation, and the many costs this process has incurred. She elaborates on paid administrators that govern no school or students, high turn-over in leadership, and other examples of significant dysfunction.

Jennifer Widness, President Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges (CCIC):

Submitted written testimony in support of the *premise*. CCIC believes making higher education more accessible is critical "to meet the workforce demands of the 21st century

economy." However, they believe that "by making one sector free, policymakers are picking winners and losers," and that by offering funds to all full-time students, grants will disproportionately be awarded to students that already qualify for Federal Pell Grants. They say these funds would be better spent on students with greater need and fewer means who do not currently qualify. CCIC says CT has cut support for education, and lags both the region and nation in need-based financial aid.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

[John Board, CSCU Graduate:](#)

Submitted written testimony in opposition and substitute language. He believes this program "has been riddled with issues," and a more holistic solution exists.

Reported by: Jeremy Salyer

Date: 03/12/2021