



February 22, 2022

Dear Members of the Appropriations and Higher Education Committee,

On behalf of Connecticut's higher education community, we are writing today to ask the legislature and the Lamont administration consider making significant changes to the state's student financial aid program, the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program, as part of the Governor's mid-term budget adjustments bill, HB 5037, and HB 5137: An Act Studying and Funding the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program.

Between 2008 and 2020, need-based aid in Connecticut was reduced by nearly 60 percent. A recent report by the [National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs \(NASSGAP\)](#) found that Connecticut invests only \$259 in need-based grant aid per enrolled undergraduate, far less than half of the national average of \$721. Connecticut now ranks last in the region in our investment in need-based financial aid as a percentage of our overall higher education spending, at just 3 percent. This has led to a significant amount of unmet need; with nearly 40,000 students enrolled in Connecticut higher education institutions who are eligible receive a grant yet just 11,000 students receiving a grant annually.

While we very much appreciate the investment made for FY 22 and FY 23 with ARPA funds, a strategy needs to be developed to increase funding for the longer term. Further, the program's funding is currently retrospective such that institutions are forced to guess their annual allocation when packaging students during the admissions process. The allocations to the institutions are not made by the Office of Higher Education until August, after enrollment decisions have been made and students have already enrolled.


In addition, there is consensus among Connecticut higher education institutions that the program design is ripe for an overhaul that would prioritize assisting the state's neediest students and thereby increasing Connecticut's college attainment rates. For example, one student-centered approach would include determining eligibility based on need when a student files the FAFSA and are applying to college and making enrollment decisions. The awards would then follow the student to the Connecticut institution of their choice, similar to the federal Pell grant. The timeliness of award notifications to high school seniors is paramount among these recommendations, to ensure that students have optimal aid information that can assist us in retaining them in the state. We would ask the state to engage with a national expert such as the National Center for Higher Education Systems Management (NCHEMS) to assist with the program re-design.

As such, for this 2022 legislative session we would request:

- **UTILIZE BUDGET SURPLUS TO FUND WILLIS PROGRAM PROSPECTIVELY:** We would ask the legislature to take advantage of a portion of the state's budget surplus for FY 22 and use it for a one-time appropriation of \$33 million in FY 23 to provide **prospective funding for FY 24** for the Willis Program so that students, institutions and their families can begin to **know in advance** what levels of financial aid is available to them **PRIOR** to making enrollment decisions for the fall of 2023.
- **ENGAGE A NATIONAL CONSULTANT TO RE-DESIGN RWSP:** Many states in the country have a need-based financial aid program that follows the student to the institution of their choice and provides notice of eligibility to students based simply on the completion of a FAFSA. It is time for Connecticut to move to this model. Federal FAFSA simplification is on the horizon and changes to RWSP will be required in the near term either way. We would ask the legislature to charge the Office of Workforce Strategy, the Office of Higher Education and the Office of Policy and Management, in consultation with the state's higher education institutions, to work with an entity such as the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to develop a new program for implementation in 2024 that would include significant investments in aid and capitalize on more timely awards to our state's neediest students.
- **INCREASE FUNDING IN FY 23 FOR FY 24:** In 2019-2020, CT enrolled 130,554 undergraduate students with a state financial aid budget of approximately \$34 million. This equates to \$260 per pupil. The national average in state spending for need-based grant aid is \$721. Even if Connecticut were to double its investment we would still significantly lag the national average. Additional funding is needed to ensure low-income Connecticut students have adequate state support to access post-secondary education.

We appreciate your consideration of this request. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



Terrence Cheng  
President  
Connecticut State Colleges  
and Universities



Jennifer Widness  
President  
Connecticut Conference of  
Independent Colleges