



February 22, 2022

Dear Members of the Appropriations and Higher Education Committee:

As President of the University of Saint Joseph, I am writing today to ask the legislature and the Lamont administration to consider making significant changes to the state's student financial aid program, the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program, as part of the mid-term budget adjustment 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%. This has led to a significant amount of unmet need; although nearly 40,000 students enrolled in Connecticut higher education institutions were eligible to receive a grant, there were available funds to award only 11,000 students.

The Roberta Willis Scholarship Program is a critical component of the financial support that USJ students receive, supplementing their aid from the federal government and from the University itself. Almost all of USJ's undergraduates receive aid from our own scholarship funds, and last year 38% of our first-year students were eligible for federal Pell grants based on their family incomes. Of the 480 USJ students eligible for Roberta Willis Scholarship Program funds only 102 (21%) currently receive the funds, because of the limited allocation to USJ. These are students who are critical to meeting workforce needs in the state. In a recent graduating class, 9% earned degrees in the sciences, 46% earned degrees as health care practitioners, 12% as social workers, and 2% as teachers. More than 85% of our graduates remain in Connecticut after graduation, filling essential jobs and contributing to their communities.

While the funding our students receive from the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program is critically important to their ability to enroll and persist at our institution, we are also concerned that the manner in which the program is administered is not serving Connecticut as well as it could. The Office of Higher Education is not able to alert institutions of their annual allocation until after the fall semester has begun – and students have already made their enrollment decisions – because they must wait until the legislature completes the budget process. Therefore, institutions such as USJ must make a conservative estimate annually about how much funding we have to award Connecticut students and may need to hold back funds until the budget has passed. It would be much more beneficial for students and their families if the legislature provided funding for the program in the fiscal year *prior* so that all funding could be distributed when enrollment decisions are being made. Unfortunately, high-need students often choose to forego the college experience altogether if not fully informed of their costs up front.

Further, while general eligibility for the grant is written into a statute, due to a lack of funding, a Connecticut student may receive a Willis grant at one Connecticut institution, but not at another. A more student-centered approach, where students learn of an available award upon filing FAFSA, would significantly improve our ability to retain Connecticut students in-state for college.

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 level of financial aid is available to them PRIOR to making enrollment decisions for the fall of 2023.
- **ENGAGE A NATIONAL CONSULTANT TO REDESIGN RWSP:** Many states 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 that low-income Connecticut students have adequate state support to access post-secondary education.

I appreciate your consideration of this request. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



Rhona C. Free, Ph.D.  
President