



UNIVERSITY OF SAINT JOSEPH

CONNECTICUT

**Testimony for the
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
Rhona C. Free, President
University of Saint Joseph
March 2, 2021**

On behalf of the University of Saint Joseph, I am submitting testimony on:
S.B. 881 AN ACT CONCERNING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT.

The University of Saint Joseph (USJ) applauds Governor Lamont for his leadership in establishing the Governor's Workforce Council and putting resources and a strong team in place to support the implementation of the Council's Strategic Plan.

USJ is eager to partner with the newly-established Office of Workforce Strategies to ensure Connecticut has the talent pipeline it needs to meet the needs of the state's employers and to provide opportunity for our state's citizens. In recent years, USJ has responded to workforce needs by creating programs in Block Chain Technology, Computer and Data Science, Actuarial Science, Bioinformatics, Physician Assistant Studies, Digital Media and Communication, Health Care Coordination, Master of Public Health, and Musculoskeletal Health/Orthopedics and Sports Medicine, to name just a few. Independent colleges are well-positioned to support this effort as we offer in-demand degrees and have the capacity to be nimble and responsive to the needs of employers. Given our capacity to be helpful, **we would ask legislators to ensure that any language creating programs or opportunities for funding are flexible enough for private, non-profit colleges to participate.**

Academic Program Approval: The Governor's Workforce Council strategic plans calls on higher education institutions and workforce development programs to work more closely and in alignment with business and industry in our state. One of the barriers that continues to be in place for independent colleges is the requirement that private, non-profit institutions of higher education must submit new programs for approval to the Office of Higher Education when they reach the limit of the current statutory exemption provided in 10a-34 limit of 12 programs annually. While it is unlikely that USJ would intend to add more than 12 programs in one year, having the flexibility to do so would be beneficial given the need to respond quickly to workforce changes. With the possibility of developing highly-specialized certificate programs, a cap on the number that can be developed without the delay required for the program approval process could slow response to workforce needs. USJ, like other private non-profit colleges, has a multi-layered internal approval process and additionally must comply with accrediting requirements in many disciplines.

Connecticut remains one of few states in the country to continue to require private, non-profit colleges to have to go through this level of review. **We ask that the bill be amended to remove the 12-program cap on our program approval exemption to better position private, non-profit colleges to respond to the needs of the state's employers in developing new programs.**

FAFSA Completion: We strongly support the provision in this bill which seeks to require high school students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) prior to graduation, beginning with the class of 2024, with a few important exceptions that are outlined in the bill and we stand willing to support its implementation through offering support to students and districts. One important component of closing the vast opportunity gap that exists in Connecticut is to do more to educate high school students about what their eligibility for financial aid might be and to help them understand that higher education – at a public or private college – is more accessible than they might think. USJ is a partner with Career Beginnings, Hartford Promise, and other programs that promote college enrollment of Hartford region students; most of these students, along with most of our undergraduates, are eligible to receive federal loans. At USJ, almost 40% of our student body is Pell-eligible.

Auto Admit: USJ is eager to engage in the Automatic Admission program created in this bill, which seeks to ease the burden of applying to participating higher education institutions in this state for certain qualified Connecticut high school seniors. We appreciate that the bill facilitates the opportunity for independent institutions to participate in this program but would **ask that interested independent institutions be permitted to participate in the program from the beginning – rather than being prohibited from participating until the summer of 2023 – and that the fee associated with participation be lowered from \$50,000 per institution.**