



# UNIVERSITY OF SAINT JOSEPH

CONNECTICUT

## **Testimony on House Bill 6439**

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**March 4, 2021**

I am Rhona Free, President of the University of Saint Joseph, and I am grateful for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 6439 to express support for funding of the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program.

Governor Lamont has proposed flat funding this program in Fiscal Years '22 and '23, at \$33.3 million in each year. Last year, the Governor allocated \$6.8 million towards the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program from the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund for a total of \$40.1 million. I am requesting that the appropriation in the biennium be increased accordingly to \$40.1 million each year, so that students and institutions are not faced with a reduction in financial aid this fall.

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 45% of our first year students were eligible for federal Pell grants based on their family incomes. In addition, 120 USJ undergraduates currently receive Roberta Willis Scholarship Program funds. Because of the limited allocation to USJ only 16.3% of those who qualified based solely on need, received the funds.

These are students who are critical to meeting workforce needs in the state. In a recent graduating class, 11% earned degrees in the sciences, 49% earned degrees as health care practitioners, 13% as social workers, and 10% as teachers.

While University of Saint Joseph students graduate with below-average debt and have earnings that allow them to pay their loans, resulting in one of the lowest default rates of any college in the state, they need these grant dollars to make college affordable. In addition, offering them Roberta Willis Scholarship funds encourages students to stay in Connecticut for college. More than half of Connecticut's high school graduates leave the state to attend college, making Connecticut the third-largest exporter of college students in the U.S., behind New Hampshire and Vermont. The Roberta Willis Scholarship Program helps to keep USJ students – and all Connecticut students – in state for college, ultimately making them more likely to join the Connecticut workforce once they earn their degrees.

I understand that the state continues to face significant fiscal challenges, but funding for need-based financial aid must be a priority to provide access and opportunity to higher education for low-income residents of this state. Investing in making higher education affordable for Connecticut students will provide the state's workforce with a pool of talented graduates to further strengthen our economy.