



Sacred Heart UNIVERSITY

Testimony for the
Appropriations Committee
Sacred Heart University
March 4, 2021

On behalf of Sacred Heart University, I am submitting testimony on **H.B. 6439: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR**

In particular, I am concerned about Governor Lamont's proposal to flat fund the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program in FY22 and FY23 at \$33.3 million in each year. I understand that the State has significant fiscal challenges, and we appreciate the Governor's continued support of this critical program. However, I am concerned that—especially in these challenging economic times—this will not be enough money and will leave some deserving Connecticut high school students without options for higher education. It is critical that we provide this need-based financial aid to as many low-income state residents as possible.

By way of background, the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program is the state's need-based financial aid program administered by the Office of Higher Education that provides scholarships to needy Connecticut students attending Connecticut institutions—public and private. Students at independent colleges received approximately 17% of the funding from this program in FY21.

Funding need-based college financial aid programs is a necessity, not a luxury. But over the past decade, millions of dollars have been cut every year from vital programs aimed at attracting and retaining college students, the lifeblood of our State's future growth and prosperity. For example, for 2019/20, Sacred Heart University's Roberta Willis Scholarship (RWS) allotment was \$406,833, which allowed us to help 212 students. For 2020/21, we received \$386,260 from RWS aiding 169 students and \$114,048 from the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER) aiding 55 for a total of \$500,308 benefitting 224 recipients. Many of the students we are unable to serve through this program are electing to leave Connecticut—they are enrolling in institutions out of state, and the likelihood they will return is slim.

The independent colleges play an important role in educating students for our state's workforce. We award the majority of the degrees earned in key growth areas such as engineering, computer science, research and the health sciences. Many of our graduates do internships and residencies in-state and often choose to remain in Connecticut after graduating. As these numbers shrink, so will the interest of employers in remaining in or relocating to Connecticut.

Funding for need-based aid for students attending all of our state's institutions of higher education must continue to be a priority. It is a critical tool for both retaining much-needed young talent in Connecticut and for providing access for low-income students. Our state's attainment gap, which is the abyss

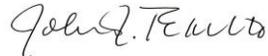
between whites and minorities in attaining post-secondary credentials, continues to be one of the worst in the country.

Here at Sacred Heart, we are doing our best to combat that achievement gap through our Horizons at Sacred Heart program that works to change the lives of underserved students in the Bridgeport community with a goal that each student will attend college and become a vital participant in Bridgeport as well as the broader global community and with our vibrant and longstanding Upward Bound program that also has a goal to increase the rate at which students complete secondary education and enroll in and graduate from college. We are financially invested in these programs, but these students will need help to make the next step. Programs like the Roberta Willis Scholarship Fund allow them to continue on the road to that final goal of a college degree.

It is great that the Governor's Office has included increased access to post-secondary opportunities as part of his Workforce plan. But there needs also to be an investment in financial aid to ensure equitable access for those strategies to be successful. Other states understand this connection and have increased their investments in financial aid, but this is another area where Connecticut is behind the region and the nation (NASSGAP annual survey 2018-19).

If we choose to ignore these gaps in achievement and education funding, the long-term results for Connecticut will be disastrous. Students and their parents will continue looking elsewhere for their college education, and current and future employers will follow.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John J. Petillo".

Dr. John J. Petillo, president
Sacred Heart University