

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-5137

AN ACT STUDYING AND FUNDING THE ROBERTA B. WILLIS SCHOLARSHIP

Title: PROGRAM.

Vote Date: 3/17/2022

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/8/2022

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

Allows the CWO and OHE to issue a request for proposal (RFP) for a national consultant to recommend changes to the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship Program.

Substitute language:

- Lines 25-28: adds to the study the feasibility of adding private occupational schools to Robert Willis scholarship program.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

[Terrence Cheng, President, Connecticut State College and University \(CSCU\) System](#): The Connecticut State College and University System is asking the state legislature and Governor Lamont to "consider making significant changes to the student financial aid program," as part of "budget adjustment bill" [H.B. 5137](#). Specifically, there needs to be a long-term strategy developed to increase funding in the future. Currently, "institutions are forced to guess their annual allocation when packaging students during the admissions process." The consensus among institutions of higher education in Connecticut is that the "program design is ripe for an overhaul" so that it would "prioritize assisting the state's neediest students and thereby increasing Connecticut's college attainment rates." Finally, for the 2022 legislative session, CSCU is requesting a utilization of the budget surplus to fund the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program prospectively, engaging a national consultant to redesign the RWSP, and increasing funding in fiscal year 23 for fiscal year 24.

[Mona Lucas, Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Policies and Strategic Initiatives, University of Connecticut](#): The University of Connecticut is "supportive of the overall intent of" [H.B. 5137](#) and is "most excited about the potential for students to be advised that they are financially eligible to be considered for RBW funds once they file" for FAFSA. UConn is also hopeful that [H.B. 5137](#) will result in more funding for the program, since "Legislation that stands to better serve students from financially needy Connecticut families is most exciting." Due to the work that's been done by the University and the General Assembly, "Connecticut's most academically talented and diverse high school students" have been able to graduate "with little to no debt, enabling them to finance graduate school after college or enter the workforce with less debt." In addition, UConn "tied for first place with four other schools" in terms of a student's average time to graduation, showing the University's commitment to affordable and cost-effective programs for its students.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

[Victoria McNeil, Director of Financial Aid, Quinnipiac University](#): Although Quinnipiac University is "grateful for the recent infusion of ARPA funds to assist with students eligible for [the] Roberta B. Willis scholarships this year and next, the reality is that Connecticut is lagging far behind our peers across the nation in funding for state financial aid programs." Offering financial assistance to students "at a higher rate would give them more incentive to stay in-state to attend one of" Connecticut's institutions of higher education. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, college enrollment has declined substantially, and informing students of their financial aid awards earlier than later would have a significant impact on their enrollment decisions. Therefore, a "redesign of the Roberta B. Willis program" as outlined in [H.B. 5137](#) "would signal the commitment of the state of Connecticut to helping its students enroll and stay in Connecticut."

[Yale University](#): Yale University "applauds" the state legislature and Governor Lamont "for taking the important step in allocating \$20 million of American Rescue Plan funds in both FY2022 and FY2023 to the Robert Willis Scholarship program." This additional funding will help to get students to remain in Connecticut during and after their pursuit of higher education by making the process more affordable and cost-effective. Therefore, the University supports [H.B. 5137](#), specifically the plan "to seek expert advice about redesigning the Roberta Willis Scholarship program to provide award information directly to students and to provide that information earlier." The changes proposed in [H.B. 5137](#) would "help low-income and first-generation students understand that college is affordable."

[Diana Draper, Director of Financial Aid, Fairfield University](#): Fairfield University recommends that the state legislature "consider making significant changes to the state's financial aid program" as outlined in [H.B. 5137](#). Specifically, that the legislative session utilizes the budget surplus to fund the Roberta B. Willis scholarship program prospectively, to engage a national consultant to redesign the scholarship program, and to increase funding in fiscal year 23 and fiscal year 24. While the University is grateful for 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." In addition, institutions of higher education are "forced to guess their annual allocation when packaging students during the admissions process." These allocations aren't made by OHE until August, "after enrollment decisions have been made and students have already enrolled." Finally, the consensus among higher education institutions in Connecticut is 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."

[Rhona Free, President, University of Saint Joseph](#): The University of Saint Joseph is recommending that both the state legislature and the Lamont administration make "significant changes to the state's student financial aid program" as part of "budget adjustment bill" [H.B. 5137](#). Connecticut ranks last "in the region in our investment in need-based financial aid as a percentage of our overall higher education spending." Because OHE is unable to "alert institutions of their annual allocation until after the fall semester has begun," colleges and universities are forced to make "conservative estimate[s] annually about how much funding we have to award Connecticut students and may need to hold back funds until the budget has passed." Therefore, the University recommends utilizing the budget surplus to fund the Roberta B. Willis program prospectively, engaging a national consultant to redesign the scholarship program, and increasing funding in fiscal year 23 for fiscal year 24.

[Julie Savino, Executive Director of Financial Assistance, Sacred Heart University](#): Sacred Heart University "offers our support for" [H.B. 5137](#), as "Providing funding for need-based financial aid, which will provide access and opportunity to higher education for low-income residents of this state is critically important." The state legislature needs to "make assisting the neediest students a priority, which will increase Connecticut's college attainment rates—also among the worst in the country." Finally, Sacred Heart recommends using "the budget surplus to fund the Willis Scholarship program prospectively," "Hir[ing] a national consultant to redesign the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program," and "Increas[ing] funding for FY23 and FY24."

[Jennifer Widness, President, Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges \(CCIC\)](#): The Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges is recommending "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" [H.B. 5137](#). Additionally, the consensus among institutions of higher education in Connecticut is that the scholarship program is "ripe for an overhaul that would prioritize assisting the state's neediest students and thereby increasing Connecticut's college attainment rates." Therefore, the CCIC is recommending that the legislature utilize the budget surplus to fund the Roberta B. Willis program prospectively, engage a national consultant to redesign the scholarship program, and increase funding in fiscal year 23 for fiscal year 24.

[Ashley Zane, Government Affairs Associate, Connecticut Business and Industry Association \(CBIA\)](#): Ms. Zane of the Connecticut Business and Industry Association supports [H.B. 5137](#), stating that, "Investing in higher education is critical to ensuring our state's economic future, and expanding access and awareness is the key to expanding opportunity." Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, college enrollment has declined substantially, and "ensuring the highest need students have access to funding is critical to ensure they have options for their future and are not left behind." Students are offered "better financial aid and grants options" in neighboring states, which can lead to a mass "migration of talent." Therefore, [H.B. 5137](#) will help to alleviate this issue by offering financial incentives for graduating students to remain in and/or return to Connecticut.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None Expressed for House Bill 5137.

Reported by: Austin Hyatt

Date: 3/22/2022