



Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Testimony in Support of

Senate Bill 1410, An Act Establishing A Task Force To Support Promise Programs In The State

House Bill 6885, An Act Expanding The Debt-free Community College Program

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

March 7, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Slap, Representative Haddad, Senator Martin, Representative Bronko, and distinguished members of the Committee on Higher Education and Employment Advancement. The [Hartford Foundation for Public Giving](#) appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony **in support of Senate Bill 1410, An Act Establishing A Task Force To Support Promise Programs In The State and House Bill 6885, An Act Expanding The Debt-free Community College Program. The foundation appreciates the legislature's efforts to ensure that all of Connecticut's students have access to affordable post-secondary education opportunities that reduce or eliminate the need to incur debt and establishes a task force to fully examine supports students need to get to and through college.**

Since 1925, the Hartford Foundation has proudly served as the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. This year, the foundation celebrates 100 years of service and remains committed to building an even greater Hartford region. Over the past two years, we have distributed more than \$100 million in grants to promote equitable opportunity for all residents in our region. Made possible by the gifts of generous individuals, families and organizations, the foundation has awarded grants of more than \$1 billion since its founding in 1925.

As part of our strategic priorities to dismantle structural racism and advance equitable economic and social mobility for Black and Latine residents of Greater Hartford, the Hartford Foundation continues to work with government, nonprofit and other public-private partners to increase stable employment and career opportunities for youth and adults in our region facing multiple barriers.

Our work recognizes that all residents in our region need access to education and training that lead to employment that provides a sustaining wage. The foundation's efforts focus on increasing opportunities for post-secondary education and training and hiring and retaining residents with significant barriers to employment, including first-generation students, returning citizens, and opportunity youth disconnected from school and work, and students from low- and moderate communities of color. In February 2025, unemployment in Connecticut was three percent, yet labor participation was 62.6 percent. The low participation reflects the need to ensure we are engaging residents who have challenges in accessing and persisting in workforce training and job opportunities.

Recognizing the value of postsecondary education and training to the economic mobility of middle- and low-income students, in 2024 the foundation awarded 440 scholarships totaling more than \$1.45 million. These scholarships were awarded through more than 100 funds created at the Hartford Foundation by individuals, families and organizations. The foundation has been awarding scholarships since 1945 and has seen firsthand the importance of students receiving adequate funds to attend and complete college. For many students, especially those from low- and moderate-income families, whether they receive the financial aid needed directly



affects the feasibility of attending four-year colleges. We know that a high percentage of older and first-generation students in Connecticut rely on receiving substantial support.

The foundation offers its enthusiastic support for Senate Bill 1410 which creates a task force to examine Connecticut’s existing scholarship programs, research and document the unmet needs of students, and identify strategies to expand the range of comprehensive scholarship services provided by programs. We would recommend that the task force’s research begin by reviewing studies that have been conducted to date in Connecticut to inform its work.

Existing research has shown that there are negative effects on college enrollment when college prices increase and grant aid decreases, and that these enrollment effects are particularly substantial among students from low-income households. Local research examined how expanded services can better support underrepresented college students. A literature review on scholarships and student supports conducted by Trinity College on behalf of the foundation highlighted that monetary scholarships on their own are insufficient in helping students to complete college and financial aid applications, successfully transition and acclimate to college, or remain resilient until completion. The review suggested additional supports including financial aid application assistance, enhanced advising and college coaching both before and during enrollment, immersion in learning communities, and sustained contact with scholarship recipients about procedural requirements may be particularly effective in increasing college access, persistence, and completion.

The executive summary of the literature review can be found [here](#) and full report [here](#). A Hartford Foundation learning brief on scholarships and college access can be found [here](#).

The foundation recognizes the importance of wraparound services to help meet basic needs and navigate steps to complete college. The foundation has long-standing experience working with the [Hartford Promise](#) scholarship program. To date, Hartford Promise has awarded \$9.5 million in scholarships to more than 1,000 students. Ninety percent of the students served by Hartford Promise are people of color, 75 percent come from low-income households, and 70 percent are first-generation college students.

Hartford Promise not only provides hundreds of Hartford Public Schools graduates with scholarships, but also comprehensive wraparound services before, during, and after college over ten years. These supports have contributed to the incredible success that Hartford Promise has demonstrated with 87 percent of their students persisting beyond the first year of college and 75 percent of participating students graduating from college. These numbers far exceed the majority of promise programs throughout the country. Some of this support includes financial resources for laptops, textbooks, emergencies, and mental health support. Wraparound supports include one-on-one pairing with a coach for direct assistance including connection to tutoring, academic advising, and strategic goal planning. To better prepare them for college and careers, Hartford Promise scholars participate in workshops on vital soft skills including time management, professionalism, and resume writing. Career development services are also available including mock interviews, salary negotiation workshops and networking.

The foundation appreciates that the proposed task force in Senate Bill 1410 would consist of a diverse group of stakeholders including experts in financial aid, college admissions, students and graduates who have participated in promise programs, school guidance counselors, representatives of promise programs in Hartford and New Haven, and key state education officials. **We would also recommend the addition of representatives**



of the Waterbury promise program. We applaud the bill’s inclusion of students and graduates from promise programs and utilize their first-hand experience of some of the challenges and opportunities facing students and how these programs can be most effective.

The Hartford Foundation especially appreciates the bill’s intent to establish a public-private partnership to coordinate services state-wide. We recommend also including representatives of Hartford, New Haven and other private foundations to draw on their experience in providing scholarships, critical student needs, and in developing recommendations on ways government and philanthropy can work together to enhance and sustain these important programs. Understanding the investments in which philanthropy has been involved is essential in understanding the ongoing government support needed to ensure the program is successful. No one entity can support the significant needs for tuition and other supports alone. Another alternative would be for the task force to invite representatives of philanthropy to sessions for consultation. This kind public-private collaboration does not happen enough.

The foundation also supports House Bill 6885, which seeks to expand the Mary Ann Handley Award, Connecticut's debt-free community college program, to include students enrolled in state universities within the Connecticut State University System. We know that the vast majority of the approximately 85,000 students attending Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) are from Connecticut, with 35 percent of all high school graduates attending a school in the CSCU system after graduation. We also know that approximately 80 percent of these students work and live in Connecticut after graduation, helping to infuse our economy with educated and talented young people. Beyond offering students a wide array of quality academic programs, CSCU also represents the most affordable option for students from lower income and working-class backgrounds.

Providing access to an affordable post-secondary education is vital to the long-term health and well-being of our state. By including qualifying CSUS students in the Mary Ann Handley Award program, this modest legislative proposal will reduce out-of-pocket expenses to make higher education more affordable.

There are a number of other programs the foundation has supported that offer intensive supports to help students to prepare for and complete college.

In 2023, the Hartford Foundation gave a grant to [Hartford Youth Scholars \(HYS\)](#) to provide academic and mentoring support to students before entering 7th grade and continuing through college graduation. HYS programs are designed to address the needs of every student, as well as to provide them and their families with a nurturing and supportive community throughout high school and college. With frequent communication, academic monitoring, and special attention to the college process, HYS tailors its programming to each individual student’s situation to ensure that they have the supports they need to obtain a college degree.

In 2021, the Foundation awarded a grant to [Capital Community College](#) to more fully serve its student body by connecting students to its on-campus Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Center initiative. It is designed to help connect students to both internal and external support programs needed to persist and complete their studies and move on to gainful employment.

The foundation also provided a \$45,000 community organizing grant to the [Student Loan Fund](#) to support its work of developing leaders to help improve the systems of higher education funding and financing that disproportionately impact people of color and first-generation students. With an average debt of \$36,000, borrowers are struggling to build wealth, contribute fully to their families, and engage deeply with their



communities. Student debt also has been shown to be a racial equity issue. Black women often receive less financial aid and end up owing more than any other group.

The Hartford Foundation is eager to partner with legislators, philanthropy, nonprofits, advocates, and businesses to eliminate barriers to higher education and employment and ensure that all residents have an opportunity to reach their full potential and attain economic stability, to thrive, and contribute to Connecticut's economy.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our staff at policy@hfpg.org or 860-548-1888.