

October 3, 2023

Chairs of the Joint Committee on Higher Education
State House, Room 473B
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chair Comerford, Chair Rogers, and members of the Joint Committee on Higher Education,

As organizations committed to advancing educational equity and justice in Massachusetts, we appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony in support of H.1265/S.823, An Act relative to debt-free public higher education.

In Massachusetts' knowledge-based economy, postsecondary education is a critical pathway to achieving social and economic mobility not just for individual students, but for entire families and generations. Yet, for hundreds of thousands of college-going students in the Commonwealth, one of the most significant concerns is the rising cost of college and how to pay for it — not just for tuition but other expenses such as room and board, books and supplies, transportation, and additional unexpected costs that can derail students from pursuing their college goals. For many students, attending a public institution where state residents pay less tuition is the most affordable and often the only option. However, years of inadequate state funding and grant aid have put this once-affordable option out of financial reach for students, especially systematically underserved students.

Despite being among the wealthiest states in the nation, before the Fiscal Year 2024 state budget was signed last month, MA ranked 37th in state-funded student financial aid. Meanwhile, the cost of public higher education in MA has increased by 59% since 2000, while the average household income has only increased by 13%. This reality, coupled with inadequate grant aid, has left many students and families in the Commonwealth no choice but to take on some of the country's highest average student loan debt burdens.

If adopted, this bill would create a grant program to pay tuition and fees for eligible students at Massachusetts public colleges and universities or certificate, vocation, or training programs at a public college or university. It also ensures that funds from this new grant program do not affect the eligibility of other forms of aid such as state grants, Pell Grants, Institutional aid, gift aid, or federal aid. These provisions would be life-changing for many – making college more accessible and affordable, especially for students from low-income backgrounds, undocumented students, and Black and Latina/o/x students who have less wealth on average than their White peers. Reducing barriers to college is particularly critical in the Commonwealth, where demands for specialized skills continue to grow, and earnings for college graduates far outpace wages for high school graduates. In 2021, the median income for bachelor's degree holders was \$71,344; in contrast, for high school graduates or individuals with a GED, median earnings are \$40,724 – a difference of more than \$30,000 annually. This is more evidence of substantial and pervasive gaps in our state – however, it does not have to be this way.

While this legislation represents a positive shift toward investing in public higher education and mitigating the affordability crisis, particularly for low-income students, undocumented students, and students of color, we recognize this is just one component of broader higher education policies and strategies needed to commit to, and invest in, improving institutions and student supports. Therefore, we also support the Cherish Act, which would establish a minimum funding level for public higher education and prohibit tuition and fee increases for students enrolled in public colleges and universities.

With significant investments through the recent passage of the Fair Share Amendment and the fiscal year 2024 budget, coupled with public demand and policymakers' recognition that higher education must change to meet the needs of

individuals and society, it is now up to state leaders to seize this opportunity to take the bold steps necessary to make college affordable, especially for those who struggle the most to pay. Ensuring students can afford to attend and graduate college benefits the individual and their families while contributing to a better-educated society, which is critical to the Commonwealth's prosperity and the health of our economy. Therefore, we urge you to report these bills out favorably as soon as possible and ensure the House and Senate pass the bill this year!

With deep gratitude for all that you do to support Massachusetts students and families,

