

## Supporting H-5130

My name is Dr. Mikaila Arthur. I am a Providence resident, and I am here today to talk about the impact increasing Rhode Island's minimum wage, as outlined in S-143, would make in terms of college access and affordability.

A full-time undergraduate student at Rhode Island College in 2020-2021 will pay about \$10,000 in tuition and fees, before any financial aid. Depending on whether students live in dorms, on their own, or with family, additional costs for books, living expenses, meals, and transportation vary, but are usually estimated at over \$13,000, leading to a total cost of about \$23,800.

Financial aid makes a dent in this sum—the maximum Pell grant, \$6,345, together with other federal, state, and institutional aid, can cover much of the tuition cost for the poorest students. But many students, even those with no financial support from their families, are ineligible for federal financial aid due to complexities of their family situation. At the current Rhode Island minimum wage, a student ineligible for federal aid would have to work more than 40 hours a week just to afford to pay their total cost of attendance.

As anyone who has worked with college students knows, working a full-time job while going to school full time is extremely challenging. Such a balancing act deprives students of time to study, time to engage with co-curricular opportunities like internships, and even time to meet with academic advisors to plot out their academic careers. As a Rhode Island College faculty member, I see students every day struggling to maintain this balance. They are amazing, insightful, dedicated, and motivated, but trying to hold down two different jobs, to care for their families, and to study means they do not even have time for sleep. And working full time has become more common—today, 40% of undergraduate students work at least 30 hours per week. Research shows that working such hours, especially in non-professional jobs, is associated with decreased academic success and reduced graduation rates. Research also shows that 4-year college graduates make \$1 million more over their lifetimes, pay more taxes, and use less social services. The RAND Corporation estimates that the total net lifetime public value gained from an individual achieving a bachelor's degree rather than stopping at high school is approximately \$100,000-\$150,000.

So what would be the impact of a \$15 minimum wage here in Rhode Island? Students would become able to pay for their full cost of attendance, even without any financial aid, at a little more than 30 hours of work per week. Tuition costs alone would only require about 13 hours of work a week. This is still too many hours, but it is worlds better than what students are facing today.

A real commitment to college affordability, of course, would require the State of Rhode Island to substantially increase its investment in higher education. According to the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, Rhode Island spends about 27% less in state dollars per full-time equivalent student on public higher education than it did 20 years ago, and while funding has been trending upward in recent years, these small gains do not make up for years of disinvestment. An increase in the minimum wage coupled with much stronger public support for higher education would lead to a college education our students and their families could truly afford.

As an educator, it is heartbreaking to see students forced to choose between going to class and picking up an extra shift or to watch them struggle to stay awake in class after working long hours in low wage jobs. I am reminded every day of how big a difference a few more dollars would make in my students' chances of fulfilling their dreams and aspirations. Therefore, I know that supporting an increase in the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, as proposed in H-5130, is one small but important part of the effort we must make to increase college access and affordability. Tying the minimum wage to inflation and including tipped and domestic workers in the increase are also important for reaching this goal.

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