



Office of the
Postsecondary
Commissioner

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May 8, 2024

The Honorable Marvin Abney
Chairman, House Finance Committee
Rhode Island House of Representatives
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

RE: In Support of HB8108 - An Act Relating to Education - Rhode Island Hope Scholarship Program

Dear Chairman Abney:

I am writing to express my support for HB8108 - An Act Relating To Education - Rhode Island Hope Scholarship Program, which would extend funding for this pilot scholarship program until 2030.

I initially supported the creation of this scholarship program during the 2023 Legislative Session noting then that the average college debt was \$32,056 per student and that Rhode Islanders had over \$4.6 billion of student loan debt. I also discussed that getting a college education in Rhode Island was, and remains, an expensive investment but that a college degree is a powerful tool for economic mobility for our residents. Further, it is clear that student success leads to building and sustaining a healthy state economy.

The creation of the Hope Scholarship made a college education here in Rhode Island a reality for 300 Rhode Island College students enrolled in the program during the fall 2023 semester. Additionally, the program had a successful kick-off event last October which was well-attended by state and federal leaders, staff, faculty and students alike. The energy among the RIC community and beyond was palpable and that enthusiasm remained with faculty and staff who continue to actively engage in supporting students working towards successfully completing a four-year degree or certificate program in high-need fields such as nursing, pre-K through grade twelve (12) education, and the trades. RIC provides a strong and affordable education for the jobs the Rhode Island workforce needs to fill. Additionally, the college reports that freshmen and sophomore students are more focused on their academic goals in hopes of earning the scholarship in their last two years at RIC.

Extending the Hope Scholarship Pilot Program to 2030 would allow a new cohort of students to take advantage of this exciting program. It no doubt will help Rhode Island meet its goal of 70 percent attainment by 2030 and address workforce needs left by an aging and retiring population.

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The future of Rhode Island depends on the investments we make in our students and I believe the Hope Scholarship will continue to provide our students with an affordable option for college and subsequent employment success. I thank the committee for its consideration of this bill and encourage the committee to support it for passage.

Respectfully,

**Shannon Gilkey, Ed.D.
Commissioner of Postsecondary Education**

cc: **The Honorable Members of the House Committee on Finance
The Honorable Joseph McNamara
Ms. Nicole McCarty, Esq., Chief Legal Counsel to the Speaker of the House**