

Debt-Free Public Higher Education Coalition

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the economy and on public higher education. To address these intertwined concerns, the Debt-Free Public Higher Education Coalition is voicing its strong support [for House Docket 5157, An Act Relative to Debt-Free Futures for Essential Workers.](#)

The bill provides those deemed [essential workers](#) during the pandemic with a \$10,000 grant that can be used to help them attend Massachusetts public colleges and universities or help relieve their existing student debt burden.

This bill takes a creative approach to tackling three problems at once. First, it addresses the racial and economic justice goal of providing greater access to higher education by eliminating student debt for anyone attending a public college or university. Second, it supports enrollment at public colleges and universities during a period when schools are facing many challenges, including enrollment uncertainty. Third, it provides fuel for the state's economy as employment needs and opportunities arise that will require a trained and educated workforce.

The impact of debt and the value of investing in public higher education are the subjects of two recent studies: [COVID-19 Pandemic, Economic Recovery and the Need for Student Debt Cancellation in Massachusetts](#), by Anastasia C. Wilson, and [An Economic Analysis of Investment in Public Higher Education in Massachusetts: Recovering from the COVID-19 Crisis and Laying Foundations for the Future](#), by Michael Ash and Shouvik Chakraborty.

The coalition also sees this bill as a small societal recognition of those who have put themselves and their families at risk during the pandemic and kept the Commonwealth functioning.

Sadly, we have already seen many instances of essential employees suddenly becoming expendable, as was the case in recent layoffs at UMass Lowell, at hospitals and in many other workplaces.

This bill will help Steve Turcotte and people like him. Steve works in the facilities department at UMass Lowell and is responsible for making sure dorms are clean

and meeting COVID-19 prevention protocols. He is an essential employee as well as a student at UMass Lowell, pursuing a bachelor's degree in business administration. Steve has been threatened with being laid off and was forced to take a furlough. He does not deserve to be thrust into economic uncertainty or have his pursuit of a degree — one that will lead to more employment opportunities — jeopardized.

Such opportunities will be vital. The coalition fears that many workers, even those deemed essential, will lose jobs because of the pandemic's effect on the economy.

Protecting those who have protected the rest of us during a global pandemic is a just goal. It is good for our essential workers, good for our public colleges and universities, and good for our economy.

The coalition is counting on you to support [HD.5157](#) as tangible recognition of the sacrifices that essential workers have made throughout this crisis.

Sincerely,

The Debt-Free Public Higher Education Coalition

The coalition has representatives from the Massachusetts Teachers Association, American Federation of Teachers-Massachusetts, Boston Teachers Union, Citizens for Public Schools, Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance, Jobs With Justice, PHENOM, Act On Mass, Zero Debt Massachusetts, Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, Field First, Massachusetts AFL-CIO, SEIU, Hildreth Institute, Massachusetts Communities Action Network, Progressive Massachusetts, and Raise Up Massachusetts.