October 15, 2013

Members of the Subcommittee on Student Loans and Debt,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on a topic of great significance to me as the President of Wheelock College and to the students who attend our institution in pursuit of its unique public mission – to improve the lives of children and families.

Wheelock College shares the Committee’s concerns about the issue of high debt levels for students and alumni. We are dedicated to finding workable solutions to bring down this burden. Although our tuition increases have been modest, our budget for financial aid, including scholarships, grants and loans, has increased at a faster rate than tuition, resulting in more financial support to our students than ever before. Unfortunately, however, as student need has increased, state and federal financial aid has decreased.

The College is constantly fund-raising to fill the student aid gap resulting from decreased public funding while doing as much as we can to keep costs down. We annually evaluate our students’ financial needs and recalibrate the College’s financial aid awarding strategy to ensure we are addressing those needs. As a result, we are among Massachusetts’ public and private colleges that have done our part in ensuring access for all students by collectively committing over $700 million in need-based financial aid to Massachusetts residents in 2012.

Need-based financial aid programs must be a funding priority for the Legislature. I commend you and your colleagues for increasing funding for need-based financial aid in FY14. This action represented the first significant increase to the program in the state since 2008. I urge the Legislature to continue this upward trend and do everything possible to return need-based financial aid to previous levels. With colleges like Wheelock doing everything in our power to lower costs and keep necessary tuition adjustments low, increasing need-based financial aid for FY15 is an immediate step the Legislature could take towards alleviating the effects of loans and debt on students and their families.
For many of our students, federal Perkins loans make sense because these loans are often partially or completely cancellable when our students go to work in their chosen fields. Likewise, state student loan forgiveness programs are of tremendous benefit to Wheelock students. Because of the College’s unique mission and commitment to social justice, our graduates often enter fields that do not pay high salaries, such as social work, teaching, counseling, and youth advocacy. Our graduates follow Wheelock’s mission to improve the lives of children and families by making this a better world - there is no more noble cause. I urge the Committee to consider supporting and expanding student loan forgiveness programs for students that enter the “helping” professions, particularly the social work student loan forgiveness pilot currently proposed by HB1077. Such opportunities encourage students to follow their passion for public service and social justice oriented work while enabling them to re-pay debt. Both of these outcomes benefit the Commonwealth.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide thoughts on a critical issue facing colleges, universities, families and students of the Commonwealth. I am available to provide additional feedback or to answer questions at any time. I can be reached through Marta Rosa, Wheelock College’s Senior Director of Government & External Affairs and Strategic Partnerships, at mrosa@wheelock.edu or 617-879-2314.

Sincerely,

Jackie Jenkins-Scott
President