



February 13, 2009

Honorable Chairs, Members of the Committee:

My name is Tom Bontly. I am an associate professor in the Philosophy Department at the University of Connecticut. I am also President of the UConn Chapter of the AAUP.

There is an aphorism about an ancient monarch who hired a wise man to inscribe a saying on his tomb, a saying that would be true for all time. When the monarch came to see the words that had been written, he found these: "This too shall pass." In better times, these words would seem pessimistic. Today they strike an optimistic note, reminding us that, like past recessions, this one too will eventually recede.

How quickly the recession will recede in Connecticut, and what shape the state will be in when it does, are another matter. In these difficult times, you, our legislative leaders, have the unenviable job of balancing the state's urgent needs for today with the desire for a better tomorrow for the people of Connecticut.

I don't need to tell you that a healthy University of Connecticut is crucial to a better tomorrow. The state needs an educated workforce ready to seize opportunity and reinvigorate the economy. The state needs an engine of ingenuity and entrepreneurship. It needs a magnet to attract both investment and talent to Connecticut. And it needs a vigorous public-private partnership to maximize the return on our resources. UConn today is all of these things. The numbers bear out how important UConn is to the state economy: for every state dollar allocated to UConn, the state sees more than five dollars added to its GDP.¹ The university attracts federal and private investment, promising students, excellent teachers, and top-flight researchers. In other words, UConn stimulates the economy. And we could all use a little economic stimulus right now.

However, UConn wouldn't be in a position to do any of these things without your leadership. The state's major investment in UConn 2000 and 21st Century UConn transformed the university in many ways. But a great university is a fragile thing. Without adequate support,

¹ *UConnomy: Contributing to the Economic Health of Connecticut*, <http://www.UConn.edu/UConnomy/>

many of these gains will quickly be reversed. Already we are serving more students with fewer teachers than we were just a year ago, and we've only begun to see the effects of the economic downturn.

I think you know that UConn faculty, through the AAUP, have stepped up to the plate to help the university get through difficult times before. And we recognize that the state's needs far exceed its resources at present. So I'm not here today to ask you to increase funding for anything—only to ask you please to protect what you have built, and (as in the saying of Augustus) to “make haste slowly”, so as not to let today's fiscal crisis cause a further tragedy tomorrow.

This week there has been a great fuss about the rehiring of retired faculty (and other state employees). The suggestion that such rehiring is “abusive” is however inaccurate. In fact, the system is working as intended. In economic downturns, the state encourages early retirements so as to shift costs to the pension plan, one inducement being the opportunity to be rehired part-time. Simultaneously, support for the university gets cut, making it impossible to hire new full-time replacements for the retirees. But enrollment pressures don't go down, so the university is forced to hire part-timers. The most qualified are usually those who just retired early, and thus the rehiring is a fairly direct result of measures taken to save the state money in hard times. We urge that sensationalized press reports be set aside. The abusive of the system is imagined, not real. No taxpayer dollars were wasted. The real issues are whether the university has adequate staffing given its enrollments, and whether the pension plan has adequate funding to support another wave of early retirees.

We are party to the on-going SEBAC negotiations/discussions. I am not at liberty to discuss what is happening there, but faculty, now as ever, are looking to play a productive role. We are concerned that any concessions by faculty should benefit the University of Connecticut and the students in particular. In past downturns, a portion of the savings from retirements and concessions has flowed to the university. That does not seem to be in the offing this time, and we worry that the outcome will be a severe depletion of the educational outcomes and opportunities: fewer and bigger classes, longer time to graduation. When state support is reduced, our 25,000 students are of necessity asked to pay more for their education. Please keep in mind also that a good share of tuition at UConn goes to financial aid for students, and the Pell Grants are ticking upwards as well. These burdens should be shared.

I know that our Executive Director, Ed Marth, has encouraged some of your colleagues to think about a mechanism to help stand behind the many newly-unemployed parents of students.

Unemployed parents are unable to co-sign for student loans; students who can't get loans are forced to drop out; drop-outs are more likely to become unemployed themselves. Such a cycle would be extremely destructive; we cannot allow it to become established. We need to create new supports for the student loan program, to keep our students in college and prevent doors of opportunity from closing on those already harmed by the economic downturn.

We also need to revisit the unbelievable morass created in the wave of post-Rowland ethics reform. Some of these reforms essentially stymie faculty from engaging in public service and students from interactions with the public. In the former I refer to a new obligation for faculty to get permission to do their job in the form of serving on national panels, reviewing books and professional journal articles, performing service in the summer, and more. We support the aim of avoiding conflicts of interest, and we are not asking for a lower standard--we ask only that the audit system not itself become a barrier to public service.

As I said, these hard times will pass, but a return to prosperity will require strong leadership and wise legislation. In the mean time, the burdens should be shared fairly by all. We ask for thoughtful assistance and urge review of the real needs of the educational and research mission of the University of Connecticut.

Thank you for your time.

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President UConn AAUP