

**Burns, Vanessa**

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**From:** mtarsi.umass@gmail.com on behalf of Melinda R. Tarsi [mtarsi@polsci.umass.edu]  
**Sent:** Monday, February 28, 2011 3:12 PM  
**To:** AppropriationTestimony  
**Subject:** Testimony for Public Hearing on State Education, 2/28/11

Dear Members of the Committee,

I am a 2006 graduate of Western Connecticut State University, and currently a Ph.D. candidate in political science studying American social policy. A lifetime resident of Connecticut, I am a strong believer in the value of public higher education and of the need for state support of all of its institutions of higher education. The current system is indeed untenable, but the proposed changes to the higher education system will only corrode the member institutions and adversely affect the quality of education received by all students.

One of the proposed changes to the system would be to collapse the administrative organization of the state schools into one Board of Regents (although there is still deliberation about whether or not UConn would be included). Such a proposal faces inherent structural and substantive problems. Structurally, the Board of Regents would need to be equipped to handle a highly diverse set of educational institutions, ones with very different missions, contexts, and student bodies. It is unlikely that one board can adequately meet the needs of all member institutions equally, especially with the ability to determine how to transfer funding from one part of the system to another. This necessarily means that CT institutions of higher education will be in competition with one another, not only for the best students and faculty, but also for resources necessary to their survival, given at the discretion of a board with too little oversight and no prior history of maintaining such an organization.

Substantively, the changes to the administrative structure would affect the unique educational character of the member institutions. No longer encouraged to celebrate their individual accomplishments or strengths, member institutions would be thrown together into categories and forced to spend resources lobbying for essential services and funding. Examples of similar systems (like in Minnesota) reinforce this claim, as schools face uphill challenges maintaining institutional diversity while being a part of an umbrella organizational structure.

While the organizational side of the proposal is troubling, perhaps even moreso are the proposed changes to funding, tying it to performance standards for students of these public institutions. Measured against private universities, public education students seem lackluster, with higher rates of attrition and lower levels of academic performance. If the use of educational standards in public education at the primary level (through No Child Left Behind, for example) has taught us anything, it's the inability of performance standards to make wholesale positive changes in the academic lives of students. Schools striving to achieve educational standards set by a governing body without realization of the special needs of that institution mean that the school, in a desperate attempt to secure the funding it can never be sure of, will push towards metrics and leave behind the rich, fulfilling elements of higher education. If extracurricular activities such as theater, athletics, debate, or student groups do not have measurable impact upon student performance, from where will their funding come? How will the Committee be able to assure students at these institutions that their educations will not be focused more on retention and graduation rates than on their personal success and achievements?

A student who graduates in four years is not necessarily better or more academically developed

than one who graduates in five, and as you know many of the students in our public education system are classified as "non-traditional," such as working professionals returning to the classroom. Forcing institutions to be beholden to outmoded and untested parameters for assessing academic "success" means that only a very narrowly-constructed student is "deserving" of higher education in the state. With the current economy and the reality of globalization and technological advance at the state, national, and international level, this is certainly no time to limit access to education for students. Generic metrics of success tied to funding is a recipe for a race to the bottom in CT higher education, and one that this Committee should not endorse.

What is unique about public education in Connecticut is its diversity, and its strength comes from its open access to members of the community. I encourage the members of this Committee to undertake more deliberation, including more events for stakeholder participation, before hastily endorsing a proposal which could negatively impact the quality of higher education in Connecticut for years to come.

Best,  
Melinda R. Tarsi, WCSU '06

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