

The University of Connecticut Chapter of

AAUP

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HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT ADVANCEMENT COMMITTEE

Thomas J. Peters, Professor & President
Edward C. Marth, Executive Director

March 10, 2011

Re: S.B. 1011

Senator Bye, Representative Willis, and Members of the Committee:

For nearly forty years we have been involved with higher education administration, often striving to correct the ill effects of maladministration. We have witnessed changes in boards from Regents to Higher Education. We have had the privilege of working with a board which has responsibility solely for a single educational institution, such as the UConn model.

As members of the UConn educational community, we will first emphasize the critical concerns this proposal raises for UConn. We will then expand upon the expected negative impact more broadly for higher education in Connecticut, while we respectfully urge you to expand that breadth to include the dissenting comments offered by our educational colleagues at those sister institutions.

In President Austin's testimony of February 28th, he emphasized the research emphasis at UConn. He noted that UConn is unique in having this responsibility within Connecticut higher education. Vice President Laurencin of the UConn Health Center joined in this emphasis. The pursuit of nationally and internationally competitive research funding requires agility and responsiveness that further bureaucracy could easily impede.

The value of this agility is expressed by a recent example. An interdisciplinary UConn team had been awarded nearly \$1M in funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to purchase state of the art equipment for advanced engineering design capabilities. A supplement was subsequently awarded from NSF for interaction with industry to promote technology transfer, providing direct federal salary funding for a visiting industrial scientist to utilize this equipment. The facility became operational in late February, 2011, while the industrial scientist was traveling internationally. Several communications then led to confirming a March 8th opening on March 1st. The funding was in place and the department was resourceful to clear the authorizing payroll paperwork within 48 hours to secure the arrangement. This timeliness is crucial to building these relations with industry and would have likely been impeded by a more extensive bureaucracy.

The only rationale consistently expressed for the inclusion of UConn is on the lines of the March 8, 2011 Hartford Courant editorial, where the title "Why Omit UConn" is an apt summary. This merely presumes that homogenization is tantamount to fairness. We strongly disagree. The risk of the present proposal to a research enterprise that annually wins \$260 million in funding for the state cannot be overstated, particularly in these tight economic times. This funding creates jobs and is an important factor in the Connecticut economy. This research emphasis also provides a different educational experience for students, which is simply not available at the community college and college level. President Austin summarized that these aspects make UConn "... different, not better, but different." The risk is that homogenization will destroy that very difference and its considerable benefits to the State of Connecticut.

More broadly, the expressed rationale behind the proposal to merge Charter Oak, the CSU system, and the Department of Higher Education is to reduce what seems to be a bloated bureaucracy. While a laudable goal, this proposed compression of agencies risks also the merging of missions as an extremely bad unintended consequence. It is a proposal which seems a reaction to the unseemly decisions made at CSU in the past year. Some local corrective action might be appropriate, but the proposed consolidation appears to be an overreaction. Our colleagues at these sister institutions have their own strong arguments while this merger will hurt their missions, while the UConn argument, above is distinctive to its research mission. We appreciate these unique perspectives that our higher educational colleagues offer. The unified higher educational argument is in strong opposition to the proposed merger, as the differences were intentional to provide an integrated educational experience that would be both diverse and inclusive for the broad needs to Connecticut citizens. Here, one size does not fit all.

Results ought to be the priority. The primary educational benefit conjectured has been a smooth flow of students who seek to begin college at the community college level and to move to graduation with a bachelor's degree from the state university system or UCONN. Considerable migration by students already happens among these institutions. I have no doubt that more ought to be done, and with fewer impediments. However, there are real differences in the expectation and offerings of each institution. Controls are important to preserve quality. While these controls might have initially been confusing and inconsistent, the institutions have cooperated over the years to enact articulation agreements that facilitate the students' pathways among these institutions. This seems like a working system that could profit from a minor tune-up, not the major overhaul proposed. Frankly, the claimed inefficiencies appear to be based upon old data, much of it merely anecdotal and imprecise that does not fully credit this valuable interagency cooperation that has already transpired without the presence of a single board. Merging the boards will not change the distinctive missions of each institution other than to seek, like water, the lowest levels in offerings, doing a disservice to aspirations to students looking to optimize those differences to enrich their educations. Vesting a single board or executive with all financial authority of a single pool of funds will eliminate competition for good ideas and become another forum for lobbying interests to divert precious resources which ought to be for bettering education in the interests of the citizenry, the business community, and the students seeking to find their way in the unfolding century.

Planning and designing a house always works better than just nailing wood together in the hope it will be better than spending time on plan and design. So, too, with higher education. The proposal to date provides no compelling design, with demonstrable benefits, only considerable risks.