

Testimony for the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee's public hearing on S.B. No. 1011 - An Act Concerning a Reorganization of Connecticut's System of Public Higher Education.

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Dear Senator Bye, Representative Willis, and members of the committee:

I want to thank you for taking my testimony.

You're giving me a great opportunity to let you know just some of what we do at Southern. We are all about students and we are also all about the surrounding community. We have a Center for Autism and a Center for nanotechnology. We house the CT Women's Hall of Fame. We have our lab school, and our speech and hearing clinic. We host the Special Olympics every year and language courses every Sunday. We have produced community leaders like Michael Jefferson, Gary Highsmith, and Gary Holder-Winfield.

That is to say, we are a community-building center, and not just a job-training center.

Indeed, we are a public university, committed to access and affordability. And the role of the public university is to develop good citizens. At the same time, our liberal arts core provides the critical thinking abilities and communication skills—writing, speaking, and listening—that all businesses want in their employees.

In fact, we've spent years building a general education curriculum that addresses 21st century workforce needs and issues.

Ten years in the making, this Liberal Education Program (as it's called) requires students to take 6 courses as a foundation for their learning: Technological Fluency, Critical Thinking, Written Communication, Quantitative Reasoning, Multilingual Communication, and Critical Inquiry.

Students also take nine courses from the following AREAS OF KNOWLEDGE: Global Awareness, Social Structure & Conflict, the Natural World, Cultural Expressions, Time & Place, Mind & Body, the American Experience, and the Creative Drive

Woven throughout all the courses are discussions of the following VALUES: Human Diversity, Aesthetic Sensitivity, Ethical Judgment, Rational Thinking, Environmental Awareness, and Civic Engagement

We put the extensive time and effort into creating this program that all students must take as part of their education at Southern because we want to create the minds that create the jobs for industries yet to be created.

More importantly, though, we want to produce reflective and nimble citizens, citizens who can participate effectively in all forms of civic life at all levels of society.

As important as it is to attain job skills, think back to your own education, and think about what kind of education you want your children to have, and what kind of education you want your neighbors to have had.

You probably want in your community people who understand the science underlying climate change; people who know the U.S. constitution; people who can read Homer and Toni Morrison; people who can distinguish between Shia and Shiite; people who know about the needs and opportunities of different economic classes.

These will be people who will participate in their community's political life, who will support their local art community; they'll go to museums and theatre, and they'll help maintain the social safety net. These will be the kind of people that Southern graduates.

If we are reduced to providing only job skills, we will strangle the kind of civic engagement that makes a healthy society and we will cut off the paths to the knowledge and opportunities that got you yourselves into the positions you now hold.

I wish I could introduce you to many of the students I have had. Knowing their circumstances would break your heart, and understanding their difficulties would make you doubt that education can provide them enough to overcome those difficulties. So much the more reason, then, that seeing their successes would move you to tears, and discovering their achievements would make you dance with joy. We don't just touch people's lives, we don't just change people's lives—we utterly transform people's lives.

I also wish you could spend just half a school day with one of our teacher/scholars. You would then see up close how much we cherish our teaching and research, our affordability, and our location in New Haven. You would see then that we could do so much more with the appropriate support. We could be a greater resource for the surrounding community, and we could transform the lives of even more students than we do now.

Thank you for listening.

Michael Shea, President of SCSU-AAUP and English Department Chair