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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

Senator Bye, Representative Willis, and members of the Committee. Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today.

I am here to express concerns regarding the portion of SB 1011 that would tie funding of the CSUs, Community Colleges and Charter Oak to various performance outcomes like graduation rates. The proposal would allow the new Board of Regents to use performance measures as a means of rewarding some institutions and punishing others - upwards of 15% of an institutions budget could be affected in this way.

I believe this type of incentive may actually degrade academic performance not enhance it. Institutions afraid of losing 15% of their budgets may pressure faculty to pass students whether they merit passage or not. There will also be pressure to dumb down or reduce the difficulty of classes. A recent book by two scholars at NYU showed our nation's universities already expect too little from students and that the students expect to do little work to graduate. They concluded that this is leading to a population that holds degrees but is not really educated. Using graduation rates or similar measures to reward universities will make this problem worse, not better. Moreover, it appears that rewarding performance in education, period, may lead not to enhancements in learning but institutions finding ways to cheat the system. The USA Today Newspaper in an article this week found evidence that cheating by schools on assessment tests has become endemic and that as the stakes on these exams grow the incentive to cheat grows as well. Fifteen percent of a school's budget is a very high stake. Ironically, a drive to reward quality may actually decrease it as every institution does what it can to graduate more students or have them score high on exams, instead of actually doing the hard work of educating students. In a time when we need to ask more of our students this policy may lead to us asking less. The result may be more degree holders but not a more skilled and educated citizenry.

Finally, institutions could also easily raise graduation and success metrics by elevating their criteria for admission. Accepting students with stronger academic credentials - as the University of Connecticut does - its average SAT is about 300 points higher than Southern's - would raise our graduation rates tremendously. Probably into the 70% range like the University of Connecticut's. Of course, this would also shut the door to opportunity for many students. Southern and its sister institutions currently give students chances that others would not give them. Many of these students are successful. I have personally helped a student who failed out of college on his first try graduate first from southern and then from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. If Southern was not as open as it is this student and others like him would never have had the chance to reach their dreams. That is something I do not want to see disappear.