



Testimony by President James Schmotter
Western Connecticut State University
Before the Higher Education and Employment
Advancement Committee
February 16, 2012

Greetings Senator Bye, Representative Willis and Committee members. I am James Schmotter, President of Western Connecticut State University (WCSU), and I am here to offer comments about House Bill 5029, *An Act Concerning College Readiness Assessments*.

For seven years, Western has addressed this issue through its “Building a Bridge to Student Success” collaboration with Danbury and Bethel Schools. As you may recall from earlier testimony to this committee, this work has produced significant decreases in the need for remediation for students from these districts preparing for college. When the program began, 61% of Bethel and Danbury students tested showed a need for remedial Writing courses and 62% needed remedial Mathematics. In year seven, the comparable percentages are 3.74% for Writing and 18.7% for Math. In the two years for which we have data, students enrolling at Western who have participated in Bridges have first- to second-year retention rates 12 to 15 percentage points higher than the general population. The six-year graduation rate for the first cohort is 4 percentage points higher than the general population. As a result, we have dramatically decreased remedial instruction at Western, with cost savings both for families and the state.

A key element in the success of the Bridges Program includes exactly the same sort of testing that H.B. 5029 proposes. We test in the junior year, assess student preparation and then WCSU and Bethel and Danbury faculty work together in curriculum workshops to develop approaches to increase readiness. It is an ongoing collaboration that has entailed considerable work over the years on developing appropriate rubrics, assessment mechanisms and curricular tools. We believe the results speak for themselves.

However, we have also discerned in our collaborative work that testing and focused attention on college readiness in the junior and senior years of high school may be too late for some students. We’ve learned from our Bethel and Danbury colleagues that often decisions made in sixth grade with regard to course selection can appreciably limit college options years later. That is why we have developed a menu of programs that engage middle school students with the college experience. These both incite personal ambition by bringing students to campus and helping them “see themselves there,” and by providing realistic counseling about academic preparation.

These programs include:

- An annual Young Writers Conference, a five-day experience that culminates with public reading of participants' work followed by an autograph party.
- Enrichment Days that bring students from Rogers Park and Broadview Middle Schools in Danbury and Bethel Middle School for enrichment across academic disciplines from the arts and sciences; students are organized into teams named for famous scientists, mathematicians or inventors.
- Camp College in August, during which students from the same three middle schools participate in a program with courses in chemistry, biology, math and writing taught by WCSU faculty in our laboratories and classrooms. Students eat in our cafeterias and learn what college is like. NASA has partnered with us on this program.
- The Junior Meteorology Program, a semester-long program in which eighth-graders work with students from our Meteorology program to learn weather forecasting skills and present their own on-air predictions. Dr. Mel Goldstein would be proud!

It will be most interesting to see how these programs affect college readiness as the participants approach high school graduation; we expect favorable results.

We believe that intervention based on measurement of students' academic proficiency produces results, and so support H.B. 5029. But we also note the importance of the nature and timing of such intervention and stress the importance of the sort of open, collegial partnership that exists between WCSU, Bethel and Danbury faculty. Bridges works because long ago we collectively decided that we all own the problem of remediation.

We intend to add at least one more school district to the partnership in the near future and also hope to develop a center or institute to offer what we have learned to colleagues across the state. Thanks to previous state support and generous help from local corporations, we are encouraged about this prospect.

Thank you for your attention. I hope this description of our experiences at Western adds some context to your deliberation on this important topic.