

**Testimony of
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**Raised Bill No. 6655
An Act Concerning Campus Safety and Security
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee Public Hearing
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Achieving the Mission: Mental Health and Student Success in College

Good afternoon Senator Bye, Representative Willis, Senator Boucher, Representative Legeyt and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee.

I am Dr. Jane Fried, Professor and Director of the Student Development in Higher Education, Masters in Counseling program at Central Connecticut State University. I am here to testify about House Bill 6655, *An Act Concerning Campus Safety and Security*.

Campus security is both a policing and a mental health issue. Most students with mental health issues do not constitute a danger to anyone, but they are in danger of failing to achieve their educational goals. In order to support students with mental health issues (best estimates are at least 25% of the population) the entire campus environment must focus on improved support for student success. This will lower student frustration, improve the quality of teaching and academic coaching and generally improve the quality of life for students and all staff who are trying to help them achieve their goals.

College attendance has become essential in this society for students who want to live stable economic and personal lives. Unfortunately, most colleges are organized and funded as if the students who attend have adequate financial resources, academic preparation and family support. For many, current resources are not adequate and these support systems are being cut at a time when the need for them is increasing if students are to achieve their academic and career goals.

Success in college requires the presence of four key assets: Academic Competence, Psychological Resilience, Financial Stability and Family/Community/Peer Support. Students who are most at risk generally lack one or more of these assets.

- 1. Academic Competence:** Many students are not prepared for the academic demands of higher education. They have not developed adequate mastery of high school subject matter, nor do they have the necessary study skills, willingness to take responsibility for their own learning or ability to maintain “time on task,” i.e. study. They often expect parents to negotiate with teachers about grades, have not been exposed to criticism of their work and have attended schools where superficial self-esteem is considered more important than academic achievement. Many have attended high schools with very weak academic programs where their grades do not accurately reflect their academic achievements.
- 2. Psychological Resilience:** College counseling center directors¹ report that this generation of students shows a significant increase in mental health issues from previous generations. These include anxiety, depression, learning disabilities, hyperactivity disorders, autism spectrum disorders, eating, substance abuse and self-abuse disorders, bipolar disorder and history of sexual abuse. Approximately 25% of persons in the 18-24 age cohort have a diagnosable (and typically treatable) mental illness. In addition, survivors of trauma often have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and veterans may also have minimal brain damage from battlefield concussions. Observations by college staff members also indicate that many students lack age appropriate social skills and do not know how to handle interpersonal difficulties without asking parents for help. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) reports that 75% of all mental illnesses appear between 18 and 24 years of age, indicating that the typical student of college age is at risk even without the pressures of college attendance. The presence of any of these conditions diminishes the likelihood that a person will be resilient and able to cope with the stresses of daily life.
- 3. Financial Stability:** Increases in adult unemployment, decreases in the value of family homes which typically are used to provide collateral for student loans and overall decline in the economy have created a perfect storm for financial instability among college

¹ Gallagher, R. (2012) National Survey of College Counseling, American College Counseling Association

students. State support for public colleges has declined in recent budget cycles leading to increased student tuition and fees. Student debt for college loans now exceeds credit card debt in the United States. The size of student loans and student fears about not being able to repay loans because of the limited job availability is a constant source of conversation among students. Many students work 40 hours a week at low paying jobs in order to pay for school. They are exhausted and unable to study or learn at the level expected by professors.

4. **Family/Community/Peer Support:** All students need social support in order to be successful in college. Historically this support has come from family and friends. This generation of students includes many who are the first ever in their family to attend college as well as veterans returning from combat who have specific needs for support that colleges are not used to providing.
 - a. *First Generation Students* - First generation students have few family members who can provide advice on methods for negotiating the administrative and academic systems of their schools, i.e. financial aid, including the completion of complex forms that require disclosure of family finances, transportation, adding and dropping courses, speaking outside of class with professors, requesting aid in the library, coping with inadequate or inaccurate advising and knowing which offices can provide help when they are in academic difficulty. These students also need training in time management and the skills of communicating with their families who may not be able or willing to release them from some of their family responsibilities
 - b. *Returning Veterans*- Returning vets have transitional difficulties as they move from a cooperative, group oriented environment to an individualistic, competitive college environment. They experience stress in crowds, and feel great isolation in classes with people who have no idea what they have been through in combat. They also have difficulty adjusting to the lack of a defined structure for required activities and the system for accessing campus resources for vets.

In order to succeed in college students need a variety of supports and resources. Some possible supports include:

1. Adequate staffing for learning centers so that students receive training in study skills and self-confidence as well as skill in negotiating the other sources of academic help at their institution.
2. Enhanced and increased staffing in counseling and career development centers so that students can learn to manage stress and make reasonable career decisions.
3. Improvement in the various advising functions that are currently provided so that every student has at least one employee or advanced student who can serve as a mentor and guide through at least the first two years of college.
4. Enhanced communication with families of first generation students so that these families have the tools and knowledge to support their students. Some of this communication should be delivered by bi-lingual staff members.
5. Training for the faculty in the neurology of learning and the effects of trauma on the learning process. Faculty members must begin to understand that learning is a complex process involving psychological, neurological and contextual factors and what to do to help students succeed in each course.
6. Training for all campus employees about the current generation of students including their emotional and contextual needs and specific training in recognition of signs that a student may be in trouble.

Conclusion

College costs have increased and resources and support services have decreased in this period where college completion has become critical for the well-being of students and the welfare of our country. The current situation requires that educational policy makers and legislators become educated themselves in the issues that this generation of students is facing and the support that these students need to become productive members of society. This education of our policy makers should lead to the integration of academic education and student services in both instructional processes and organizational structure so that the next generation of students can emerge as productive, responsible citizens, family members and workers.