



CONNECTICUT STATE
COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES
BOARD OF REGENTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

**Testimony by Ernestine Weaver
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Board of Regents for Higher Education
Connecticut State Colleges & Universities
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Good afternoon distinguished members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement and Public Safety and Security Committees. My name is Ernestine Weaver, Counsel for the Board of Regents for Higher Education. The Board of Regents governs Connecticut's four state universities, 12 community colleges, and Charter Oak State College, the state's only public, fully-online institution.

I welcome the opportunity to speak today to the efforts of the Connecticut State Colleges & Universities to fully implement Public Act 12-78. I am accompanied today by Tom Clark, Assistant Counsel for the Board, and Christopher Piscatelli, Director of Judicial Affairs at Southern Connecticut State University, who, along with other campus compliance officers sitting in the audience today, can assist me in more completely answering your questions. I am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss with you the work we are doing to implement this important Act.

I will offer just a few brief introductory remarks on behalf of our team, and then turn it over to you for questions.

First and foremost, I assure you that every one of our campuses understands on a profound level the necessity of providing the safest learning, teaching and working environment possible. No one can succeed as a student, instructor or staff member when she or he feels at risk of harm.

Due in large part to preexisting federal requirements, I can report to you that our institutions have been in compliance with the provisions of Public Act 12-78, particularly the requirements pertaining to prevention and awareness programming, for many years. While the Board has not yet formally adopted the definitions of offenses as set forth in the Act, we do have equivalent definitions in existing policies. Incorporating these provisions of the Act into our policies comes at an opportune time since we are undergoing a thorough review of our Student and Academic policies as part of our continued effort to consolidate and unify the policies of the three systems recently brought under the umbrella of the Board of Regents. I expect this incorporation will occur within a few months' time.

Implementation of the Act is layered with respect to the different cultures and sets of policies currently in place at Charter Oak State College, the State Universities and the Community Colleges. Each had previously adopted policies without regard to the other systems, and each serves dramatically different student bodies that interact with our schools and campuses in dramatically different ways. What is common, though, among all of these institutions is the commitment to addressing the issue of sexual violence and informing the campus community of the expectations of faculty, staff and students in preventing, reporting and responding to sexual violence on campus.

A comprehensive strategy to minimize the occurrence of sexual violence consists of prevention efforts, fair processes, encouraging reporting, and proportional consequences – all to the end of changing behavior and having campuses that are as free from gender violence as possible.

The starting point in preventing sexual violence is with prevention and awareness education. Informing, and in some cases altering, perceptions of what constitutes appropriate relationships and interactions

between individuals is essential given the studies that show that the perceptions of what is appropriate can be quite startling, especially among recently graduated high school students.

Beginning with New Student Orientation, Connecticut State Universities take an active and continuous role in raising awareness and creating a safe space for open dialogue and action, and I have attached examples of communication efforts from Southern that are provided to students during Welcome Week. Although each campus is different, it is typical to raise awareness through the use of educational programs that are coordinated by the Women's Center, University Police, the Office of Residence Life, and Counseling Services. These programs are designed to define the problem, explain the laws and university procedures, and teach sexual violence awareness, prevention, intervention, reporting options and confidentiality should an assault occur.

The well-known key element in preventing sexual violence is reporting. Studies consistently show that for a number of reasons sexual violence is the most underreported offense in society – not only on college campuses. Having practices that are as supportive as possible, as fair as possible, as welcoming as possible, allowing for as much victim control regarding confidentiality and process as possible, are all essential to encouraging the prompt reporting of such acts so that effective action can be taken. Additionally, institutions must strive to ensure that they make the appropriate accommodations in housing arrangements and referrals to the appropriate counseling and wellness services that provide students the level of support they need when a report is made. The processes must be characterized by fairness with care and concern, dignity and respect for all involved – the kind of processes that each parent would expect is provided to their daughter or son should she/he find themselves in such a situation.

Of course, objectives of sexual prevention efforts include changing the behavior of individuals found to have engaged in such behavior as well, to assure that the campus is not a hostile environment. Enforcement of proper conduct procedures must result in consequences that are proportional to the circumstances to alter the behavior of those who may be found to commit such acts, while assisting to inform and deter others. Doing so is consistent with the developmental mission of each campus and is instrumental and effective in maintaining a safe campus.

Upon adoption of PA 12-78, the Community Colleges formed a task force to review and make recommendations for action to reach full compliance under the Act. To that end, a template was developed for use by colleges and recommendations were made for revisions of the Community College Policy on Student Conduct to include the required definitional statements, required disclosures pertaining to professional assistance in accessing campus, local advocacy, counseling, health and mental health services, as well as mandated disclosures regarding student rights to notify law enforcement and obtain protective orders. Many of these mandated disclosures have been required through enforcement of Title IX by the Office for Civil Rights. Board staff has drafted recommended policy revisions that will soon be reviewed by the Board of Regents. Once adopted, the policies required by the Act will have the authority of the Board and the Colleges may then disseminate the Act's required policy disclosures.

In concluding my testimony and in anticipation of your questions, I commit to you that the campuses of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities – and all campuses in the State for that matter – must be known not only for the excellence of our academic programs, but for the culture of setting clear boundaries and limits of personal behavior while treating all with care and concern, dignity and respect.

Thank you, again, for including us in this conversation. I welcome any questions you may have at this time.