Testimony before the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

RE: H.B. 5050 AN ACT IMPROVING COLLEGE COMPLETIONS, SB 30 AN ACT CONCERNING THE BOARD OF REGENTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INFRASTRUCTURE AC and "Transform CSCUs 2020"

Submitted by Stephen Adair, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology at Central Connecticut State University, Chair of the Faculty Advisory Committee to the Board of Regents for Higher Education, and ex-officio member of the Board of Regents
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Representative Willis, Senator Cassano, and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony. I am in the classroom today and unable to present this in person. I am here to comment on the Governor's Bills listed as HB 5050, SB 30, as well as he budgetary outlines of the Governor's initiative "Transform CSCUs 2020."

As a faculty member, I first want to express my support for the Governor's willingness to make positive changes in the budget allocations for higher education. It represents an important investment in the state universities, the community colleges, and Charter Oak. It reverses the trend over the last few decades in which the state's portion of the system's operating budget has steadily declined. And it provides an important contrast to the general trends in states that are racing to the bottom by slashing their contributions to public higher education.

I will begin by drawing attention to two of the smaller budget items in the Governor's proposal. Over the last year and a half, much of the necessary ground work has been completed for a comprehensive program of transfer and articulation. At this point, faculty from across all institutions and all disciplines need to meet, establish, and complete curricula to institutionalize student transfer programs and degrees. The budgeted $900,000 ought to be sufficient to complete that work. Also, faculty and administrators have been actively preparing for the full implementation of PA 12-40 this fall, which requires innovation in our remedial offerings. Because campuses are now experimenting with different types of courses and programs, it is difficult to anticipate fully the financial cost and impact of this change. The $4 million will help to mitigate the costs of the embedded support in credit-bearing courses and provide an important resource for successful implementation.

Additional budgetary resources to address deferred maintenance and improve classroom technology are worthy goals, but I am not in a position to evaluate the size of these allocations relative to our system needs. I would, however, ask that you carefully weigh these items relative to what I regard as the two most important budgetary priorities: (1) to lower tuition costs for students and (2) to reduce the reliance on part-time faculty. Student debt is rapidly rising and emerging as one of the most significant financial problems in the US. Part time faculty are skilled and affective course instructors, but full-time faculty design, structure, review, assess, and modify the curriculum and provide the advising, mentoring, and personal investment in students over the course of an academic career that often proves to be the decisive contribution in transforming students.

I would like to place these priorities in a larger context. The recent public attention to the growing income inequality has particular significance for Connecticut. In 1970, Connecticut was the 34th most unequal state in the US; today it is second only to New York. While every state has experienced increases in inequality over the last several decades, the rate of change in Connecticut has been about 30% faster than any other state.

This change has great significance for the two systems of public higher education, UConn and CSCU. While both systems draw students from across the income spectrum, UConn tilts in one direction and is able to thrive in this context. CSCU tilts in the other direction and so is faced with a different set of problems and challenges.

The growing income inequality and attendant problems have a profound impact on our pedagogy and curricula, our retention and graduation rates, the amount of debt that students carry at the completion of their degree programs, and student learning, as too many students work too many hours while trying to go to school full time. Public higher education cannot solve the problem of growing income inequality on its own, but this system must be successful if it is ever to be addressed.

The value of public higher education contributes to a skilled workforce, but it also enriches the cultural, artistic, social and political conditions of the state and its citizens. The state benefits when all eligible and aspiring students realize their educational goals. But when a first generation student reaches graduation or a student in need of remedial support surpasses their own expectations, then real positive social change is achieved, one student at a time.

Realizing this change will require a balanced and equitable approach in which students at UConn, the state universities, the community colleges, and Charter Oak receive comparable levels of support. I encourage this committee to allocate as much as it is able to dedicate funds to reduce the financial obstacle for students struggling with debt and the high cost of tuition and to reduce the over-reliance on part-time faculty.

Thank you for considering my testimony.