

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

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Testimony

By

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Co-Chairs, Ranking Members, and Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, thank you for allowing me to submit written testimony today on *HB 7007 An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Planning Commission for Higher Education*.

The University of Connecticut is pleased to have participated in the Planning Commission and applauds the effort and goals of the Commission. We wholeheartedly agree that additional planning among and between higher education institutions across the state is important and valuable for all constituencies. We would welcome the opportunity to communicate with Presidents and Provosts across the state to plan initiatives and work collaboratively on the challenges facing higher education.

UConn's Board of Trustees and administration continue to set relevant benchmarks and strive to meet them. For example, UConn has recently completed a new academic plan, is nearing the completion of a new campus master plan, and has begun implementing Next Generation CT to increase our science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) capacity both in terms of increasing student enrollment, and research and education activities in these areas. Additionally, the University continues to provide an incredible return on the state's investment in UConn. For example:

- In the fall of 1995, UConn received about 10,800 applications. This year, it was more than 32,000, an increase of 198%. More importantly, the academic quality and diversity of our applicants and our students continues to rise. In that time, enrollees' SAT scores have shot up by over 120 points. And about one third of students in our most recent freshmen class are members of minority groups. In 1995, that number was 15%.
- UConn is keeping the state's best students here in Connecticut, helping to reverse what is often called the "brain drain." In each of the last three years, each freshmen class the university has enrolled has been more academically qualified and diverse than the class that came before it – with the most recent being the best in the history of the university. We are home to more honors students, valedictorians and salutatorians than ever before.
- Our freshmen retention rate is 93%, including for minority students. That is well above the national average of 81% and 80% respectively.
- Our average time to a degree is 4.2 years, which is also among the best in the nation. We have attracted more than \$40 million in private sector funding to collaborate with Connecticut companies to help them be more competitive.

- And in addition to the percentage rates, the actual numbers themselves continue to rise. In 1995, UConn awarded about 4,700 degrees. This year, that number is expected to be over 7,700. And once they graduate, most of our alumni continue to live and work in Connecticut.

We have had many conversations about academic quality at our planning commission meetings and want to reiterate the need for quality to be at the forefront of what is proposed for the future of higher education in Connecticut. Just because an academic program is cheaper, does not mean it will attract and graduate students, and/or prepare students for the workforce. Additionally, students have a choice of universities and programs to attend, both in state and out-of-state, and in order to ensure that we meet future enrollment targets, maintaining quality is essential.

UConn has worked diligently over the last decade to maintain affordability for our students. Despite cuts of more than \$35.1 million since 2009, we have done our best to keep tuition increases as minimal as possible. UConn continues to try to provide the best financial aid package to those who need assistance most. Since 1996, the University has more than quadrupled the amount of tuition and fee revenue set aside for financial need and merit based aid from \$17.4 million to \$93 million this year.

Our commitment to students and their families has been recognized by independent authorities like Kiplinger's Personal Finance, which has consistently named UConn as one of the 'best value' public universities in the nation – this year ranking UConn among the top 30 best values of public research universities. Last year, we collaborated with the Program Review and Investigations Committee on an in-depth study of UConn's affordability and are pleased that the report showed that the University of Connecticut is providing an affordable, high-quality education for our students, regardless of their economic means. As you may know, the report found specifically:

Compared to its peers, UConn's prices are about in the middle or lower, and the cost of attending UConn has grown at a rate much lower than comparable institutions. According to the report, while the median cost of attending a state flagship university increased by 22 percent between 2008-09 and 2011-12, the increase at UConn was 9 percent.

UConn's federal student debt generally compares favorably to similar universities. The average indebtedness of a UConn student (from the 2013 graduating class per U.S. News & World Report data) who borrowed from federal loan programs is well below the national average, \$24,600, as compared to the national average of \$29,400-- a direct result of the University's substantial financial commitment to supporting students in need. We are below the national average now so requiring UConn to be at the national average is unnecessary. We will continue to do all we can to keep UConn affordable.

Finally, we support section 2 of the bill which removes the Board of Regents for Higher Education (BORHE) authority to establish state-wide higher education policy and guidelines. We believe that this authority was given to BORHE inadvertently during the consolidation of the Connecticut State University System and the Connecticut Community College System.

Thank you in advance for your attention and we are grateful for all of the support that you continue to give us.