



Labor and Public Employees Committee

March 5, 2015

Testimony

By

Mun Choi

Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

University of Connecticut

Senator Winfield, Representative Tercyak and members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today on Raised Bill 6874, *An Act Concerning Graduate Assistant Benefits*. My name is Mun Choi and I'm the Provost at the University of Connecticut.

It is our understanding that Raised Bill 6874 was requested by the United Auto Workers (UAW) on behalf of its affiliate, the Graduate Employees Union (GEU). The GEU represents graduate students who are appointed as Graduate Assistants (or GAs) at UConn. The University and the GEU are currently engaged in bargaining of the first contract.

The most concerning aspect of Raised Bill 6874 is the provision to waive all student fees for GAs, a proposal that the Union has also raised in collective bargaining. This proposal will have a dramatic financial impact to the university and affect the delivery of quality education to undergraduate students.

There are almost 7,000 graduate students at UConn. Each graduate student, like each undergraduate, pays student fees. These include the General University Fee and the Infrastructure Fee, whose amounts vary according to the number of credits taken by the students. There are also flat fees, including those for matriculation, activities, transit and technology. These fees are paid by all graduate and undergraduate students and support important aspects of the instruction and services to those students. Apart from these fees, graduate students also pay for services that they consume personally and directly, like parking and housing.

At any time about 1/3 of the graduate students at UConn hold appointments as GAs. If GAs were exempted from paying student fees, the university would lose more than \$5 million annually. With the significant reductions to the university's operating budget in the last 7 years and the prospective \$40 million cut proposed to UConn's state appropriation in FY16, the University simply does not have the resources to make up for the loss of these amounts. In order to maintain the current level of services to graduate students these sums would have to be recouped from other sources currently used for other important purposes. And undergraduate students and graduate

students who do not hold GA appointments will have to pay higher fees, which would be very unfair.

GAs receive substantial benefits from the University in exchange for part-time work supporting teaching and their own research. These include waiver of tuition charges (\$12K for an in-state student \$31K for an out of state student), heavily subsidized health insurance premiums (from \$4K for a GA electing individual coverage to \$11.6K for a GA electing family coverage) and payment of stipends on a tax favored basis that range from about \$21K to \$24.5K per 9-month academic year. The total value of the financial support provided by the University to GAs ranges from a low of \$37K to a high of \$67K.

By contrast, the graduate students who are not GAs pay full tuition, provide their own health insurance and receive no such stipends. Shifting the fees currently paid by the GAs to these other graduate students is not a feasible or equitable course.

In addition to the fee waiver, RB 6874 also proposes to permit graduate assistants to participate in the state employee health insurance plans. GAs at UConn are currently included in a comprehensive student health insurance plan that is heavily subsidized by the University. They are not eligible to participate in the state employee health plan. This proposal, as currently drafted, is not necessarily objectionable to UConn as it would require the GA electing such coverage to pay the full premium cost. It is our understanding, however, that the intent of this bill is for graduate assistants to be included in the state employee health insurance plan or the equivalent Connecticut Partnership Plan at UConn's full expense. This is what has been proposed by the UAW in collective bargaining. While precise costing information is not yet available, it has been projected that GA insurance costs, currently over \$9 million annually, would increase dramatically if they are transferred to the plan currently reserved for full-time state employees. This too would have a devastating impact to UConn's already tenuous financial stability.

Whether GAs should be exempted from paying the student fees that all other graduate students at UConn are required to pay and the health insurance program they participate in should be resolved through collective bargaining rather than through legislation. The State Employee Relations Act encourages public unions and state employers to reach agreements through bargaining and provides binding arbitration to resolve issues when the parties cannot do so themselves. Circumventing collective bargaining through legislation such as the bill before you would undercut the important public policies that led to adoption of the Act.

Let me close by emphasizing that this proposal will increase the cost of education to undergraduate students and graduate students who are not GAs. Because of the revenue loss and potential cost increases that would result from this bill, the already substantial cuts in state funding to UConn, the proposed very large cuts to the state block grant to UConn, the inequity of shifting the fee burdens to other students, and the strong public policy that favors use of collective bargaining to resolve such issues, I urge you to reject RB 6874.