



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

Office of Higher Education

Testimony
by
Jane A. Ciarleglio
Executive Director, Office of Higher Education
before the
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
Thursday, February 18, 2016

Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Willis, Senator Flexer, Representative Lopes, Senator Witkos, Representative Betts, and distinguished members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony regarding S.B. No. 24 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING PROGRAM APPROVAL FOR INDEPENDENT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION. The Act proposes to exempt Connecticut independent colleges and universities from state oversight.

For well over fifty years, we have approved new programs at our independent colleges and universities. Beginning with the establishment of the Commission of Higher Education in 1965 and all subsequent entities up through the creation of the Office of Higher Education (OHE), academic program approval has been a central role and function of the agency. As a result, the State of Connecticut has been a leader across the nation for maintaining high academic standards and safeguarding students through our consumer protection role.

The review and approval of academic programs provides important and significant benefits to the people of Connecticut, ensuring a minimum educational quality throughout all of our state's institutions of higher education. This protects many constituencies including students, employers, and the general public. Such protection is especially important in a state like Connecticut, where forty (40) colleges and universities compete for a limited pool of students and where high educational quality is important to developing and sustaining a highly-qualified

work force. For this reason, all new programs offered by our public institutions undergo public review and approval according to the same standards applied to the independent colleges and universities. It is in Connecticut's best interest that we maintain a level playing field among all Connecticut institutions, public and private.

Our state also has a long history of public investment in independent colleges and universities. Last year, for instance, the state awarded nearly \$14.5 million to these institutions through the Governor's Scholarship. State program approval at these institutions keeps them accountable to state taxpayers, who must be assured that such a substantial investment of taxpayer dollars is being made in programs of high quality.

Like many other states, especially here in the Northeast, we also conduct program approvals because many other regulatory entities depend on it. The United States Department of Education, for instance, looks to see that we have approved a program before they certify it for Title IV benefits. Similarly, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs requires that we approve programs before they certify them for G.I. benefits. Because our reviews ensure that all programs meet professional licensing requirements in our state, professional accreditors also depend on our approvals before they will consider their own. These programs cover a variety of fields, including nursing, social work, engineering, and many others. Without state review, these programs may falsely promise students preparation for professions for which they will not qualify.

Although this bill seeks to ensure quality through regional accreditation, that type of accreditation occurs only at the institutional level and does not guarantee the quality of individual programs and courses. For this, the accreditors rely on the states. In fact, the OHE has had a long-standing partnership with NEASC that benefits both entities in ensuring academic

quality, and we participate on all of their accreditation reviews so we can address issues regarding the institution's programming.

While committed to thorough reviews of each program, we nonetheless believe in seeking efficiencies in our process so that institutions can quickly offer programs in response to new opportunities. For this reason, in 2013, we reexamined our approval process with the input from many interested parties, including the Governor's Office and the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges (CCIC). As a result, we significantly streamlined our process, and we now review all program proposals within only forty-five (45) days; the average time for approving new programs in 2014-15 was approximately one month (32 days). While the process for new program submission currently resides in our OHE online application, joint reviews with other agencies often involve another agency, such as the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) or Department of Public Health, taking the lead. For instance, the CSDE is the statutory lead agency on **all** programs preparing students for teacher certification. We may, therefore, approve an education program with little delay and, if certification is later sought for that same program, join with the CSDE in their review according to their own timeline.

Although swift, our current review process is thorough and has many times led to substantive modifications to the proposed programs. The results are better programs and better educational experiences for students.

Thank you. I would be happy to address any questions you may have.