

**Justin Ahern Testimony
Eastern Connecticut State University**

**Connecticut General Assembly Appropriations
Committee Budget Hearing
Connecticut State Colleges and Universities
Wednesday, February 10, 2016**

Dear Honorable Member of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Justin Ahern, I am an undergraduate student at Eastern Connecticut State University, President of Eastern's Student Government Association and I have been writing testimony to you for the past three years. I am absolutely honored to meet and work with so many brave and talented students around the state. Whether it's sharing opinions at meetings, working on campuses, or candidly speaking to classmates, friends, peers and the community, these students are awesome in a unique kind of way: they care about- not only their education- but the future of our higher education system all together. Students at the CSCU's have a special connection with their college or university. It's a connection so strong that it has us worried sick about the future of our campuses.

In 2013, I started my first year at Eastern with the intention of transferring to UCONN after a semester, which is common for a good handful of students that go to the state universities, especially Eastern. I began to learn about the great opportunities Eastern had to offer in my First Year Introduction course, and I joined Student Government Association a few months later.

Needless to say: I was hooked on what the organization had to offer. I became deeply involved in the Office of Student Activities, and it has truly impacted me in a way that's hard to describe. I am now SGA President, Student Ambassador, Information Desk and Tech Crew Assistant, and member of various student organizations that are offered. It is these opportunities that keep students committed, engaged, and enrolled at Eastern as student involvement directly contributes to retention and graduation rates. The information and experiences that are gained from being involved in student activities make us better students and prepare us for our future careers and aspirations. I could not be happier to be a student at Eastern, and I owe every bit of my successful college career to this University. That's why I care so much about the CSCU System. Students all over the state are having great experiences like mine – from New Haven to Hartford to Norwich - and I don't want these experiences to be diminished. Right now, so much of our system's future is on the line.

Our schools rely on funding from the state in order to operate at full capacity. The only other option is to raise our student's tuition when they can barely afford it now after an additional raise last year. Our Governor ran on a platform that highlighted his, and our, concerns related to education in this state. Taken directly from the Governor's previous campaign website is this:

“Higher Education Affordability: The dream of a higher education shouldn't be out of reach for families across Connecticut. We have already put in place plans to help families save for college for their children but with the rising cost of a higher education, we need to do more to help students struggling with student loan debt.” –Dan Malloy for Connecticut

I know that both Senator Bye and Representative Walker are concerned about the negative impact that this budget may have on the state's quality of life – but I am asking you all too please keep higher education in the back of your mind when you're forced to present a budget that calls for additional cuts.

Cutting the state's investment in higher education would be devastating. It could mean increasing the burden of high cost tuition when this system functions off of the notion of being affordable and accessible. It means the possibility of cutting the jobs of student workers like me, who work hard to pay off the loans we are already having trouble affording. It means cutting the hours to the J Eugene Smith library and the ECSU Student Center, where I spend about 80% of my time at school. It includes reductions to staff, police and security around campus, when safety is a real concern in our community. It means no new hires and additional layoffs when most of the Professors I have are adjuncts that don't hold office hours for extra help outside the classroom. It means deep cuts to the life of a college student. **It means deep cuts to my college experience and education. It means deep cuts to thousands of dedicated students around the state. And I get it**; this is a tough situation where there are hundreds of people lining up at the Capitol for the same thing, money. But I'm here to reiterate the importance of higher education and that it should come first, because I don't think the media is listening. The CSCU's have been hurting for a while now, and in order to succeed and stay the great schools that they are right now and have a future of one day being able to grow again, we need help.

When more people have a college education, it helps all of Connecticut, because it helps the economy. It means that our workers are more educated, productive, and have the willingness and ability to create a stronger economy. So what we need to do is to try to make college as affordable as possible for students and share the cost of that through public funding. We're here, we exist, and we are scared to witness a decline in success for the colleges and universities that we care so deeply about and depend on for a better education and brighter future.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Justin Ahern', with a stylized, cursive script.

-Justin Ahern