# STATE OF CONNECTICUT

## Office of Higher Education

Testimony
by
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before the
Appropriations Committee
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Good morning Senator Osten, Senator Formica, Representative Walker, Representative Ziobron, and distinguished members of the Appropriations committee. For the record, I am Keith Norton, Acting Executive Director of the Office of Higher Education. Thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony regarding the Governor's recommended biennial budget. Both the changes and reductions proposed by this budget are very challenging, but achievable, and we are fully appreciative of the difficult task before you in these economic times.

Several changes have been proposed to the budget of the Office of Higher Education. Reductions in the Personal Services line will be absorbed due to savings from vacant positions which have remained unfilled or filled at a lower level. Likewise there are savings associated with our recent move to 450 Columbus Boulevard which are sufficient to offset the reduction to the Other Expenses line. I'm also pleased to report that we have worked hard to make the Alternate Route to (Teacher) Certification program self-sufficient through both moderate, phased-in tuition increases and a restructuring of the program so that it will continue, unaffected by the elimination of the remaining state funding.

Finally, a reduction is proposed to the state's Scholarship Program which is administered by our agency and is the state's means of awarding financial aid to students attending our public and independent colleges. The budget, as proposed, would further limit aid going to students,

however students currently in the program would continue to receive their grants until they graduate.

The Governor's budget proposal also seeks to merge the Office of Higher Education into the State Department of Education. Nationally, as more emphasis is being placed on P-12 – Higher Education coordination to increase levels of college and career readiness and opportunities, it is imperative that Connecticut take advantage of every means to do so, as well. Organizations such as the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), the National Association of System Heads (NASH) and Higher Education for Higher Standards (HEHS) have been working together to analyze the effects of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), for example, and concluded that it is imperative that State Education and Higher Education systems work together to implement the approved policies and programs included in state plans. The merger of the Office of Higher Education and the State Department of Education will largely facilitate this coordination through the use of shared resources to achieve these important goals and guide Connecticut's educational system into the future.

Over the last several years, as with most state agencies, funding for the Office of Higher Education has been cut in order to meet the goals of a balanced budget, and as a result, has fewer employees. I am very proud to say that my staff has met these challenges head on by cross-training in different job functions, taking on added responsibilities and finding ways to effectively and efficiently accomplish our core functions of providing both protections and opportunities for Connecticut's students. Yet still, evolving and increasing programmatic demands have left us short of the most important of our resources – human resources.

The merger of the two agencies will provide OHE with the opportunity to add the considerable talent of the SDE employees to our own to further our goals and objectives. Similarly, I believe SDE will benefit from involvement in the many outstanding programs administered by my office, some of which reach into the K-12 system.

This is not a new concept. Other states, including Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New York, have already successfully adopted a system whereby the Higher Education executive reports directly to an Education Department. It is a model that works, and I strongly encourage your consideration and support of this recommendation.