

Testimony for Higher Education and Employee Advancement Committee
Public Hearing on Students First
January 29, 2018
By David Blitz, CCSU Professor of Philosophy

Thank you for this opportunity to speak. I have been a faculty member at CCSU for 28 years, and have served in the past on CSU/BOT committees on e-learning. Like many of the speakers today I am highly critical of the "Students First" initiative, which I consider ill-considered and counter-productive, as well as misnamed. It should be called "System Office First" or "Centralization or Central Office First", because that is clearly its focus and intent. In terms of the consolidation of the community colleges and the consolidation of the "back offices" of the universities, it amounts to a tremendous increase in the power of the Central Office on Woodland Street, and office which has no students, no faculty, and no classes, yet employs over 140 staff at a cost of \$25 - 30 million+ per year.

I personally have no grievance against individuals at the SO, and even consider that the CSCU President is a talented politician. But neither he nor the staff he employs understand what it is to be a university, nor for that matter, a community college. Under the guise of economy of scale and reduction of costs – something no doubt music to the ears of the legislature which is burdened by a persistent budget crisis – the "Students First" project has received scant scrutiny from the legislature, and I welcome this opportunity to address this issue. In all the various documents produced by the Board of Regents and its staff, no clear indication is ever made as to how consolidation improves the quality of education. To the contrary, centralization is more likely to lead to academic conformity and hinder innovation, which is essential to higher education.

Moreover, the BOR in its various scenarios, never considers a number of options that would actually reduce expenditures without consolidation, and its attendant (and unmentioned) transition costs. Let me give just two examples:

1/ The use of no-cost open source software to replace costly proprietary software. The example is already there even in the private sector, where the open-source Apache server can fully replace Microsoft's version. As someone who participated in the implementation of the course management system Vista, the predecessor of the current Blackboard software, I was amazed to see millions and indeed tens of millions of dollars fly out the window for something which can be done at no start-up cost by the open source Moodle, used by many universities larger than any CSU campus. Instead of the costly Adobe Photoshop many institutions and individuals use GIMP, which does everything that Photoshop does. Naturally, there is an associated personnel cost for installation, training and maintenance, but there is a potential savings in the tens of millions over current purchase and subscription of enterprise software.

2/ Of the 144 personnel presently employed at the system office, almost half are IT specialists who, in the case of the universities at least, duplicate functions better done at the local level. Except for those who assure community college functions not accomplished at the campus level, many if not most could be transferred, as vacancies occur, to the campus level, where they could work on projects directly related to teaching and institutional administration. On a related topic, there is no need for an Academic Affairs section at the system office, and the recent "Design Thinking" document produced there, that was unanimously rejected by faculty who saw it, attests to the superfluous nature of this group, except for a minimal number to provide technical assistance for transfer articulation policies.

Much more could be added, but I cede my time to other who have much to say.

Thank you again for allowing this opportunity to be heard.

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