

January 20, 2018

**Testimony for the Connecticut General Assembly  
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee**

**John O'Connor, Associate Professor, Central Connecticut State University**

Dear Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon. My name is John O'Connor and I am an Associate Professor in the Sociology Department at Central Connecticut State University. I have been teaching at Central for almost fifteen years. Prior to being hired at CCSU, I taught at Trinity College and the University of Hartford, both of which are fine institutions. Teaching at Central has been a joy – the students are engaged and eager to learn, they are racially and ethnically diverse, and many of them are the first in their families to attend a college or a university. My students are the best Connecticut has to offer, they work hard and they embrace opportunity. I have been proud to help Connecticut's Community Colleges and State Universities provide a pathway for students to secure meaningful employment and a decent life for their families.

As many on this committee know, Connecticut has been the home of a number of important storytellers – Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Oliver Butterworth. Yet, these days, one of the state's more notorious storytellers is Board of Regents own President Mark Ojakian. Although we live in one of the wealthiest states in the nation, President Ojakian's stories are entitled "Structural Deficits," "New Economic Reality," and "fringe-benefit cost increases." All of these phrases are tossed about to justify a poorly-thought out consolidation plan – a plan that contrary to the BOR's wishes will not put Students First. In fact, it has the potential to compromise students' educational experiences and outcomes.

I think it is very important that this committee have this hearing today. While legally President Ojakian may have the right to restructure the CSCU system as he sees fit, we all need to acknowledge that the CSCU system belongs to the people of Connecticut. Regardless of what President Ojakian may think, the state's Community Colleges and Universities are not his plaything. Thankfully, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) is demanding that if Mr. Ojakian wants his new super-community college to be accredited he must provide some meaningful details. I encourage this committee to take a long look at the BOR's plan -- its features, its numbers, its purported savings. and its consequences – both intended and unintended. This committee owes this to the people of Connecticut. You need to look at this plan very closely and don't be afraid to call shenanigans.

There are a lot of issues that one can raise about the BOR's plan – are the savings real; how are curricular decisions to be made; why has the process been so secretive; why the hurry; what if it doesn't work; how can the BOR (with all its trials and tribulations) pull this off? But I would argue that the BOR's attempt to save \$28 million comes at a terrible price. One of the more interesting features of teaching in the CSCU system is that when students reach the university level they are imbued with the culture and the identity of the institution that they started in – that is true whether it is Norwalk, Capital, Tunxis,

Gateway, Three Rivers or Naugatuck. We may not know it, we may not appreciate it, but the CSCU system produces students that are a wonderful mix of our different communities. That will all be lost if we produce one super Community College directed by the Woodland Street.

Rather than consolidating, this committee should force the BOR to celebrate and build on the institutional diversity of our community colleges.

President Ojakian's story is a troubling one: 12 institutions into one; less is more; front office versus back office functions; Students First through consolidation.

This committee should force Ojakian and the BOR to revise and resubmit. The students and the communities of Connecticut deserve better than what is on offer.

Thank you.