

Testimony before the Higher Education and Workforce Development Committee

RE: Students First and the Consolidation of the 12 Community Colleges

Submitted by Stephen Adair, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, Central Connecticut State University,
Vice-Chair of the Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC) to the Board of Regents (BOR) for Higher
Education, and ex-officio member of the BOR

January 30, 2018

Members of the Higher Education and Workforce Development Committee thank you for this opportunity to testify on the consolidation of the 12 community colleges.

The specific wording in this testimony is my own, although it is based on a FAC report that was collectively produced and represented a consensus of the FAC membership. That report was presented to the BOR in December.

1. The savings target of \$28 million annually will not be achieved. The savings are projected based on organizational forecasts that propose eliminating 390 administrative positions and replacing them with 190 in a new structure. There is little evidence to indicate that 190 positions will be sufficient to meet the functional needs of the new organization. The projected salaries for the 190 positions are based on ranges for new hires, which are not representative of current staff, which the system office is intending to use to fill the positions. The budgetary projections also do not include any implementation costs, which will be considerable. The consolidation will require tens of thousands of labor hours to alter policy, align curricula and academic standards, integrate operations, standardize procedures, and create new software or computer programming operations across a variety of functional areas.

While other states have attempted to consolidate higher education administrations to save money, the system office is unable to identify other consolidations that have achieved anything close to the savings that are projected here.

2. Negative impacts on future foundation contributions. Although the current plan is retain the current campus-based foundations, some alumni and local businesses that supported their local community college in the past may not feel the same obligation to support a branch campus of a state bureaucracy.

3. Stodgy Curriculum. The consolidation will require curricular realignment of programs across the community colleges, which will make future innovation more difficult. Currently, colleagues in a discipline on a single campus are in continuing conversation about what is or is not working in their academic program. Many program adjustments are accomplished informally through modifications in the learning objectives of prerequisite courses to better prepare students for more advanced work. Nearly all formal curricular changes are a result of the close proximity between the assessment of student work and the faculty in a department who design the curriculum they teach.

When a program curriculum is no longer the intellectual product of a departmental faculty, future innovation may be hindered. Faculty will need to reach out and achieve consensus for proposed changes across campuses and then work the changes through a multi-level, bureaucratic process.

Once programs that are common to all campuses, including general education, are approved and operational, they will likely become very resistant to change and easily outdated.

4. Diminished Retention. In the enormous literature on student retention, the single most consistent finding is that retention increases when students develop a social, personal, or intellectual connection to someone or some activity on campus. Such connections will not disappear in the new structure, but few students, we believe, will develop an emotional attachment to a President and a Provost that they never see, or will want to wear a T-shirt bearing the logo of the Community College of Connecticut. A statewide campus will not be able to build the rituals and the symbolic engagement so that students take their enrollment as an element of their membership, their identity, or their pride.

5. Bureaucratic Red Tape. Aside from cost, arguably the most common complaint that students nationwide voice about their higher education experience concerns the complexity of the bureaucracy. Students often have difficulty finding the right person in the right office who has the authority to solve their problems. Above all else, the consolidation plan pulls authority off the 12 community college campuses. Irrespective of any and all intentions, the FAC believes this new institution will be less responsive to individual student needs and problems.

6. Opportunity Costs. Over the next several years, all the initiative and creativity of faculty and administrative staff will be and must be devoted to the creation and the functioning of a new bureaucratic structure. As critical administrative functions get overlooked in the transition, crisis management will come to seem like the norm. Just as importantly, administrative energy and creativity will not be devoted to improving access and quality. Efforts to build new programs through partnerships with local businesses, working with local high schools to improve college readiness, and creating new marketing and certificate programs to compete against private occupational schools will need to be set aside to address required administrative priorities.

7. Loss of Accreditation. Removing accreditation from the individual campuses has significant non-monetary costs that reduces the value of the campuses for the students and the communities that the colleges serve.

8. Risk. Achieving accreditation by NEASC may prove to be more elusive and take longer than the system office envisions. Delays will magnify both transitions costs and bureaucratic dysfunctions as both building the new institution and the operational functioning of the 12 campuses will be compromised by the competing objectives among a dwindling administrative staff. Three or four years from now, we do not want to be in a position of acknowledging a failed experiment and having to try to put the pieces back together again.

9. Alternatives. There are many alternative ways the system could respond to declining levels of state support. One possibility would be to indeed consolidate some administrative functions while retaining accreditation for each college.