



January 30, 2018

To members of the Committee on Higher Education:

Thank you for giving us an opportunity to present testimony on Students First, the ill-considered and irresponsible plan by CCSU administrators to consolidate the twelve community colleges in Connecticut.

I am the department chair in History at Central Connecticut State University. I meet with every transfer student who comes to my department from a community college, and I know and work with department chairs and faculty at the community colleges, especially Manchester and Tunxis from which CCSU largely draws its students.

Students First is anything but a student-centered plan. It's not even a money-saving plan, as it also purports to be. It is a plan to more tightly control higher education and make it more business-like, with more opportunities for consultants and administrators at the system office to run the show. It flies in the face of shared governance, a principle recognized in all good systems of higher education, and it is an attempt to replace faculty governance with administrative governance.

My department chair colleagues at community colleges meet with and get to know nearly every single student. They help these students plan for their transfers to four-year colleges if that is what the student wants; they write letters of recommendation and prepare planned programs of study. It is proposed by Students First to do away with these department chairs and replace them with deans who will oversee several departments. Already the social studies department chairs oversee psychology, history, geography, and sociology; now the deans will supervise even larger combinations of departments. Deans are administrators, not faculty. They do not typically teach the students they serve, whereas department chairs do. Department chairs are also members of unions; deans are not. This is a move to remove governance from long-term, tenured members of the institution and cede it to short-term, at-will employees who will be paid more but who have less job security unless they are doing exactly what is mandated by the system office. Advising will be handed off to non-faculty advisors, who know much less about what is required in particular academic programs than the department chairs and faculty advisors. The role of faculty will be diminished, a loss for students who need mentors in their fields of study. Would you want to send your child to an institution in which his or her only contact with faculty was in the classroom, where there were few opportunities to sit down with people whose full-time job was to care for the students, curriculum and functioning of the college? I would not.

The system office spends money at an alarming rate on consultants and software. While programs like DegreeWorks might be fancy and (arguably) efficient, if saving money were a priority we could have used open source software or the less expensive software we had. Frankly, I sit down with every advisee and carefully review each course the student has selected. I talk to my advisees about their career plans in these sessions, and about their futures. DegreeWorks does not do that, and I don't need it in order for me to advise. But no one really asked us. Instead they imposed a system on us that made things better for them, and more cumbersome for us. And that scenario is repeated over and over with each new software purchase, the centralizing of IT, and so on. We use Blackboard Learn as our course management software. It is clunky, ugly, and difficult to get started on BB. My older colleagues especially dislike it. If we wanted to save money, we could use Moodle, which other universities in state systems use; it is FREE, open-source software, and we use it at CCSU where faculty operate it. The system office is uninterested in saving money on software, because if they did that, they would not need to have the staff they do in IT. Students First is a plan to put more functions in the system office so it can grow. The system office teaches no students, and it supervises no faculty. It is disconnected from campus life, but it values its staff and its functions above all else.

Faculty are not Luddites who do not want to embrace change. In 2001 the history department at CCSU began a public history program to embrace community needs and applied learning, for example. We engage in digital history projects; we are not afraid of new technology. What we object to is not change that will improve our system and our university and our community colleges. What we object to is needless disruption—and I am using “disruption” in the sense of the model of disruption advocated some decades ago in the business world. As the Harvard historian and public intellectual, Dr. Jill Lepore, discussed in an article in the *New Yorker*, disruption is terrible for universities and higher education. Disruption is the idea that you try something without evidence that it works—exactly what Students First is! If it fails, dismantle it. For university students who need guidance and predictability and for faculty who have to prepare curriculum years in advance, disruption is a nightmare. If you allow consolidation to go forward to see if it can stick without evidence, you are taking a huge risk.

If my child were about to enter a community college in Connecticut, I would tell her, do not do the TAP (which cost hundreds of thousand of dollars to accomplish for little to no benefit, I might add); you will finish all your gen ed and take so much of your major that when you get to the university you will have to do all upper level courses. It will be an academic uphill battle. I would advise taking prerequisites and several gen ed courses, but not all. Save electives. But no one asked me or my colleagues. We were simply told to make a plan that allowed for the transfer of 60 credits, 30 in general education and half of the major credits. It will be very hard at the universities to give students a schedule that won't overwhelm them under the TAP, but as with everything else the Board of Regents does, we were not consulted. We were told.

Faculty actually do know something about higher education. Mr. Ojakian does not. Perhaps some of the system office people do, but they have no direct contact with any students or any faculty on a campus in the college environment. Having them make decisions for one “community” college pretty much robs the community. At the BOR meeting at which Students

First was approved, business leaders and members of foundation boards spoke against the consolidation. Larry DiNardis, a former university president with some knowledge of how universities work, said he disagreed with the plan, even though he gave his assent in the end.

Make no mistake. If this goes forward, students will be last. The system office will be first. It will grow beyond your wildest dreams. Administrative bloat will occur. Students will then come to you with a different set of complaints, beyond “my credits didn’t transfer.” They will be telling you about financial aid problems, IT problems, problems finding any full-time faculty who can help them. I’m sure there are people who like the University of Phoenix and will sing its praises. But I think most of us who have been to actual universities or community colleges where we got to know professors who cared about us understand the difference in quality. Mr. Ojakian wants you to believe this is unaffordable. He wants you to believe it is necessary to cut, cut, cut and that by cutting the students will be better off. That’s a good trick.

I have been serving students in the state of Connecticut for twenty years. I myself came through Boise State University and transferred to the University of California at Irvine, so I know what it is like to transfer. Because of my ability to find mentors, and for mentors to find me, I was able to go to graduate school at Yale, something I would have deemed out of my reach. My academic advisor and other professors not only explained what I needed to do academically, but they explained the finances. I try to give that back to my students, to help them go to law school or graduate school, or get a job, to talk out life plans. My colleagues at the community colleges do the same for their students. Why would you blow up that system of community teaching, mentoring and care?

Please don’t.

Sincerely,



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