

Legislative Office Building
Hartford, CT 06106
Christine Savino
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H.B. 5195: An Act Concerning Student Membership on the Board of Trustees

To the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee,

To begin, I would like to thank the Honorable Senator Bye, Representative Haddad, Senator Linares and committee for their attention to this matter. I am grateful for the opportunity to testify before you today in support of H.B. 5195, An Act Concerning Student Membership on the Board of Trustees for the University of Connecticut. My name is Christine Savino, and I am the current undergraduate representative on the Board of Trustees.

The Board of Trustees is the leading legislative body of UConn that makes critical decisions such as appointing the president, establishing colleges, approving of tuition and fees, allocating student revenues, and many more in which students are key stakeholders. However, since the Board's creation in the early 1900's membership has more than doubled, but its student representation has remained at maximum two; a graduate and undergraduate. This number fit the needs of UConn at the time when it was first established as an obscure agricultural school with sparse enrollment. However, we are now an internationally distinguished university with over 32,000 students and rapidly growing. It is thereby appropriate to discuss increasing the number of students on the Board.

Fundamentally, as budget cuts continue and a greater proportion of revenue is generated by students, it is important that students have increased representation. It is also simply the right thing to do. In 2017, tuition and mandatory fees comprised 41.3% of the budget, and this is expected to grow to 42.5% in 2018. In fact, a greater proportion of student-generated funds than state appropriations now funds our university.

As the current undergraduate trustee, I have the great pleasure of representing over 23,000 undergraduates, a growth of over 1,200 undergraduate students since this bill was first proposed in 2014. Throughout my term alone (July 2017-Present), students have proven themselves to be positive advocates for the university and effective partners with all of UConn, especially administration. Last Fall, over one thousand students from all campuses stood by the university amid a budget crisis as One UConn. They unyieldingly worked with faculty and staff to spread awareness of the cause and lobby as a community. Through various projects and advisory groups, students and administrators have worked in unison to strengthen dialogue, resolve obstacles that were previously undiscussed, improve student health services, establish sturdy relations with community stakeholders such as town governance, and overall strengthen our university. Increasing student input on the Board will mean even more collaboration, more discussions, better ideas, and stronger relationships that will create the best UConn community possible. Our students, values, and teamwork have been essential to the university's growth, and the trustee bill will further this.

It will also help ensure that the growing constituencies are effectively represented which is currently a concern. Student trustees should always be in touch with student ideas, questions, input, and projects that comprise the moving parts of UConn's daily dynamic functions amidst a highly involved population. Of course, this is extremely time consuming and mandates consistent dedication. Being a student trustee, I can attest that having one representative per constituency is not favorable in supporting the rapidly growing population and thereby limits the effectiveness of each role. In this way, student trustees should put in the work to wholly represent their constituents, and this bill will help allow for this. Additionally, per state law, student trustees must be full time students, meaning that they balance their respective course loads (graduates vary, for undergraduates; minimum 36 hours of class time and recommended minimum 2-3 hours of studying per hour of class), other extracurriculars, job(s), navigating college life, as well as being trustees for progressively disproportionate populations. In the same way, the likelihood of student trustees not effectively representing their constituents is thus becoming increasingly likely as the student population continues to vigorously expand. It is only logical to share the responsibility among two representatives per constituency. When it comes to making sure that

the student voice is being represented, especially at a public university such as UConn, its representatives should not be discouraged from fulfilling their duties due to capacity logistics.

Furthermore, this bill will generate long term value through increased community engagement and intellectual diversity with Board and student leadership. Both parties hold incredible value and drive the university's future, and it is important that both their ideas are paid attention to and collaboration with each other encouraged. Likewise, due to the large volume of students, student needs and input are astoundingly complex as well as diverse, which is best represented by more than one individual per constituency.

I would also like to mention a few points, not to oppose the author of the counter testimony, but to provide a holistic look of important logistics:

Firstly, public comment can be a fantastic way to participate in governance, however during trustee meetings its effectiveness is moderated. Speakers are limited to three minutes for what can be complex concerns, and there lacks the opportunity for much dialogue. However, cooperative interaction, discussion, and teamwork is where efficient productivity truly occurs. I have attended every Board meeting for the last two years and occasionally prior to that. Throughout this time, I have not seen an issue resolved due to public session, and speakers who express frustration frequently leave in the same state that they arrived. Most of the speakers in distress are students or individuals associated with a student group, which exemplifies the importance of having cooperation between the Board and students. This is where the student trustees can be very valuable as they are bridges between these two bodies.

Governing boards for universities should certainly be comprised of mainly professionals, and that is why they are. UConn is not and should never become an exception. Truly, this bill was not supported over the years by legislators and students to degrade this notion, but to embrace diversity and collaboration in governance. The addition of students does not mean the removal of professionals, and this bill still leaves students greatly outnumbered on the Board.

Likewise, the duty of all trustees is to enforce the better good of the university or fiduciary responsibility. This does not mean that representative trustees do not add value by providing perspectives of the groups that they represent. Their very titles, “alumni” and “student” trustees, show that the university voluntarily recognizes them as different from other members due to their constituencies. This does not mean that they cannot fulfill the fiduciary responsibility due to default conflicts of interest, otherwise the university should be accommodating such inherent breaches of fiduciary responsibility. It means that representative trustees provide the valuable input of their constituencies and reflect the value that UConn places on alumni as well as students. It also shows that the university cares about alumni and students having input on university governance, or voting for their representatives on the Board. Likewise, there have been numerous agenda items concerning the businesses, hometowns, etc. of various trustees. Of course, this does not mean that they should not be on the Board for risk of conflicts of interest. There is always the right of abstaining for any trustee, and typically is used when there is such potential conflict of interest.

Thus, the very purpose of having representative trustees is to relay perspectives to other members that may be removed from these groups. For instance, all Board members have full time and professional jobs, while students “live UConn” daily on the ground level and thus know the intricacies of life at UConn in a way that other members may not. This does not mean that they are more fit to lead the university, but that they provide valuable insight for those who are. The hypothetical situation of either alumni or student representatives not advocating for what they believe to be the in the best interests of UConn as a whole is not an issue of policy, but personal breach of fiduciary responsibility. In all actuality, the same applies to any trustee.

Likewise, managers, executives, and other employees are provided plaques, draped tables, and positioned adjacent to Trustees at each Board meeting. If the Board should truly be functioning without risk of conflicts of interest from external figures, then pursuant to this logic these practices would be invalid. In this way, management should not be encouraged to be in same the room or provided favored placement as the Board is voting on decisions. As has been publicly demonstrated, there are also personal relationships between management and Board members, which can be interpreted as conflicts of interest. Likewise, the university’s Bylaws allow for the

Board to add committee members except for the UConn Health Board of Directors even if they are not trustees, and for terms that the Board designates itself. This could also be viewed as a conflict of interest and therefore should be removed according to this logic. In this way, someone who is personally close with many trustees can be appointed per the Bylaws. For the record, I am not providing my opinion on these practices, but simply applying the proposed logic towards this bill to how the Board currently functions.

Over the last year, I have met with administrators and Board members to discuss in depth the costs and benefits of adding two student trustees. It is very clear to me that for those who oppose this idea, their main concern is how students would behave on the Board. These include fears of students breaching executive session, not agreeing with one another, not understanding why administration makes the choices it does, and others of that nature. It is important to look at past experiences, then, to reason if this concern is likely to come to fruition. By doing so, it becomes clear that students have worked well with Board members and balanced their fiduciary responsibilities while also relaying the student voice.

To provide an example, well before presenting this testimony to legislators as a trustee, I carefully took time to understand the logistics of the bill and if it was in the best interests of UConn. I even presented it to the Board privately, encouraged any edits, suggestions, or otherwise, as to assure that I was furthering the better good of the university as well as having administrative oversight on my public remarks. I received none of the sort. My motive was not to solely represent students but to work with the Board to make the best decisions possible- for all of UConn. Although I risked beginning a debate with colleagues, being stopped, or challenged, I did so to maintain my fiduciary responsibility. This is because although I have strong reason to believe that this bill will help UConn, I do represent UConn and not only students. Likewise, many student trustees before me have voted on or publicly favored their own tuition and/or fee increases. This is because student trustees have proven themselves to represent UConn and not solely their constituencies.

These concerns that have been expressed to me, then, should not be reason to not add or remove students. In other words, if the Board did not have any student representation, these arguments

could be made in favor of not adding them. They could also be used to attempt to remove students altogether.

Connecticut will face a multibillion-dollar deficit over the next few years, and UConn will surely continue to be cut millions in state funds annually. Likewise, the burden of repaying student loans is becoming a more extensive issue around the nation. There will also eventually be a recession, as they are inherent with business cycles, which will impact higher education in America. Because of this, I know that in the long term, there will be difficult financial choices that UConn will need to make. It is critical that the Board keeps open communication and collaboration with students to best approach these challenges.

Likewise, I do not believe that alumni will push back against adding more students due to feelings of inequality. Alumni actually have their own separate Board called the UConn Foundation Board of Directors. The Foundation Board is comprised of forty-seven voting members, almost all of which are alumni. It oversees the Foundation, which fosters alumni relations, raises money, manages endowment funds, accommodates alumni, and more. Likewise, the Foundation has experienced exponential endowment especially recently with growth being 11.9% in 2017. Clearly, the Foundation Board, although more than double the size of the Board of Trustees, is not poor governance. In all actuality, it as well as hundreds of Foundation staff and students have been highly successful in strengthening UConn, garnering strong support for UConn, and giving back to students through millions in scholarships! Likewise, according to the matter of theory proposed in the testimony, alumni would have pushed for more representation for the Board having a student life since 1986 without an alumni life committee. They would have also done so for the changing of Bylaws in 2017 to add students and not alumni to committees.

In addition to the reasons prior, increasing student representation is important because students' lives mostly if not completely revolve around UConn on a daily basis. Construction, revenue allocations, and much more directly and instantly impact them. Alumni are important to the governance of UConn, but to suggest that alumni will push through law for more alumni trustees is not supported by fact. Likewise, the relations between UConn and alumni is vigorously

strengthened by thousands of staff, faculty, students, as well as entire UConn organizations daily. The relations between the Board and students is meager, which has resulted in numerous miscommunications and clefs in perspectives during my term alone. There is clearly a better need for better relations between the Board and students, which is why bridges between them are so vital.

To clarify, the committee offer was brought by administration to the Undergraduate Student Government in exchange for its members not advocating for the trustee bill. It was offered that an undergraduate student be added to the Student Life Committee, although negotiations resulted in the resolution provided to you. The final compromise was to add two students to the Student Life Committee and assign the Undergraduate Trustee to the Financial Affairs Committee. Any student trustee always had and currently has the right to be on the Financial Affairs Committee anyways. Likewise, all trustees, unless they come in late, are in attendance by approximately 9 am. Therefore, all (student) trustees are present for the fifteen-minute Financial Affairs Committee meeting anyways, since it occurs immediately before the Board meeting, in the same room, and at the same table. Throughout my term, all Financial Affairs agenda items are either anonymously approved of or a person/few people abstain. Thus, the latter portion of this compromise did not change much. The Student Life Committee meets about four times per year and for approximately an hour. The committee votes on mainly constitutional changes for student organizations, and from my experience all motions have passed unanimously. I have been informed that this was the same for the academic year prior to me, although for those who are interested, Student Life minutes are available on the official Board of Trustees website under the Committees tab and subsequent Student Life Committee meeting minutes link. Other items are mainly reports of projects from other offices relevant to students, and so that work is already done beforehand. Although the Student Life Committee is beneficial to the Board, the addition of two students to it would not change much. Policies are debated and initiatives discussed moreover within administrative offices such as the Dean of Students Office, administrative advisory groups such as the Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee, and the Undergraduate Student Government. Due to these factors, as well as those described in this testimony, this bill is still greatly important for the over 32,000 and growing students at UConn.

Finally, this bill is drafted such that there is much room for compromise within the university level. I understand opposing viewpoints on this topic and know that with a year of strategic planning and teamwork, they can be accommodated. The revised bill, if passed as law, leaves much room for the university to assure that students who are elected as student trustees are reliable, which is a concern that has been brought to my attention. Although, as it currently stands and aside from how students on university probation are not allowed to run, this is not pushed. Thus, keeping policy as is does not assure “safety” and is currently putting the university at risk per the logic expressed to me. This does not mean that the logic is invalid and may hold potential to benefit UConn. Some examples to help in this regard include mandating more rigorous application processes for student trustees, having a review committee verify the additional student trustees’ qualifications, mandating background checks for applicants, etc.

In sum, the student voice is of great value to UConn’s, and by extension our state’s, future. The teamwork of legislative governance, UConn faculty and staff, as well as students has been crucial in making UConn the state flagship university that it is today. This bill is simply another effort in furthering this. The Board’s strengthened knowing of student affairs, what improvements need to be made for them, and the increased student-administration teamwork will make UConn an even more attractive place for prospective students to apply as well as current students to be as successful as possible in.

Thank you sincerely for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions.

All the Best,

Christine C. Savino

University of Connecticut School of Business

(203) 581-2934

christine.savino@uconn.edu