Testimony before the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

RE: SB 817 AN ACT CONCERNING HIGHER EDUCATION

Submitted by Stephen Adair, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, Central Connecticut State University, Member of the Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC) to the Board of Regents for Higher Education,

February 14, 2019

Representative Haddad, Senator Haskell, Representative Hall, Senator Hwang, and Distinguished Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify.

I am Stephen Adair, Professor of Sociology at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU), and Member of the Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC) to the Board of Regents (BOR). I also was the Chair/Vice Chair of the FAC from 2012-2017 and served as a non-voting faculty member on the BOR.

I urge your support for SB 817, An Act Concerning Higher Education, which proposes a study of higher education in the state. I recommend that such a study focus sharply on the CSCU system.

Eight years have passed since the merger of the state universities and the community colleges. It is time to assess the costs and benefits. While the merger brought some successes, such as the alignment of transfer programs and collaborations to improve developmental education, there have also been failed presidencies, notable dysfunctions, and millions wasted.

Overseeing 17 institutions with different missions for the BOR is a daunting task. The sheer volume of work is a strain. The monthly meetings of just the Academic and Student Affairs subcommittee typically have 200-page agendas. Some have been over 600.

An unanticipated consequence of this complexity is the growth in the power of the CSCU system office, which has become the intermediary between the Board and the campuses. Campus presidents have little to no direct contact with the Board. All the information, resolutions, and documents that go to the Board are filtered, created, and presented by the CSCU leadership.

Prior to the merger, the Board of Trustees of the state universities engaged in rigorous performance evaluations of each campus president. In the merged system, the system President conducts the evaluation. This changed relationship means that the system President is empowered to direct institutional change, and campus presidents are in a precarious position if they contest this erosion of their autonomy.

The lack of communication between the Board and campus presidents has become especially acute under President Ojakian. Board meetings are not held on member campuses, as they once were. Institution Presidents no longer engage in rigorous reviews of campus budgets with the Board's finance committee, as they once did. In the just completed accreditation review at CCSU, the NECHE (New
England Commission of Higher Education) site team expressed astonishment at the absence of communication between the Board and our campus President, Zulma Toro.

Concentrating power in the system office was at the heart of President Gray's Transform 2020 plan and it is the heart of Students First.

Above all, the consolidation of the community colleges into a single statewide college and controlling critical university operations by the CSCU system office transforms the administration of Connecticut higher education from a federated system into a centrally controlled one. As it pulls authority into a central office, people left in the wake are demoralized and disempowered.

In the few years that President Ojakian has been in office, six of the twelve community college Presidents have either announced their retirement or have found jobs elsewhere. These six openings have all been filled by appointments with no indication that any of these positions will be filled through an open, competitive search process. Almost all of the chief academic officers on the community colleges are interim appointments.

Hundreds of faculty and staff across the 17 institutions do not believe we are on a viable path. Last spring, NECHE rejected the CSCU application to consolidate the community colleges. Few have faith that the problems NECHE identified are being resolved. It is entirely unclear if we are being led to a successful accreditation or a dead end. It is a big gamble.

Nationally, other states (e.g. Oregon, Indiana, Tennessee, West Virginia, and North Dakota) are moving in the opposite direction from centrally controlled structures to federated one. It is time for Connecticut to take a careful and objective look at the CSCU system.