Statement by David Blitz on Raised S.B. No. 817

Thank you for taking the time to consider requiring the Office of Higher Education to study issues relating to higher education. I am Prof. David Blitz, with 29 years of service at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU). In that time I have served as department chair, program director and interdisciplinary coordinator, as well as assuming responsibilities in the University Senate and on system-wide committees of the previous Connecticut State Universities (CSU). I attach to my written remarks a 29 page document of my detailed critiques of the Board of Regents (BOR) and resolutions of the CCSU Senate critical of the BOR.

After 8 years of the merger of the community colleges, Charter Oak State College and four CSU universities, it is time to evaluate the results and re-assess the decision. The history of the BOR is one of failed projects (such as Transform 2020) and failing projects (the current “Students First”). According to its own spreadsheets just the cost of the staff at the Woodland St. headquarters of the BOR runs to approximately $35 million a year, for over ¼ of a billion dollars and heading towards 1/3 of a billion by the end of 2019. Now, the BOR is searching for regional presidents to add to its already overgrown bureaucracy adding two additional levels of administration for a total of four before we even begin to get to the actual business of the colleges -- teaching students: a Board President, an eventual President of the proposed single Community College, three regional presidents, and a dozen CEOs of each community college (formerly, presidents).

The one apparently positive achievement of the Board: the development of Transfer Articulation Agreements, was accomplished by faculty committees, not the bureaucracy of the Board, and can be continued without it. Even so, the TAPs assume that students entering community colleges from the outset know their intended major, do not change their mind, and do not immediately transfer to a university once they decide to proceed to a bachelor’s degree. These are unlikely in many if not most cases.

Students First has a double aim, both of which are wrong: consolidation of the community colleges into a single institution – already turned down by the accrediting agency, and consolidating the “back office” functions of the universities – depriving them of valued support staff needed to implement institutional policies. Let me paraphrase a colleague of mine, recently retired from the university – what we need is some regionalization of services along with maintenance of local administrative autonomy. I would add: regionalization of services must be done bottom-up, based on bilateral and multilateral agreements between and among the administrators and faculty on the ground, not top-down by fiat of the system office. Further, the four CSU universities are already regional institutions. The current efforts by the BOR to centralize university functions such as Institutional Research will only hinder our ability to develop policies specific to our local needs and regional opportunities.

What should be done: I suggest that the legislature eliminate the merged System Office and Board of Regents, and either (1) restore two Boards of Trustees, one each for the Community Colleges and the State Universities, with significantly reduced staffing or (2) establish regional boards for the Community Colleges and one board each of the CSU universities. The Boards should focus on assisting their institutions in establishing regional cooperation with businesses and communities and raise additional funds from them. They should not meddle in academic affairs, best left to the local autonomy of the institutions whether individually or in voluntary consortia.