Testimony before the Higher Education and Workforce Development Committee
RE: SB 817 AN ACT CONCERNING HIGHER EDUCATION

Submitted by Louise B. Williams, Ph.D., Professor of History, Central Connecticut State University, President, CCSU-AAUP

February 14, 2019

I am here today to talk about SB 817, a Study of Higher Education.

A study of the structure of Higher Education in Connecticut is critical right now. Since the Legislative Program Review & Investigations Committee did a report in December 2010 that structure has changed significantly. Changes are still being made to the CSCU system by President Mark Ojakian to this day. More are to come.

What is being done is best summed up as consolidation and centralization. The twelve Community Colleges are to be merged into one huge single college, and the supposed “back office” functions of the four state universities are to be combined and placed under the control of the central systems office, rather than the individual schools.

There changes have provoked a great deal of concern by faculty, staff, and administrators. And yet we have continually been dismissed or ignored.

We are worried about many things that I do not have time here to explain. One is that we doubt the goal of cost saving can be achieved, and that the restructuring has and will cost far more money than it will save.

But even more important, we worry about how this new structure will affect the quality of education we can offer our students, and our ability to respond to the rapidly changing economic needs of the state. As I am sure you are aware, having a system of higher education of the highest quality and most flexibility is essential if Connecticut is to keep our talented young people and businesses in the state.

It is absolutely essential that we know if we are headed in the right direction before it is too late.

But we are not the only ones to express concern about the magnitude and direction of these changes. Our accrediting body, the New England Commission of Higher Education (formerly NEASC) also has reservations about these changes. They called the consolidation of the twelve Community Colleges the biggest change ever to higher education in New England.

Among their many concerns, they are afraid that these changes will make it difficult for faculty “to oversee the quality of the academic programs.” They also worry about the consolidation of the institutional research functions into the systems office that President Ojakian is doing through the system, even the four universities. They think this “will not provide the institution and the campuses with sufficiently responsive information and feedback to support planning and evaluation.”*

*
It is possible that because of their concerns NECHE will not accredit the new community college, or not fully re-accredit my school, CCSU, which has applied for it this year. That in turn will impact the financial aid students can get.

But even if we do get or keep accreditation, we should think twice about the changes that are being made because NECHE certainly has shed some serious doubt on the direction in which we are going. Why would students stay in Connecticut for higher education, why would businesses stay here or move here, if they quality of the system of higher education is doubted by the one organization that truly is acknowledged as expert?

Finally, there are other expert organizations, like the Association of Governing Board of Universities and Colleges that make the recent changes appear unwise. They published principles for reviewing State Higher education governance structures, which recommend that rather than huge change, states look for less disruptive options, and that states make sure there is support for the changes among stakeholders like faculty and staff, that institutional autonomy is supported, and that the changes comply with accrediting associations’ criteria.**

What President Ojakian has been doing violates these principles. Clearly his plans must be reviewed and assessed more seriously

So I urge you to support a study. This is absolutely essential for our students and the future of our state.

*NEASC, letter to Mark E. Ojakian, April 24, 2018.