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Connecticut State Colleges & Universities
Before the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
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Senator Haskell, Representative Elliott, Senator Witkos, Representative Haines, and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities today.

Proposed H.B. No. 5109 AN ACT PROHIBITING GRADUATION FEES AT PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

The only CSCU institution which assesses a “graduation fee” as described in this proposed bill is Charter Oak State College (COSC), and is a product of their unique mission in serving those individuals who cannot or do not choose to complete a college degree program through conventional means. Part of this unique mission includes aggregating credits from a variety of sources including other higher education institutions, standardized tests, military training, licensure and certifications, and portfolios with COSC courses to help students graduate with a degree. This results in a much more expansive and labor intensive degree audit than other institutions.

The “graduation fee” that COSC charges covers the costs of this degree audit and the diploma. As this expansive degree audit is a significant cost driver for COSC, the fee is passed along to graduating students, and not to non-matriculating students. The Board of Regents approves COSC’s tuition and fee rates and would be happy to work with them to clarify the language around this fee to avoid confusion in the future.

However, elimination of this fee in its entirety would double COSC’s current budget deficit or would lead to increased tuition and fee costs for all students.

Proposed S.B. No. 193 AN ACT CONCERNING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ISSUES AT PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION RELATED TO THE INSURANCE INDUSTRY.

The insurance industry is a vital sector for Connecticut’s economy and a crucial partner for CSCU institutions and our students. Across all our 17 colleges and universities, we offer a variety of degrees, certificates, apprenticeships, and other specialized programming to meet the needs of this industry and provide pathways to meaningful careers. We support the premise of this bill but would like to work with the sponsors and our colleagues at the University of Connecticut and the Governor’s Workforce Council to find ways to incorporate this study into a broader analysis of our workforce development efforts. With the rise of the insurtech sector in Hartford, and the evolving nature of the industry, we must work together to find ways to make sure that our workforce development efforts in this sector are not siloed.

Proposed H.B. No. 5467 AN ACT ESTABLISHING A "FEE-FREE DAY" AT PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO COMPLETE THE FREE APPLICATION FOR FEDERAL STUDENT AID.

We appreciate the attention to initiatives such as this to drive more cost-conscious enrollment efforts at our public institutions. The CSCU system already offers a number of fee-free application opportunities including completely fee-free applications at Connecticut's community colleges. We are currently working with the Governor's Office to expand these opportunities with an application fee-free guaranteed admissions program for the state universities. We look forward to working with the committee to find ways to incorporate this with our ongoing efforts, including the Governor's proposal to require FAFSA completion as a condition of graduation from a Connecticut high school, while mitigating possible administrative concerns.

Proposed H.B. No. 6231 AN ACT REQUIRING HEALTH INSURANCE BENEFITS FOR PART-TIME FACULTY EMPLOYED BY THE CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM.

We share the laudable goal of this proposed legislation in expanding access to health care for more Connecticut residents. Particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we all appreciate how central health care is to our daily lives and our communities. However, we have a number of concerns with this proposal as drafted, outlined below, chief among them is the massive unfunded liability this presents which would be borne by our students and their families.

Part-time faculty employed across the four Connecticut State Universities are already eligible for health insurance and other benefits if they meet the workload requirement equivalent to 20 hours per week. This standard is not only in line with best practices, it is what the Comptroller has issued as guidance to state agencies in determining eligibility. Connecting eligibility to total credits previously taught, regardless of contact hours, would not only violate prior guidance but would present a massive unfunded liability and a significant administrative challenge to our universities.

Employment for part-time faculty is not guaranteed year to year or semester to semester. This new eligibility standard presents a number of technical challenges and questions in implementation. How are the credit hours defined? Over what period of time can someone accrue these credit hours? Do faculty members retain benefits if they do not teach for a semester, or more? How many hours would they need to continue to work to retain eligibility?

Additionally, this bill represents a gargantuan financial liability to our students and their families. While the state pays for fringe benefits for employees paid out of the general fund, students and their families are responsible for approximately 30% of our fringe benefit costs not covered by the state. With no accompanying increase in general fund support for this expanded coverage, the costs that would be borne through tuition increases for students and families is potentially tens of millions of dollars annually.

Finally, in accordance with Connecticut labor practices, health benefits are a subject of collective bargaining. We are currently in active negotiation with our bargaining units, and believe this is a subject best left to the negotiating table where experts from both sides can properly weigh all of the considerations of labor laws, administrative implementation, policy precedents and ability to pay.