

Testimony before the Committee on Higher Education and Employment Advancement

HB 6402: An Act Concerning Higher Education

SB 850: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Higher Education Statutes

Submitted by Francis M, Coan, Ph.D., Professor of History, Tunxis Community College

March 4, 2021

Dear Senators and Representatives:

My name is Francis Coan. I am a Professor of History at Tunxis Community College and have served that institution for the past thirty years. Between 2007 and 2019, I chaired the Social Sciences and History Department. Currently, I am the elected Tunxis representative on the Board of Regents Faculty Advisory Committee.

I strongly support House Bill 6402 and urge you to pass it with the substitute language I have provided in my written testimony. I also ask that you pass Senate Bill 850, the purpose of which overlaps with that of the former bill.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the creation of the Board of Regents (BOR). This is an opportune time to assess the effectiveness of the Board and the System Office (SO) that implements Board policies among the seventeen CSCU colleges and universities. The evidence demonstrates—indeed, proves beyond doubt—that the history of the BOR is a history of repeated failure. Over the past decade, approximately \$400 million has been expended on system-level administrative costs with little to show except an expanding, expensive bureaucracy, schools starved of autonomy and resources, faculty and staff marginalized and alienated, and student services severely curtailed. The so-called “Students First” plan to combine the community colleges into a single unwieldy, inflexible, top-heavy entity is the just the latest—albeit the most far-reaching and damaging—fiasco.

The BOR has failed to secure sufficient funding and resources for the seventeen institutions it oversees. Worse, it has diverted tens of millions of dollars to the administrative apparatus at 61 Woodland Street—the System Office—that has a budget larger than that of any of the community colleges and more than half the size of that for Eastern Connecticut State University or Western Connecticut State University. Much of this money is being spent on building Connecticut State Community College (CSCC), an institution that does not exist, is not needed, will serve students no more effectively or efficiently than the existing twelve colleges (quite the contrary, in fact), and will not exist prior to 2023 at the earliest. While CSCC lacks accreditation, classes, a curriculum, and students, it will employ eighty-five managers, administrators, and staff by the end of the fiscal year at a cost of \$8.5 million in salaries and benefits. Some of these positions were created and funded as early as 2019, and more will follow.

The BOR has failed to preserve and respect the autonomy college and university presidents and administrations need, and accreditation standards require, to run their respective institutions.

Ten of the twelve community college presidents have been replaced by Chief Executive Officers, whose duties seem largely confined to implementing SO policies and directives. They have no power to decide anything of importance. While the CSU presidents have not had their authority eroded to this degree, they have seen their budgets micromanaged and academic policies and programs contradicted and undermined due to SO interference.

The BOR and SO have failed to establish and foster a respectful, collaborative working relationship with the CSCU faculty and professional staff. I encourage all of you to watch the public comment segment of some upcoming BOR meeting. You will see a series of well-informed, passionate, dedicated faculty, staff, and students questioning, criticizing, and raising concerns about various Board initiatives (“Students First” chief among them) and decisions, only to be met with boredom, disinterest, condescension, and dismissiveness from the Regents. No dialogue exists between the folk at 61 Woodland Street and the faculty and staff who teach, advise, assist, and mentor students.

The BOR and SO have failed to secure faculty and staff support for “Students First.” By refusing to create and implement a governance structure for the proposed CSCC, employing an arbitrary process for approving curricula for the One College, imposing a series parameters, conditions, and restrictions on the writing of curricula, prioritizing timelines over careful planning and deliberation, and draining money and personnel from the community colleges to the “Students First” project, the BOR and SO have made enemies of most of the faculty and staff. Evidence of this can be read in the form of scores of resolutions and statements of concern and protest, including votes of no confidence in President Ojakian and the BOR, passed by college and university governance bodies, the Faculty Advisory Committee, and various programs, disciplines, and professional and labor organizations.

The BOR has failed to properly prioritize resources in the midst of a global pandemic that has caused great hardship to many Connecticut residents, including CSCU students, and resulted in a significant reduction in enrollments and revenue. Every spare dollar, including moneys flowing to “Students First” and the substantial reserves the SO has accumulated over the past several years, should be used to fund our current students and our existing colleges and universities.

The BOR and SO have failed to demonstrate that they have the ability to save the taxpayer any significant sum of money except through attrition of faculty, staff, and administrators. Given that every college and university is already short-staffed and has multiple unfilled positions, such a policy will only exacerbate the lack of services available to students. Fewer classes and sections, less time with advisors, shorter hours at the Library and Tutoring Center, and more difficulty getting problems resolved in Admissions or Financial Aid are some of the consequences.

The BOR has failed to demonstrate that by centralizing or regionalizing “back-office” functions, savings can be realized and quality of services can be maintained. At the beginning of this

semester, hundreds of panicked, frustrated, and angry students emailed and called Information Technology support, which has been centralized in Hartford, because they were not listed as enrolled in courses they had enrolled in or they could not access remote courses on Blackboard. Another “back-office” function, Human Resources, has similarly been consolidated. As a result, faculty and staff at most of the colleges have no idea who they are supposed to communicate with if they have a human resources question.

The BOR has failed to demonstrate how destroying twelve community colleges and interfering in the operations of four universities will bring about greater equity in higher education. Indeed, it would seem that the goal is to reduce academic rigor, prioritize student “success rates” and graduation rates over learning, and impoverish and narrow the higher education experience for students (especially at the community colleges). This will simply magnify and codify the disparities that have always existed between the community colleges and their students—largely working class and poor and disproportionately of color—and the other institutions of higher education in Connecticut and their students. Deliberately or inadvertently, the BOR is supporting the creation of a third-tier college system, funded accordingly, for those who lack the financial means, or who are insufficiently prepared academically, to have the option of enrolling elsewhere.

Any study should focus on altering the power relationship and communications between the BOR and SO on the one hand and the colleges and universities on other hand. The current system, which approximates a unitary state, is excessively centralized, vertical, and top-heavy and is unable to understand or effectively address local needs, often unique to each college and university service area. This system needs to be replaced by a federation of seventeen colleges and universities whose work is coordinated, not directed by, a less intrusive BOR and a smaller, less expensive, less intrusive SO, and whose presidents are empowered and encouraged to collaborate to the mutual academic and financial benefit of their respective institutions. The study should also consider the efficacy of breaking the current BOR into smaller components, each tasked with coordinating the work of some subset of the seventeen colleges and universities. The same approach should be considered for SO functions.

Once again, I urge you to pass HB 6402 with the substitute language below. I also urge passage of SB 850. Thank you for your time.

HB 6402

AN ACT CONCERNING HIGHER EDUCATION

(Recommended Substitute Language)

Within available appropriations, the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee shall conduct a study concerning the efficacy of the Board of Regents (BOR) for Higher Education and the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) system of

governance from its inception in 2011 to the present with a particular emphasis on the consolidation plan referred to as “Students First,” which was initiated in 2017.

The study shall include consideration of measures of student success, the relative cost of administration, and the effectiveness of communication, governance, and the setting of budgetary priorities between the Board of Regents and the 17 educational institutions.

The study may include a review of the efficacy of alternative governance structures for public, higher education in other states.

The study will be conducted by a committee that shall consist of: six members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee (three appointed by the Committee Co-Chairs and three appointed by the Ranking Members); two current members of the Board of Regents or designees appointed by the Chair of the BOR; one university President and one CEO or President of the a Community College appointed by the Co-Chairs; the Chair and Vice Chair of the Faculty Advisory Committee to the BOR, two faculty or staff at the CSUs appointed by CSU-AAUP, and two faculty or staff at the Community Colleges one appointed by the 4Cs, and one appointed by AFT.

The committee shall elect a chairperson from among its members. A majority of the members shall constitute a quorum.

In their report, the committee may include recommendations for reforms in the governance and/or budgeting structure of the Board of Regents and CSU system or propose alternative structures of governance.

The committee shall report the results of the study to the committees of cognizance by January 1, 2022.