

Testimony before the Committee on Higher Education and Employment Advancement
On HB 6402 An Act Concerning Higher Education and
HB 6404 An Act Funding The Debt-Free Community College Program
Submitted by Lillian Maisfehl, MLIS
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and Staff Chair of Faculty/Staff Council
Gateway Community College
March 4, 2021

Good afternoon Senator Haskell, Representative Elliot, Senator Witkos, Representative Haines, and Members of the committee. My name is Lillian Maisfehl. I am a Reference & Instruction Librarian and the Information Literacy Coordinator at Gateway Community College. I am also staff chair of Gateway's Faculty/Staff Council and co-chair of the Information Literacy Expert Team of the CSCU Library Consortium.

I urge you to pass HB 6402 with the substitute language provided below.

I am not a Connecticut native. I moved here in 2004 to take a job at Gateway. Over the past 17 years, however, I have made the state, and the institution of higher learning where I am today, my home. It is impossible for me to express, despite all my best efforts, how passionately I believe in the mission of my college, in its faculty and staff, and above all in its students. We are an incredible community of scholars and experts, of dedicated and compassionate intellectual, emotional, and physical laborers, of committed educators who recognize that the need is great, and the task noble. I am intensely, *fiercely* proud of my colleagues, and of the place among them into which I have grown.

Which is why it so saddens me, makes me so sick at heart, to see the BOR choose a path of high-priced consultants, failed initiative after failed initiative, and layer after layer of administration that pulls resources and human expertise away from the colleges, where both are so keenly needed, and toward a centralized bureaucracy that insulates itself further and further from the students it purports to place first, and the faculty and staff who work directly with them. And it is why it is so troubling that this shift of resources and decision-making power away from the colleges and to the System Office has gone largely unchecked in the ten years since the BOR was conceived. The BOR has operated in a vacuum of accountability, and the policies placed before have been accepted uncritically by the Regents, despite sustained and vocal critique and opposition from the faculty and staff who work at the colleges, who understand our students and the communities from which they come and their unique needs. Indeed, the BOR's response to faculty and staff concerns has been to further marginalize, silence, and trivialize us, while providing scant evidence, based on questionable scholarship as to how or indeed whether their plan will succeed in improving higher education in the state, or saving the state money.

Human Resources and Information Technology at the community colleges have already been consolidated, and in both cases, the consolidation was disastrous. A lack of support or clear lines of communication in Human Resources led to countless instances of incorrect pay and incorrect calculation

of accrued leave time, and left many student workers unable to be paid by the colleges at all. The consolidation of Information Technology led to the breakdown of four vital technology platforms, at the beginning of the semester, during a pandemic when technology has been most critical to success, preventing students from enrolling or from accessing their courses, and preventing college counselors from advising students on courses to take in pursuit of their degrees. These failures have still not been resolved, more than month into the semester. If this is what the colleges as a whole can look forward to under consolidation, we face a grim future indeed.

Support for community colleges is a matter of social justice. We serve many underrepresented and first-generation college students. We educate students who face financial and academic hurdles that would prevent them from attending most universities. We are open to all, including and especially the students from populations and communities that have been systemically and historically underserved. We are the institutions of higher learning that do the most for those who have the least, and we are being inexorably dismantled, defunded, and silenced. Our students deserve better. Our communities deserve better., Our state deserves better. The Board of Regents, its decision-making process, and its policies and initiative must be evaluated critically, must be transparent and accountable, and must actually serve the students they claim to put first.

Regarding HB6404, your commitment to debt-free community college is noble and to be applauded. I hope you will prioritize the stable funding and support such a commitment requires, and that you will realize that the current model, which requires full-time enrollment, disadvantages some of the students with the greatest need. Our students balance school and work, school and family, or school, family *and* work, and full-time enrollment is often a greater burden than they should be asked to bear in their efforts toward education. Debt-free college should not be a barrier to education, but for many of our students, as currently conceived, it very much is. Expecting students to take on a full-time credit load when they lack the time or resources to do so, is an invitation to failure. It is the opposite of our mission to make high-quality education affordable and *accessible* to all. I hope that you will work with faculty groups at the colleges to develop debt-free college models that benefit all students.

Thank you,

The image shows a handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Lillian Maisfehl". To the right of the signature is a circular seal with a red border and a blue center containing a white emblem.

Lillian Maisfehl

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 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 CSCU 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.