

Testimony before the CGA Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
In support of HB 6402 and 6404
Public Hearing, March 4, 2021
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Senator Haskell, Representative Elliot, Senator Witkos, Representative Haines and Members of the committee, I am Colena Sesanker. I teach philosophy at Gateway Community College and I am the current Chair of the Faculty Advisory Committee. In virtue of that role am a non-voting member of the Board of Regents and serve on its Academic and Student Affairs Committee.

The FAC has produced many reports, extending years before I joined the group, that have been shared with the chairs of this committee and with many of you. Governance bodies have produced dozens and dozens of resolutions and statements just over the past three years. I cannot begin to do justice to the enormity of the mess described in those documents here.

I'm sure that you know that the spending under control of the system office has grown to a sum larger than the expenses of any of our community colleges.

During a pandemic, our board documents will show that funding was drawn back from our colleges and universities while investments were being made in administrators for a college that doesn't yet exist and which has no students.

You know that in the last ten years, the CSCU system has had six leaders (five within the first 6 years of its existence) and that ten of the twelve college presidents have left.

You might know that TAP was an initiative that gave some purpose to the 17-institution structure, but it has largely stalled in the last few years as all attention has turned to consolidation.

You know that in Spring of 2019, faculty and staff across the system voted no confidence in the board, then-president Ojakian, and the Students First plan.

In the time since the no-confidence vote, we have had reason to lose even more faith in the plan--the first departments to be consolidated were IT and HR and, as we speak, some part timers and student workers are waiting for past due paychecks. HR is overwhelmed and warning that some services may not be available, and the semester began with students who could not access online courses for which they had registered and paid. Sign on issues dragged on for weeks.

The dysfunction is real. It has significant effects. Ten years on, it is time to take a good look at where we are and see what we can learn from this experience to recommend a structure that might work for us. First, though, we would need a clear picture of what's going on, but this system is not built for transparency.

Take this example: On February 8th you might have received a [Financial Update on Students First](#) with a note that claimed that it corrected 'misinformation' that has been circulating. It is reasonable to assume that the 'misinformation' referenced was likely a CTMirror article [titled "CT's 100 Million Dollar College](#)

[Shell Game](#)". In response to the February 8th SF Financial Report, [the FAC approved its own document](#) highlighting some points that were not fully appreciated in the Report.

Forget the content of those documents for a moment-- though the content is significant. What is more alarming is that the fact that, rather than debating the wisdom and value of the investment we are making in the most recent restructure, we are still debating what it is. We still don't know what it was intended to be. Our CFO attributes our hitting the 2018 projections to 'dumb luck' and his last projection for FY21, before adjustments for COVID, anticipated that our community colleges would require almost \$100Million dollars more to run this fiscal year than they did in 2017 and '18.

If you wanted to know how much we have invested in this consolidation, where would you look? 'implementation costs' as defined by our system, include only one-time costs that would not continue beyond consolidation. So, for example, the roster of highly paid administrators whose salaries will represent about \$10M over and above the cost of the twelve community colleges in this fiscal year alone are not included in implementation costs. The category of implementation costs is not particularly meaningful and does more to conceal than it does to reveal.

If you wanted to verify the claims of savings due to consolidation, how would you check? Who would you ask? how many times would you have to ask them? And how many years would you have to wait for an answer? In October of 2019, there was [an exchange about claimed savings between Ben Barnes, Mark Ojakian, and then-chair Rep. Haddad](#). It went on for over half an hour and ended with Mr. Ojakian saying "now that we understand the question..." he'd make sure to define what was meant by savings due to Students First by the following January. Over a year later, do we yet understand the baseline for savings and how it could be claimed at the same time as projecting an increase of over 20% in spending?

Not only is the dysfunction real, we also currently have no way to take its true measure. Dysfunction on this scale cannot be attributed to individual actors- it is a product of structure and resources. With a clear understanding of where we are, we can design a better structure for our public education system.

I support adoption of HB 6402 with following substitute language:

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 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.

I would also like to record my support for HB 6404. In the absence of a funding structure that reduces the burden of tuition for students, PACT is a solid first step, and the only tool we currently have available. It should be funded at a level that fulfils our current commitments and expanded to include all students regardless of enrollment or immigration status at the colleges and universities.

Its last-dollar design, though, makes it less likely that it will be expanded in this way. I hope that we move toward funding the system at a more appropriate level so that the cost of attendance is reduced for all, avoiding a design that means that we invest more in those who have more. We must expand the tuition relief beyond first-time full-time students to the part-timers and second-chancers who constitute the majority of our student population and for whom we represent a unique path to advancement.

I would like to suggest that we look into sharing [the benefits that CHEFA funding provide to private institutions](#) in an effort to fill part of the PACT gap. The value of this benefit is made larger when wealthier institutions can capitalize on low-cost borrowing. It seems an appropriate source of funding, and its viability may be worth some investigation.