Good evening, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Berthel, Representative Nuccio and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Louise Williams. I am a Professor of History at Central Connecticut State University and President of CSU-AAUP, which represents 3,000 teaching faculty, librarians, counselors, coaches and trainers at the four state universities. We also are part of the SEBAC coalition and a member of Connecticut For All.

I am here today to ask you to permanently fund higher education. The Governor’s budget and his public statements about the need to right size or shrink our public institutions will do irreparable damage to an excellent system that drives prosperity in our state.

For the past couple of months, I have sent every legislator in the Connecticut House and Senate a weekly newsletter outlining why the CSCU system needs more funding. Let me summarize some of the facts and arguments made in them, so that it is all on the record.

The first important thing to keep in mind is that, despite anything the Governor says about providing adequate funding, the State contribution to the operating of our system has not been enough to prevent cuts to personnel and services, and rising tuition.

I started teaching at CCSU in 1997 having taught in the City University of New York system. When I first arrived, I was thrilled at the fact that in Connecticut we did not have to constantly face the pressure and anxiety of budget problems as did the CUNY system. But in the past couple of decades this has changed.

I have seen gradual cuts to the number of faculty in our universities. In fact, from 2012-2021 the full-time faculty declined by 7% and part-time faculty by 11%. There also have been continual reductions in department budgets and secretarial support, so that we don’t have adequate supplies or help to do our jobs. Key support offices are understaffed so faculty have to do tasks that get in the way of educating students. Advanced courses that faculty work hard to prepare are often cut at the last minute if enrollment goes below a certain arbitrary number. And we are pressured to teach more and more students as course capacities are increased. Low-enrolled programs that faculty have worked hard to maintain have been eliminated or consolidated.

In short, faculty and staff are working harder than ever and are squeezed at every turn. Morale has declined significantly. And this will get worse in the future. To deal with the current woefully small budget, the Board of Regents approved mitigation plans and a retirement incentive that will reduce faculty and student support even further. They plan to save almost $100 million by hiring fewer personnel.
The worse consequences of all of this is that our students are suffering. It is harder than ever for them to get the courses required to graduate on time, and the help they need to succeed and stay in school. At the same time, the Board of Regents voted to increase tuition by 5%. This is on top of decades of tuition increases. In the past 20 years tuition has more than doubled.

Students are having an increasingly difficult time paying for a public university education. This is made worse because financial aid has not kept up with rising tuition. Our institutions are not able to provide sufficient institutional financial support to supplement federal and state aid because of their inadequate budgets. At the universities, moreover, the state-supported PACT program does not exist; it is only for the Community Colleges. In the end, students at our public universities pay more for their education than do many at private institutions, which have far more financial aid to give. This means our students must work longer hours or take out more loans.

Financial difficulties add so much stress and anxiety to a university education that many of our students drop out. This is one of the main causes of our unsatisfactory retention rates; in the CSUs only around half of students graduate in 6 years. There are other reasons for low retention rates in addition to the cost of education. But it has clearly been shown that the more money institutions spend on instruction, the higher the retention. And high retention means tuition dollars are not lost, which in turn provides more money for expanded student support services. Currently, the CSUs lose over $50 million per year in tuition dollars that would have been paid had students not dropped out.

The fact that it is so expensive to earn a CSU degree also may be connected to the enrollment declines that the Governor uses as an excuse to shrink us. Students simply are not able to even begin at a university that costs so much and delivers so little. All these problems especially impact non-white and economically challenged students. We have seen an increase in the percentage of our students in these categories. In fact, 40% of CSU students are from districts in the three lowest categories of spending on K-12 education. These are the poorest parts of the state, which includes big cities like Hartford, Waterbury, and New Haven, but also rural areas in Eastern and North-Western Connecticut.

These also are the places in the state with the fewest number of adults with BA degrees or higher. This means our students increasingly are the first generation in their families to earn a college degree. And these are the students who need the most help, academically, emotionally, and financially. They need more money spent on them, rather than less.

This brings up another fact. There is a real demand for our residents to have more, not fewer, opportunities to earn a university education.

This is true of individuals. There are many potential first-generation students. While in some parts of Connecticut, like Fairfield County 85% of residents have a BA or higher, there are many other areas in which 20% of residents over 25 have a BA. In some places the figure is as low as 11.5%. These are areas with a pool of potential students we can draw from to continue to reverse our enrollment declines, which are beginning to recover. Those are precisely the parts of Connecticut where many families would very much like their children to gain the benefits that are well-known to come from higher education, such as better paying jobs, health insurance and retirement plans, and the ability to serve their communities as volunteers.
But the advantages of higher education do not just go to the individuals who attain degrees. Everyone in Connecticut is helped. More people with BAs means a reduction in our appalling inequality and the great divide between the gold coast and our forgotten urban and rural areas. Connecticut will go a long way to prevent future budget shortfalls, if the percentage of degree holders increases by 10% or 20% in underserved areas and reaches the state average of 40% residents with advanced degrees. More people will be paying taxes and using fewer social services. Businesses will prosper with a large, skilled workforce on their doorstep. New businesses may even relocate to Connecticut, and also contribute to a healthy tax base.

There are political benefits as well, especially for those of you who are Democrats and moderate Republicans. Look at our CT Higher Education newsletter no. 7 that includes three maps of Connecticut. One map shows that the percentage of degree holders corresponds very closely to the wealth of various parts of the state; the more residents with a BA, the higher the average income of families. But the correlations in the last map are even more stark. Those areas with more degree holders voted overwhelmingly for President Biden in the last election. And it is well-known that people with BAs vote more regularly and consistently than those without.

And finally, as almost everyone agrees, with more higher education options our state will have more skilled workers, which we are constantly told we need. Governor Lamont certainly wants this. But even he admits that our universities are not able to meet the demand. As he made clear in 2022, “we have a significant nursing shortage in Connecticut, and our colleges and universities do not currently have capacity to increase the number of qualified nursing students they serve.” There also is a shortage of teachers and engineers and many other professionals. If we don’t have the capacity now to educate these workers, shouldn’t the Governor support the expansion of higher education, rather than its contraction?

For someone who claims to understand what is best financially for our state, Governor Lamont seems to forget the tenants of classical economics. If there is demand, it is essential to ensure that supply keeps up with it. Clearly there is demand for higher education in Connecticut. A large pool of potential students who are first generation and from economically challenged areas exists. Businesses are clamoring for more skilled workers. But the supply of reasonably priced options in our state colleges and universities for those potential students and workers is being shrunk by inadequate investment. Why would this make any sense? We know Governor Lamont wants to be fiscally responsible by saving money for the future. But won’t the future of our state be better economically with more, rather than fewer, university educated residents?

This is a question that you must consider very carefully. Our state depends on it.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions.