

**Lois Aime**

**Comments – Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee March 26, 2019**

Thank you all for allowing me to add my comments today. My name is Lois Aime. I am the Director of Educational Technology at Norwalk Community College, an adjunct professor, the president of the NCC senate and a member of the Faculty Advisory Committee to the BOR.

The Board of Regents, an entity that reports to no one, was created in 2011. Since that time the BOR and the revolving door of CSCU presidents have introduced one failed scheme after another at a cost of somewhere around \$250M. As a CT taxpayer I am appalled that this has been allowed.

While the colleges and universities scramble for financial resources to support our mission the System Office budget continues to rise. The projected System Office budget for FY19 will be approximately \$39.5M. This is more than \$9M over the SO budget in FY17 and is a 30% increase in two years.

Of all of the plans presented, “Students First”, which includes consolidation of the 12 community colleges into one CT Community College, is the most ill-conceived, and the most flawed. NEASC (now NECHE) stated as much in their letter to Mr. Ojakian last April. It is a rushed plan to create a huge bureaucratic institution. Removing our ability to respond to our students and our community needs is anything but a panacea for the fiscal problems facing CT. In fact, it is likely to lead to the demise of quality public higher education in CT. And the hardest hit students will be those who need us most. Those students who use public higher education as a stepping stone into the middle class. As a state with one of the largest achievement gaps in the country we should be considering the best way we can make quality and affordable education available to all students.

We have a petition against “Students First” that states why this proposal will harm CT public higher education. It has close to 1500 signatures from faculty, staff, students, retired presidents, and concerned citizens.

However, the System Office continues to move forward and is in the process of completing searches for three regional presidents. Their salaries range between \$150,000 and \$225,000 plus fringe benefits. What will they do for the next four years since each college will remain independently accredited? What if consolidation does not happen?

This past year, every major system initiative has focused on the primary goal of making us “look like” one college. Academic quality and what is best for our students have consistently taken a back seat to this goal. Some of the most respected voices in higher education are calling

for our institutions to place greater emphasis on preparing college students to become informed citizens through education that stresses civic learning and democratic engagement. This holds true whether the individual is studying engineering or social work because our country benefits from informed citizens. This type of education is general education. How has our system approached a common general education core? By advocating and insisting that the least comprehensive model be used. One that undercuts the type of civic engagement that everyone else is enhancing. And why? Because administrators felt it is easier for schools with more comprehensive general education to reduce than to ask others to increase their core requirements. The most important factor in every discussion of educational planning is how we can create the appearance of agreement quickly. The same is true of the system approach to guided pathways. What they don't tell you is that individual colleges are actually out ahead of this approach in the development of intrusive advising and FYE courses. But the system's insistence that everyone appear to do the same thing has undermined the good work that was accomplished at our schools. NCC has been committed to FYE for more than a decade. We have clear evidence that our course has significant positive impact on student success.

**TIAA (Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association)** Institute notes that successful mergers share seven characteristics: a compelling unifying vision; a committed and understanding governing body; strong leadership; a sense of urgency; a good project management system; a robust communication plan; and dedicated resources. I would submit that the only one of these characteristics apparent in the “Students First” plan is “a sense of urgency,” and this sense of urgency is manifested in the need to complete this process before any one person or body can do a thorough evaluation of its merits, both in financial terms and in real benefit to our students, our communities and our state.

In short, there is no credible evidence that the consolidation of the community colleges will save any money. We believe that savings could be realized without stripping the colleges of their independent accreditation.

Finally, the community college system has long been a target for budget cutting. Yet, the American Association of Community Colleges put out a report in 2014 that states that for every \$1.00 in taxes invested in community colleges there is a \$6.80 return on investment for the taxpayer and students earn back \$4.80 for every dollar spent on their education. Thank you.

<sup>1</sup> Prior to their merger administrative costs at Georgia Health Sciences University were approximately 6.3% of a total budget of roughly \$450M. At Augusta State University, administrative costs were approximately 17% of a total budget of roughly \$70M. Post-merger, the administrative costs of the merged institution, GRU, were approximately 6.7%.