

A response to the 2013-16 Connecticut State University Strategic Initiatives, October 2013

We, the undersigned CSU faculty representatives, would like to express our support for system-wide strategic planning and for developing a CSU Strategic Initiatives document as part of the Excel CT plan. This is, we believe, particularly important given the obvious need, after years of inaction, to promote the CSU system's value and interests to the state government and to all Connecticut citizens. While we regret that we were not consulted earlier in the planning process, we welcome the opportunity to participate, for no such planning can succeed without faculty input and support. We have therefore initiated a series of ongoing conversations on our campuses, but because we recognize that time is short, we present this interim response so that our concerns may be considered in the development of the Strategic Initiatives.

We are first and foremost concerned that the current Strategic Initiatives draft does not present a clear and accurate understanding of, or vision for, the CSU institutions. CSU has a unique role in the Connecticut public higher education landscape: we are the state's regional comprehensive universities. As our institutions' names suggest, we serve distinct regions of the state, and offer the students of each region a comprehensive university education, including a full grounding in the liberal arts as well as a wide range of excellent major and minor programs. Unlike a technical institute, we offer more than career training; and unlike a community college, we offer a four-year university education. Unlike UConn, we offer that education to students who cannot pursue it elsewhere, and who come from and stay in Connecticut. We do all this in small classes and with a primary focus on quality teaching enhanced by active faculty research.

In short, we provide a unique and important service to the state of Connecticut. Any strategic plan must both acknowledge and support that important work, even as it points towards new initiatives or towards particular programs we wish to enhance. To that end, we believe the Strategic Initiatives document that goes to the state government should make clear the CSU mission and vision and should include a request for financial support for them, especially support for a broad-based liberal arts curriculum at all four universities. To do otherwise would be to build on an insecure foundation.

Within the framework of this shared mission, the four CSU institutions do have individual identities and strengths. Therefore, while we cannot support a strategic plan that places primary emphasis on campus "specializations" at the expense of our commitment to comprehensive education at each university, we embrace a plan that promotes and enhances our individual strengths while also supporting our shared mission. We are troubled, however, both by the lack of consultation with faculty in the identification of our campus "specializations" and by the results of that process, which we feel do not reflect our understanding of our strengths and aspirations. We expect that one outcome of our ongoing campus conversations will be a more accurate and inclusive understanding of those strengths and aspirations, and we will present these as expeditiously as possible for inclusion in the final Strategic Initiatives document.

Beyond these individual campus specializations and the process that produced them, we have additional concerns about the Strategic Initiatives draft and Excel CT Executive Summary; these concerns can be divided into two types. The first involves elements that address areas of faculty governance, including but not limited to:

- Transfer and articulation amongst the 17 ConnSCU schools
- Credits for experiential learning and life experience
- Developmental education
- Early college programs
- Online education
- Teacher education

While many, if not all, of these initiatives are worthy endeavors, to be done right—that is, in a way that meets both the needs of our students and the standards of our institutions—they must be undertaken through established faculty governance channels; any other mechanism would lack the confidence of the faculty, who will ultimately have to implement them. In the context of that understanding, we look forward to working on these initiatives.

Our second type of concern involves the evolving strategic plan elements about which we have too little information to make an informed judgment or to provide effective consultation. These include, but are not limited to:

- The consolidation of “back office” functions like admissions, Registrar’s functions, and Instructional Technology (Banner, Blackboard, etc.)
- The centralization of multi-campus functions like International Education on a single campus
- The consolidation of online education through Charter Oak
- Collaboration of CSU faculty with the Community Colleges

Many of these initiatives may provide valuable efficiencies for CSU—or they may infringe on institutional autonomy and hamper our ability to deliver a quality educational experience to our students. Without details, we cannot know. We expect details to be forthcoming as the plan develops and, while we appreciate the need to proceed expeditiously towards the February deadline, we also expect ongoing communication and collaboration with the faculty before the plan is finalized—we want to be confident that all elements eventually included have been carefully considered and that they will produce more desirable results than unforeseen difficulties.

We wish to make clear that our purpose here is not to be obstructionist. On the contrary, we offer our ideas in the spirit of constructive criticism because no one is more invested in the success of ConnSCU’s institutions and students than its faculty, and no one is more able to assess its needs and recognize its opportunities. We are glad, after many directionless years, to see genuine strategic planning taking place, and we are firmly committed to being active participants in its success.

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