

2023 FAC Report to the Legislative Committees related to Higher Education

The goal of the report is to allow you to directly hear concerns regarding the Board of Regents for Higher Education, of which the chair (Colena Sesanker) and the vice-chair (David Blitz) of the Faculty Advisory Committee are ex-officio members. This report is submitted in fulfillment of the reporting requirement of the FAC to the joint standing committees of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to higher education and appropriations. (Sec. 185: 10a-3a/c). We will also circulate it to faculty and staff at the colleges and universities that constitute CSCU, to the Governor and the executive branch, and to the Board and its System Office as well.

We are mindful that the current administration inherited the flawed Students First college consolidation plan which has resulted in a two-year deficit of over \$125 millions and the results of the failure by the BOR to assess the president of WCSU, where the reserves were depleted and a massive deficit of over \$33 million was accumulated. We also recognize new leadership at the Board of Regents, including diverse individuals of varying backgrounds. We have been able to hold joint meetings between the FAC and the BOR, and appreciate recognition by the Board chair when FAC representatives ask to speak at meetings. But without a regular agenda item and the ability to formulate amendments to improve Board policies and correct errors, these interventions are limited and serve essentially for the record.

We had hoped that with new System and Board leadership that there would be significant changes in procedures and outcomes. We are disappointed by results so far which we judge to be symptomatic of deep structural flaws in the CSCU system as a whole which require legislative action. We are also disappointed by the failure of the Governor and the Legislature to fully meet the base level needs of the constituent institutions (colleges and universities), in particular for FY25. The base line increase is less than the rate of inflation, while unfavorable adjustments to fringe benefit payments add an additional burden to system-wide finances.

We ask and respond to five questions which concern significant problems and possible solutions to the failings we identify. We consider (1) whether the 2011 merger of the community colleges, state college and state universities achieved its goals (2) whether the 2023 merger of the community colleges into one institution achieved its goals; (3) whether the CSCU system was able to propose and achieve a realistic and sustainable budget for FY 24 -25; (4) whether the CSCU system office has been able to break with its isolation and dysfunction; (5) whether the Board of Regents as presently constituted and functioning can resolve the problems we identify. ***To all these questions we answer No, and provide evidence to back our conclusions.***

Given these serious criticisms, we also propose (6) a framework for a solution, involving (a) rejection of CSCU's over-centralization termed "systemness" in favor of a "system of systems" approach, respecting the autonomy and integrity of the six member systems (4 universities and 2 colleges) that constitute the overall system, along with respect for faculty control of curriculum and pedagogy; (ii) with a consequent limitation on the powers of the System Office and increased scrutiny of its proposals by the Board; (iii) which itself might be divided either formally or functionally into college and university sectors, to better assist in accomplishing the distinct missions of each sector, (iv) with a coordinating group between the two sectors to assure student transfer from colleges to universities ("transfer articulation") and a council of university and faculty senate presidents to critically assess Board and System policies and propose better informed and planned initiatives. In greater detail, please read what follows:

1/ Did the 2011. merger into one system, Connecticut State Colleges and Universities fulfil its mandate as stated in section 185 of state statutes, to respect the distinct missions of the universities and colleges and report annually on its progress in that respect?

Answer: No. This is a significant failure of both the System Office and the Board:

- (1) The Board and System Office (by which we designate primarily the CSCU executive – Chancellor and others- and secondarily the headquarters in Hartford and the college office in New Britain) have failed to submit reports on maintaining distinct missions for the universities and colleges, and has failed to develop any policies to do so. This is an essential distinction to be made, as there is a significant difference in clientele between open admission community colleges, degree completion at Charter Oak, and more selective admission at the universities; as well as the differences in requirements and outcomes among Associate, Bachelor, Masters and Doctoral degrees.
- (2) Further, the mission of each sector (college, university) has been undermined by over- centralization of policy at the System and Board levels, to the detriment of local initiatives and the autonomy and integrity of member institutions. A continually shifting structure of “shared services” means that actions needed at the institutional level are delayed; a telling example are the delays in correcting health and safety problems at a number of campuses of CTState. The scope of authority of campus CEOs is not clear, even to deal with urgent situations (such as has arisen, for example at the Asnuntuck campus with respect to health and safety).
- (3) Moreover, the one link between the colleges and universities that should have been developed: transition articulation between the two to encourage community college students “seamlessly” transitioning to the state universities, has been left behind since 2017, despite a meager attempt to revive the council charged with this task by the current administration.

2/ Has the consolidation of the community colleges into one Connecticut State Community College achieved its objectives of cost savings to the state, greater equity and better services to students?

Answer: No. Students’ First, focused on the consolidation of the community colleges, piloted by the previous system administration and completed by the current one has been immune to review and revision, despite criticism by faculty and genuine efforts by their representatives to advise and assist the Board, as mandated by section 185 of state statutes. The consolidated community college was inaugurated on July 1, 2023 with the following significant problems:

- (1) A debt of over \$130 million for FY24/25 due to failures in planning and excessive hiring of full time staff, for example (i) 170 advisors on “soft funds” with an impossible mandate of paying for themselves through unrealistic retention gains (upwards of 25% per year), (ii) six area deans with no clear mechanism for coordinating faculty in multiple and often unrelated disciplines; and (iii) continued salaries to regional presidents now relieved of all their original responsibilities, and only one with new ones, for a total of \$3.7 million dollars since 2019 of mostly wasted funds.
- (2) Failure to “teach out” the over 400 programs “aligned” or consolidated into some 100 with in addition unpleasant student surprises when (i) credits for courses in the “old” program were not transferred into the new programs due to a lack of programming of the appropriate software; (ii) application of a software package which reduced federal support for any course not in a new program, penalizing students for general education and personal choices; (iii) sending out emails threatening to drop students with resultant debts over \$500. The solution to this automated problem remains slow, manual, and labor-intensive leaving most affected students uncertain of their status and overly constrained in their choices while it is addressed. There remains a further group of students for whom there is no standard procedure for a solution.
- (3) There is a lack of support structure for students, with advisors overwhelmed correcting problems due to the alignment of programs without a teach-out, and the reduction of their eligibility for part of

federal aid. Students taking courses at multiple campuses can easily find themselves served by none in particular.

- (4) Tuition and fees were raised an average of 5% in December at CTState and the four universities (but not Charter Oak) without any response from the System Office to FAC concern about the added burden on students already stressed by the significant problems of the transition to the consolidated college.

3/ Are the new leadership at the System (president, now chancellor) and his executive staff able to propose and lobby for sustainable state funding, especially for FY 25?

Answer: No. The CSCU faces a significant deficit, entirely due to cost over-runs at CT State Community College (\$125 million for FY 24/25) and Western CT State University (\$33 million for FY 24/25); this latter largely due to the failure of the previous leadership of the Board and System Office to supervise the WCSU president and assure prudent fiscal policy. These are real problems, but the System Office, without any communication or consultation with the FAC, was unable to come up with a realistic solution to the underfunding of the System and its constituent units. The “CSCU 2030” budget was exaggerated and failed to be accepted by the OPM, which in return used partial metrics (enrollment alone) to underfund the system, particularly for FY25. Had the CSCU leadership sought FAC input we would have pointed out that the proposal was inflated and unrealistic:

- (1) It proposed nearly doubling block grants in a mere two years without any specific justifications, proposed 30 new “consortium” online university programs with no consultation with the universities, nearly tripled the budget for Charter Oak State College (see 270% proposed increase for FY 25 compared to 2023 *at CSCU 2030*, p. 7) with no explicit indication why.
- (2) It included new buildings not needed in a \$2.1 billion proposal (eg: STEM at CCSU when the university just opened a \$65 million dollar engineering/advanced technology building), not sufficiently developed (\$350 million for a new Hartford campus, without any indication of its structure or even an architect’s sketch).
- (3) It failed to advocate effectively for the CSCU system when OPM transferred all health care costs to CSCU while transferring pension costs to the state, a proposal which benefits UConn for external grants but disfavors CSCU where outside research funding is minimal.
- (4) It failed to take into account the proposals by leadership of the FAC for an incremental increase of block grants from the state in the order of 8-10% per year to take into account inflation and gradually bring the funding of the colleges and universities up to the level required after years of underfunding. Alternatively, to present a standard for the state’s higher ed offerings with justifications and costs to demonstrate how the system might better contribute to the people of the state without being anchored to inadequate past levels of funding.

4/ Has CSCU broken with the culture of isolation and dysfunction characteristic of the previous System administration, including suspicion and distrust of faculty and staff?

Answer: No: Despite an effort by one vice-president at the System Office (now demoted or replaced) to improve relations with the FAC through monthly meetings, that initiative now appears ended, with no concrete results. Moreover, the following should be noted as indicators of continued distrust of faculty and staff by the System Office:

- (1) Repeated requests by the FAC to have a regular agenda item at BOR meetings have been rejected, despite the fact that section 185 of state statutes requires that the FAC not only advise, but also “assist” the BOR in its functions, impossible to do when we cannot present our resolutions and ideas in an organized way;
- (2) A meeting of the Board in December to consider “Board relationships” and functioning was not announced to faculty ex-officio Board members. The Board immediately went into executive session without a posted itemized agenda, without faculty presence, though students were included; the minutes of the meeting do not discuss any of its content.
- (3) A regular report from the System office chief of staff to members of the Board specifically excluded the FAC chair and vice-chair, who are ex-officio (non-voting) members of the Board, as well as the Governor’s Commissioners who also are ex-officio on the Board. This report contains no sensitive or personnel matters and should not have been restricted.
- (4) The System Office proposed that FAC meet with the outside consultants doing the OPM assessment of the CSUS System at a time (early January) when the colleges and universities were not in session and faculty would be unable to attend, The System office knew or should have known this fact, and at this time no further meeting has been scheduled.
- (5) The CSCU system has refused to allow public campus forums for the finalists for the Eastern CT University President, contrary to past practice, given that it is essential for faculty and staff to meet candidates and question them about priority issues that concern the university community as a whole.
- (6) There is no coherent strategy to deal with the impact of Artificial intelligence for on-ground, hybrid and online courses, A seminar on the subject of AI was organized by the System Office in August when the colleges and universities were not in session, severely limiting (to near zero) attendance by those faculty most concerned.

5/ Can the problems of the Board and the System office be resolved within the existing framework?

Answer: No. We believe the problems described above cannot be solved by further minor adjustments to the System and BOR.

- (1) The problem is in part the leadership style of the CSCU executive and its previous president (now retired) and current successor (now designated as chancellor). However, it is not solely an issue of individuals, but rather the inability of an isolated System office to understand what is going on and what is needed at the constituent institutions, and a Board which, up to now has been largely complacent in accepting System Office resolutions, sometimes without previous vetting by its own committees.
- (2) The Board consistently approves, without critical review and amendments, resolutions from the System Office:
 - a. The Board accepted a mitigation resolution with a seriously flawed demand for comprehensive program assessments in an impossibly short time frame. When the resolution was amended to exclude a \$2.5 million call on reserves for a self-study of the system, the resolution as amended was not posted as a true copy in the subsequent minutes.
 - b. A resolution entitled “consummation of college mergers” was not included in the agenda

distributed before the meeting, but instead distributed by hand at the end of a meeting. It renounced valuable accreditations of the 12 previous community colleges without any further discussion.

- c. The Board approved the System Office proposal for a 5% tuition/fee increase for all college and university students without a study of its effects on enrollment and retention, as requested on the occasion of the previous tuition/fee increase.
 - d. The Board accepted a major proposal for a retirement initiative never submitted to the Board Finance/Infrastructure Committee, and without adequate antecedent communication and consultation with all the relevant unions.
- (3) The Board is dependent on the System Office not only for major policy resolutions, but also for the data (spreadsheets and charts) used to “justify” those resolutions. In short, it has no independent source of information and so is beholden to the System Office for the very information it should use to make any criticisms or improvements.
- (4) The System Office continues to deduct its own operating expenses (in the tens of millions) from the block grants to the universities and colleges on its own say-so; the formula for the distribution of remaining block grants to the constituent units has been modified but not made public.

6/ Can we take measures to resolve these problems?

Answer: Yes, and we have some proposals in the spirit of *constructive* criticism:

- 1) *The current leadership of CSCU relies on a concept it terms “systemness” which should be abandoned.* The term is not in the major dictionaries, although it is fostered by the National Association of System Heads. This approach advocates a policy of over-centralization whereby the System Office and its head (chancellor in the case of CSCU) initiates policy with little or no consultation with the constituent unit leadership (administrative and faculty). It results in flawed and failed policies such as Students First and CSCU 2030.
- 2) *Instead CSCU and its Board and System Office leadership and staff should function using a “system of systems” approach.* Such an approach has been used with success by major engineering companies for complex projects and the US military for joint operations. By “system of systems” we recognize that each constituent institution (4 universities, 2 colleges) is itself a system, and can on its own (i) recruit, retain and graduate students; (ii) hire, tenure and promote faculty, and (iii) contribute to the advancement of knowledge and the economic and social progress of the state.

The overall system should respect the autonomy and integrity of its constituent units, rather than imposing directives in a command-and-control model inappropriate for higher public education. The overall CSCU system should provide “value added” to what the constituent institutions can accomplish on their own, something the current System Office, CSCU executive and BOR fail to do.

- 3) *The role of the System office and CSCU executive need to be more narrowly defined,* including (i) aggregating the financial needs of the constituent colleges and universities and proposing a realistic and sustainable budget to the OPM, Governor and Legislature; (ii) providing a common policy on state wide issues such as sexual harassment and computer security; and (iii) maintaining an “inventory” of programs at each level -- colleges and universities -- for reporting and assessment

purposes. The role should be one of assisting the constituent units and providing a common framework, without directing or micro-managing them.

- 4) *The role of the Board should be one that is more critical to System Office, including* (i) critically assessing resolutions and proposals submitted by the System Office in advance of Board or Board committee meetings for approval, modification or rejection; (ii) assuring that the constituent units have balanced budgets as well as assessing on a regular basis the performance of their presidents; and (iii) providing where required by law (section 185 of state statutes) final approval of budgets and other financial transactions.
- 5) *The Board needs to respect shared governance.* This implies a willingness to fully take into account the expertise of faculty and staff, and to focus on mutual agreement rather than imposed resolutions to make needed changes in the system. The history of the previous and the present administration has been one of management assertion rather than collegial cooperation, to the detriment of the educational experience of students, and career satisfaction of faculty and staff.
- 6) *The Board needs to respect faculty control of curriculum and pedagogy:* While administration has ultimate control on matters such as budget and senior personnel - subject to consultation with faculty - faculty must, by dint of their expertise, control curriculum and pedagogy - subject to final approval and funding by administration. Imposing courses on the community college or universities or the forced “alignment” of diverse programs for the sake of uniformity destroys the very foundation upon which the CSCU constituent units are based – the classroom, laboratory, seminar and other experiences designed and lead by faculty for the benefit of our students.
- 7) *The CSCU System is now split between two system offices and could itself be divided, either formally or functionally.* There is the original one on Woodland St. in Hartford, and a second, housing both Charter Oak and CT State Community College in New Britain, now termed “The New Britain Center for Higher Education”. This latter looks after the two colleges, but that leaves the question: is the role of the Hartford Office simply one of assisting the universities? In embryo, the splitting of the system office in two leads to the possibility of splitting the Board either formally or functionally, so that each separate Board or section can better assume its specific responsibilities.
- 8) *Such an arrangement would better enable the presidents of the four universities to meet,* specifically to judge the effect of system-wide proposals on their sector and to propose initiatives. A similar arrangement could be made for the two colleges (CT State and Charter Oak). with a composition including administrative and faculty/staff campus representation.
- 9) In order to achieve strategic goals to promote public higher education at its colleges and universities, System and Board officers need to improve communication and consultation and avoid command-and-control. That is the only way that trust can be restored and relations between the administration and faculty be repaired. On such a basis, voluntary cooperation and beneficial coordination could occur. But that requires significant structural changes and policy realignments such as those outlined above. Alternatively, the state legislature might analyze the value of the contributions of the CSCU system office compared with its actual cost (which is far from transparent) and determine whether that cost- unfunded by the state except by the system’s extractions from institutional funding- is justifiable or whether a structural change is advisable.

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