



Connecticut State
Colleges & Universities

Mark Ojakian
President

October 15, 2019

Dr. Barbara Brittingham, President
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
3 Burlington Woods Drive, Suite 100
Burlington, MA 01803

Dear Dr. Brittingham,

I wish to begin by acknowledging the helpfulness of the Commission's July 12, 2019 letter that provided valuable guidance as we continue our planning efforts at CSCU. I would also like to thank you and Dr. O'Brien for traveling to our system office to meet with our administrative team on September 23, 2019. Your thorough review of the standards and insights into the work ahead was very beneficial, and we look forward to presenting to the Commission in April 2020.

Thank you as well for allowing me an opportunity to respond to the public comment the Commission received in August. Rather than offering a point-by-point refutation, I wish to affirm the principles of *Students First*, why we are proposing this substantive change, and how we will continue to engage broad-based participation in the planning process.

Our single greatest responsibility is increasing success for all of our students. Our completion and transfer out rates for all students are among the lowest in the country. Adding to this troubling fact, Connecticut's 29-point achievement gap in college attainment between white and minoritized students is the third highest in the nation. This gap clearly shows that Connecticut's community colleges do not work for everyone and far too many students encounter challenges along the educational pipeline that prevent completion of credentials of value. These trends are unacceptable, especially when our state and nation desperately need a more educated workforce and citizenry. Educating all of America's students, especially underrepresented students, is a national imperative, as it can lead to positive impacts for individuals, families and communities.

Students First is our solution to address the systemic deficiencies found by NECHE (then NEASC CIHE) in a majority of 10-year accreditation reviews of our community colleges. Despite the heroic efforts of our faculty, staff and administrators, all of our colleges suffer from low graduation and completion rates, fiscal perilousness, inadequate advisement systems, and lack of demonstrable student learning outcomes. Through a single accredited institution, we can deploy scarce resources where needed and respond nimbly to workforce needs as they arise.

Our reliance on a state block grant that follows a formula to distribute a declining legislative appropriation to 12 independent institutions is not sustainable. Given current economic projections for the state of Connecticut and the difficult choices legislators and the administration must make about investments, there is little reason to believe that the downward trend in state appropriations will rebound anytime soon. Without making significant structural changes and pooling rather than stretching our resources thinly, our college system is unsustainable. In order to marshal scarce resources to maximize student success, the centerpiece of *Students First* is to create a single accredited institution that continues to provide access and opportunity at all current locations throughout the state, deploys resources centrally, regionally and locally, and harnesses the talent and innovations found throughout our campuses.

Historically, Connecticut's community colleges have always had a structure whereby the system office provides some essential services to the colleges (e.g. technology, financial aid processing, legal affairs), services that account for up to 72% of the system office budget. The system office is able to provide these services more efficiently and at lower cost than duplicating the same services at 12 colleges. Building on this foundation, the future college central office will do the same with other operational facets such as facilities management, fiscal affairs, institutional research and human resources.

Our consolidation plan is bold and implementation is complex and, in the short term, will expand the system budget. We fully understand that, as we move from 12 separately accredited colleges to a single accredited college with 12 campuses, we need to be attentive to maintaining 12 accreditations while transitioning to a single college. Part of making progress toward the new college, however, is to begin hiring staff who will serve in the single college, but who for the time being are part of system staff. The Regional Presidents as well as the Vice President of Enrollment Management are currently at the system, but will be part of the single college central office after the consolidation. In the interim between now and consolidation, a number of other positions for the one college will be part of the system office budget.

As well, there are upfront costs to implementation that will diminish as we move closer to consolidation, one-time costs we have to incur in order to consolidate. For instance, the reworking of our student information and support systems will need resources during the transition. We fully expect the system office budget to increase during implementation, but the budget will be reduced as positions take their places at the single college and as the one-time work of consolidation is completed.

When we have experienced attrition, we have moved to the future organizational structure where possible. For instance, we have hired interim Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) as plans develop to search for and hire permanent leaders. Searches for permanent Chief Executive Officers are planned in several rounds over the next two years to replace the interim positions. Those search processes were approved by the Board of Regents in September 2018 and provide for significant engagement of campus faculty, staff, administrators and students as well as foundation and

community members. These CEOs will continue to be fully accountable for meeting the accreditation standards at their colleges until the appropriate point in the consolidation process.

Our curriculum work, which is a bedrock of *Students First*, is an extension of the successful collaboration among all of our institutions that has been part of our Transfer and Articulation Policy (TAP) initiative. Whereas transfer and articulation among Connecticut community colleges and public universities was historically problematic, this initiative has brought together disciplinary professionals to work on common transfer paths from all twelve colleges to the four universities and the online college for our students. While it might appear to be unwieldy to bring together hundreds of practitioners, this is exactly what has been done with TAP. The TAP curriculum process provides a proven foundation for the alignment of curriculum for the single college. As seen through TAP, it has been advantageous to bring disciplinary practitioners together so that they can develop common and consistent learning outcomes throughout our system. The development of the curriculum was faculty driven throughout and affirmed CSCU's reliance on faculty governance in curricular matters, a bedrock principle for CSCU. The alignment of curriculum for the single college follows the same process.

The central initiative CSCU has undertaken to improve student outcomes is implementation at scale of Guided Pathways practices, which have been proven nationally to be effective in increasing degree and certificate completions along with positioning students to take advantage of workforce opportunities. This initiative, which emanates from our Student Success Center created by a grant from the Kresge Foundation, is funded by Jobs for the Future (JFF) and, similar to our partnership with Achieving the Dream described below, places our colleges within the scope of national, replicated research that will be utilized to assure student success. Implementing Guided Pathways at scale to increase student success and close achievement gaps requires upfront investment, but a recent return-on-investment report from CSCU's Chief Academic Officer makes the case that, in the near future, the costs of Guided Pathways will pay for themselves as more students persist to completion.

Although a cost to the system and the colleges, the decision to have all colleges join Achieving the Dream is a strategy designed to provide additional structure and technical support to the implementation of Guided Pathways. It is an investment in our institutions, our faculty and staff, and, most importantly, in our students. Achieving the Dream (ATD) is now in its 15th year of operation and has provided important support to institutions redesigning their advising practices, leading to positive results for completion and the closing of achievement gaps. In the past, only four of our colleges participated in this initiative; now all of our institutions will join as partners. Similarly, the decision to hire a Vice President for Enrollment Management reflects our need for consistent, high impact enrollment strategies and predictive analytics for student recruitment and retention, a capacity that not all of our twelve community colleges possess.

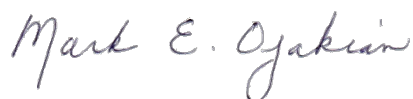
It is imperative that we continue to engage faculty, staff and administrators in the implementation of *Students First*. More than 50 teams of faculty are actively involved in our three rounds of curriculum alignment work. Committees comprising faculty, staff, and administrators are focused

on shared governance, first year experience, and general education, as well as on Guided Pathways and Achieving the Dream efforts. The new Regional Presidents are working closely with the Presidents and CEOs and the respective colleges in their regions to identify common challenges and solutions, promote collaboration and sharing of resources, and facilitate the sharing of best practices. We will continue to extend our outreach and inclusion of all who wish to contribute to our efforts.

We are mindful of the challenges ahead and continue to provide regular updates to the Board of Regents and all CSCU employees. In addition, legislative and administrative understanding of *Students First* has increased significantly in the past year as we have participated in public hearings, met individually with members of the Connecticut General Assembly and provided updates to the Governor and his staff as well as legislative leadership. The appointment or reappointment of three Regents by the legislature this session after extensive questioning related to *Students First*, and Governor Lamont's reappointment of Matt Fleury as chair of the Board of Regents through 2022, are important votes of confidence in our consolidation efforts. That said it is critical that we continue to educate legislators about *Students First* and address their questions and concerns as we share their commitment to the communities we serve and, most importantly, the students who attend our institutions.

These are challenging times for public higher education, but I remain committed to open access *and* student success for all. I look forward to our regular contact throughout the coming months and to appearing before the Commission in the spring of 2020. We welcome any guidance that you have to offer as we plan and implement *Students First*.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mark E. Ojakian".

Mark Ojakian

President

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