

Statement to the Appropriations Committee

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Christopher E. Trombly, Ph.D.

Public higher education is by no means the only publicly funded enterprise that is being stretched increasingly thin. It is, however, a compelling case in point – and the reason why we're all here, this evening.

For far too long, we citizens – and the officials whom we've elected to represent us – have resisted tax increases. On one level, and for many of us, this resistance has made good sense: Our household incomes have not kept up with our expenses; we've needed to cut back our household spending in areas in which we'd have preferred not to, in order to cover the costs of items that formerly had been less expensive or even free.

These items are by now familiar, but – despite being commonplace – nevertheless serve as genuine shocks to the systems of families throughout Connecticut and across the country:

- The exponentiating costs of our absurdly complex and unforgivably unaccountable system for paying for healthcare have held families' incomes down, as monies that employers would otherwise have used to fund increased salaries are instead used to cover skyrocketing insurance costs for their employees. To add insult to injury, larger and larger amounts of the money that families do take home are consumed by deductibles, co-pays, and prescription costs that previously had been only nominal.
- Families are increasingly asked to shoulder the costs – in the form of fees assessed by school districts – for such things as co-curricular activities and athletics that previously had been provided free of charge as integral components of a student's public school experience.
- Most germane to this evening's session, the costs of attending a public institution of higher education – like the previously mentioned costs of health care – have risen at a rate far beyond what most families and individuals can reasonably be expected to bear. Where state colleges and universities in the past served as viable options for students who lacked the resources to attend more prestigious (and more expensive) private institutions, they now are no more accessible than their private counterparts. Young people, today, have no such viable alternative – especially since they can't possibly earn enough working multiple jobs to pay their way through school even part-time. Instead, they are increasingly trapped between the rock of not going on to college at all, and the hard place of taking on a burden of student loan debt that they can't hope to repay in anything approaching a timely manner.

You all now face the unenviable task of appropriating funds from a pie that is far smaller than is reasonable.

In the short term, I ask you to recognize that whatever public higher education expenses you do not subsidize through your appropriation will, of necessity, be borne by faculty and staff who are already doing more and more with less and less, and – even more regrettably – by students and families who are already desperately overburdened.

In the longer term, I ask you to work with the governor to expand the proverbial pie – and, still more important, to communicate the need for that to your constituents. Yankee thrift is well and good, as far as it goes; but we've for far too long been penny wise and pound foolish. I am in no way suggesting that already struggling families should be taxed still further. I am, however, advocating for our tax code to be rewritten to be far more progressive than it is; for those of us who can afford to pay more to be asked to do just that.