

February 18, 2020

Appropriations Committee Higher Education Subcommittee Hearing  
Testimony from Kathleen N. Skoczen, PhD, Professor  
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Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about the Connecticut State University system. I am a professor with 22 years of experience working at Southern. Our students represent the future of our state. They are invariably hardworking, dedicated and hopeful. Most students could be elsewhere, but have the good sense to know that a stellar education is within reach and can alleviate the crushing burden of college debt later. Our students are not all from lower income families, but many are, and we represent the only avenue to success for these students. To quote a recent article. “The average undergraduate from the bottom quintile [1/5<sup>th</sup>] of income must find a way to finance an amount equivalent to 157 percent of his or her family income to pay for college, while it costs a wealthy family just 14 percent of its income to send a student to college.”<sup>1</sup> For those students hailing from the bottom quintile, the state university system is their safety net; guaranteeing our state that we do not lose this pool of talent due to the harsh economic inequality of our system.

There is a prevalent myth out there that if students do not pay for their education they will not value it. I would like to challenge that myth. I was one of six children. I started out in a private school that my family, even with grants and loans, could not afford. I finished my undergraduate degree at San Diego State, where working as a waitress I put myself through school. SDSU cost \$50 per semester, yet I cherished the education I received there, not only for the outstanding faculty, but also, because at that price, the classroom was robustly diverse with many voices: we were all there because we valued an higher education.

No, we are not California, but we charged approximately the same amount for an education in the 1970s. We have now increased that cost 100-fold! Since I have come to Southern, 22 years ago, I have seen the cost of education escalate. In 1998 a commuter student paid \$3578 a year; today that same commuter is paying \$11,446, or more than three times as much. The minimum wage in 1998 was \$5.65; today it is \$12. or just over double. Perhaps we cannot ask for free, publicly funded education but ... are we as economically as prosperous as a state like Georgia?

Georgia has seen its economy improve, alongside the enrollment, retention and graduation rates at the Georgia State Universities. Why? The governor of Georgia had the good sense in 1992 to understand that the future of his state lay in an educated workforce. He instituted the Hope Scholarship program, similar to the New Haven promise, but for the state university system. After two generations of students, the state universities in Georgia have seen stronger, better prepared students. This kind of slow cultural shift that rewards hard work in K-12, with an accessible college education, is something Connecticut can surely afford. The real question is can we afford NOT to do this?

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20191231-barriers-to-mobility?utm\\_source=at&utm\\_medium=en&cid=at&source=ams&sourceId=5154103](https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20191231-barriers-to-mobility?utm_source=at&utm_medium=en&cid=at&source=ams&sourceId=5154103)

We must stop balancing the budget on the backs of hard working, hopeful students who are themselves sacrificing and investing in a middle-class future in our state, they are the backbone of our state's economic future. As a colleague recently pointed out college education is not an expense; it is an investment. Our students are every bit as valuable to this state's economy as the students at Yale, the students at Quinnipiac, the students at UConn and the students at any other university in the country. Approximately 90 percent of our students come from Connecticut and 90 percent of students will stay in Connecticut to work, raise a family, buy a house and yes, even retire. I would ask you to think about how much your university education cost you. And what was your education worth to our state's economy, to your community, to your family? What or where would you be if you could not have paid for that education?

Can the legislator find money in the budget for the Connecticut State University? The legislator manages to find twice as much for the Department of Corrections. Our spending priorities represent our values; we need to shift our values and we will find the amount we pay for corrections will begin to decline. Our revenues will go up in the long term. Our economic prosperity will improve. We can find the resources but we have to reject the neoliberal discourse that we are all on our own: we are not. Our students are your children's teachers, the nurses in your doctor's office, nursing homes, hospitals, they are the scientists in research labs, they are clerks in your offices, and sometimes they are your colleagues in the state legislator. Shifting a fundamental cost like higher education reverberates throughout our economy. Sharing this cost means more educated citizens who are fully part of the middle class. Shifting the burden to those already struggling means putting more people at economic risk, more state services and ultimately a weaker state.

Please rescind the tuition increase, do not increase fees, and pledge to a five-year freeze on the cost of state university degree in Connecticut... then let us start working on our own Connecticut Hope Scholarship: A rising tide will lift all boats.

Annual Tuition and Fees 1998-1999 to 2019-2020

	1998-1999	2019-2020
Tuition	\$2064.00	\$5924
University Fee	\$594	\$918
University General Fee	\$920	\$4354
Miscellaneous Fees	0	\$250
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$3578</b>	<b>\$11446</b>