



**Testimony for the
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
Christine Siegel PhD, Provost
Fairfield University
March 2, 2021**

On behalf of Fairfield University, I am submitting testimony on two bills before your today:

**S.B. 881 AN ACT CONCERNING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT; and
H.B. 6374 AN ACT CONCERNING SEXUAL MISCONDUCT ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES.**

1. S.B. 881 AN ACT CONCERNING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Fairfield University applauds Governor Lamont for his leadership in establishing the Governor's Workforce Council and putting resources and a strong team in place to support the implementation of the Council's Strategic Plan.

Fairfield University is eager to partner with the newly established Office of Workforce Strategies to ensure Connecticut has the talent pipeline it needs to meet the needs of the state's employers and to provide opportunity for our state's citizens. Independent colleges are well-positioned to support this effort as we offer in-demand degrees and have the capacity to be nimble and responsive to the needs of employers. Given our capacity to be helpful, **we would ask legislators to ensure that any language creating programs or opportunities for funding are flexible enough for private, non-profit colleges to participate.**

Academic Program Approval: The Governor's Workforce Council strategic plans calls on higher education institutions and workforce development programs to work more closely and in alignment with business and industry in our state. One of the barriers that continues to be in place for independent colleges is the requirement that private, non-profit institutions of higher education must submit new programs for approval to the Office of Higher Education when they reach the limit of the current statutory exemption provided in 10a-34 limit of 12 programs annually. While 12 new programs annually may seem like a big enough cushion, Fairfield University could quickly exceed that cap if we chose to offer a series of new degrees in one concentration.

Connecticut remains one of few states in the country to continue to require private, non-profit colleges to have to go through this level of review. The public colleges are not required to have OHE review their programs and, under the bill, they will no longer have to report to OHE anything at all about their program offerings. **We would ask that the bill be amended to remove the 12-program cap on our program approval exemption to better position private, non-profit colleges to respond to the needs of the state's employers in developing new programs.**

FAFSA Completion: We strongly support the provision in this bill which seeks to require high school students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) prior to graduation, beginning with the class of 2024, with a few important exceptions that are outlined in the bill and we stand willing to support its implementation through offering support to students and districts. One important

component of closing the vast opportunity gap that exists in Connecticut is to do more to educate high school students about what their eligibility for financial aid might be and to help them understand that higher education – at a public or private college – is more accessible than they might think.

UPASS: We strongly support the expansion of the UPASS program to students attending independent institutions. We have been interested in rolling this out to our students since it was first introduced for the public colleges in 2017. Expanding UPASS will provide greater access for our students to attend class, work and participate in internships in the state.

Credential Registry: While we are supportive of NEBHE’s High Value Credential Registry initiative, we are concerned about the mandate in the bill that every institution in the state must upload at least 12 data points *on every single program that they offer*. Institutions will also be required to keep the data on their institution updated. **We would ask that participation in this credential registry be voluntary for independent institutions and that independent institutions have an appointment on the Advisory Council working with the Office of Higher Education to create this new database.**

Auto Admit: Fairfield University is eager to engage in the Automatic Admission program created in this bill, which seeks to ease the burden of applying to participating higher education institutions in this state for certain qualified Connecticut high school seniors. We appreciate that the bill facilitates the opportunity for independent institutions to participate in this program but would **ask that interested independent institutions be permitted to participate in the program from the beginning – rather than being prohibited from participating until the summer of 2023 --- and that the fee associated with participation be lowered from \$50,000 per institution.**

H.B. 6374 AN ACT CONCERNING SEXUAL MISCONDUCT ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

Fairfield University supports the underlying concepts being promoted in HB 6374 and we recognize the importance of giving students, and employees, a continued voice on issues like campus climate.

Fairfield University frequently seeks feedback from our students in many different forms on a very regular basis. Climate Surveys are not the only method for data and information collection related to sexual misconduct. We provide multiple avenues for students to report sexual misconduct, anonymously or not.

Students are encouraged to report the incidences to Fairfield University’s **Title IX Compliance Coordinator, Public Safety, or the Office of the Dean of Students**. From counseling to assistance on how to file a report, there are many **resources** available to our students, both confidential and non-confidential options.

Self-Report: If a student thinks they have experienced non-consensual sexual misconduct by force, coercion or inability to give consent, there are many resources available, including filing a complaint. The University’s process is student-centered, offering many remedies (no-contact orders, safe housing, class changes) to prevent retaliation and reoccurrence.

To encourage individuals to come forward with reports about sexual misconduct, students will not be sanctioned for revealing a violation in good faith—such as underage drinking—in the process of reporting a sexual violence claim.

A standard, formal incident report can be filed with the Department of Public Safety at any time. An Incident Report will include, among other things, the name of the complainant and the name of the accused, if known. Upon the filing of an Incident Report, the Department of Public Safety will act as

first responder and refer the matter to the Title IX Compliance Coordinator. Public Safety will also determine whether law enforcement or other authorities should be notified.

Individuals have the right to report sexual misconduct to Public Safety without further participation in the investigatory process. Individuals can choose to initiate a criminal complaint through law enforcement and/or initiate a Title IX Sexual Misconduct Complaint with a Title IX Compliance Coordinator. Individuals should understand, however, that by choosing not to participate in the University's disciplinary process, the University's response to the incident may be limited.

Peer Report: Peers of victims of sexual misconduct can file an incident report or anonymous report with the Department of Public Safety on someone's behalf. As a peer, the student may experience secondary trauma. There are many resources available through the Center for Family Justice and Counseling & Psychological Services.

We are concerned about the mandate that we must conduct a full climate survey that the Council selects every two years. This will be disruptive and costly to implement, in some instances.

Moreover, while the Council may recommend certain instruments, it should not be empowered to dictate which survey a school must use, as ultimately, we need the authority to determine the instrument best suited to their respective campus and its culture.

Fairfield University's campus climate survey encompasses much more than issues around sexual misconduct. Equity and diversity are critically important as well. Questions regarding experiences based on other protected classes (such as race, disability, national origin) may be included. In addition, every campus is different (residential; non-residential; comprehensive; undergrad only; etc.) and our surveys need the ability to reflect that.

We would ask the Committee to consider modifying the bill such that rather than having the Council select survey instruments, a limited number of data points are identified that institutions statewide collect every two years, within their own climate survey tools, and report this information back to the legislature via our annual report required under 10a-55m. This is the approach Massachusetts took in its recent legislation and an approach we would support as well.