

The University of Connecticut Chapter of

AAUP

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Appropriations Committee Hearing Testimony
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Mary Ellen Junda

Co-Chairs Osten and Walker, Vice Chairs Hartley, Dathan and Nolan, Ranking Members Miner and France, and members of the Appropriation Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of the continued biennium appropriations to the University of Connecticut.

My name is Mary Ellen Junda. I am a Professor of Music and currently serve as President of the UConn Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (UConn-AAUP), representing 1800 faculty members and coaches, and over 600 contingent faculty in collective bargaining.

The UConn faculty and staff have been remarkable during this challenging time. Over 750 faculty members have taken courses to improve on-line teaching and course development. Faculty research has contributed to the knowledge of the COVID-19 virus and increased our protection during this pandemic. We developed a low-cost portable Covid-19 test instrument that has results in minutes; a testing system for detecting the virus in waste matter that kept our students safely on campus this the academic year and that other universities and businesses throughout the country have adopted; collaborated with UConn Health to get increased supplies of PPE for our front-line workers; developed the Data Visualization Website that charts the course of the pandemic in CT and nationally; and analyzed COVID-19 Preventive Health Behaviors determining how people respond when imposed with health restrictions, which could have major implications for our future health.

This is just a short list, but our faculty has contributed much more. And, the most important result of this effort is that there are over 38,000 student applications to UConn next year – the most ever.

What is disappointing though, is that the Governor's biennium budget recommendation is slightly less than your FY21 appropriation. This is not a time to disinvest in higher education. This is a time to invest in the flagship university for two reasons. First, applications for Fall 2021 indicate that families in Connecticut and beyond view UConn as a high value, high quality educational institution for their hard-earned dollars. Reducing the state investment will have an impact in the value of the education offered by UConn and thus reduce the pool of applicants in the future.

Second, UConn must play a major role in the recovery and growth of the post-COVID economy in Connecticut. Investing in faculty will help to build collaborations in biotech, advanced manufacturing, and IT. Real economic growth will come from investing in research opportunities for faculty, who will teach students the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed in these critical industries. As our economy begins to grow, this investment will ensure that Connecticut not only educates its students, but also retains a skilled workforce.

Also of increasing concern is the cost of fringe benefits, in particular the 33% associated with the unfunded legacy costs, the result of historically poor administrative decisions. Now is the time to be creative and remove the unfunded legacy costs from the benefit side of higher education employees so that faculty can be more competitive for grant funding nationally and internationally.

I urge the Appropriations Committee to act boldly during this legislative session and invest in our faculty at the State's flagship university. This investment will benefit everyone in the state of Connecticut.