

Strengthening Academic Standards

GAIL H. WILLIAMS
CSUS BOARD OF TRUSTEES



The Board of Trustees for the Connecticut State University System (CSUS) voted this year to strengthen the academic admission standards for our institutions – Central, Eastern, Southern and Western Connecticut State Universities. The decision was made only after considerable deliberation and, significantly, with an outstretched hand.

CSUS is the state’s largest public university system, with more than 36,000 students. Nine in ten of our students are from Connecticut, and nearly that many (86 percent) remain in the state after graduation.

The universities each have their own academic distinctions, distinguished faculty and growing student populations. In fact, CSUS has reached an all-time high in the number of full time undergraduate and graduate students this year.

So, when the CSUS Board votes to change admission requirements, there will be an impact in Connecticut – which is precisely the point.

Our state has been experiencing the same dilemma as states across the nation:

- Too many freshmen needing too many remedial courses before they can get their college coursework started or begin their technical post-secondary education.
- Not as many freshmen returning for their sophomore year as we would like.
- Retention and graduation rates in need of improvement.

Raising academic admission standards – if that were the only step taken – might do as much harm as good. That is why our approach has been more far-reaching and, we believe, effective and enduring.

In recent years, under the direction of our Board, Chancellor and Presidents, we reached out in a number of ways:

- Re-tooling our first year programs, resulting in improved retention.
- Intensifying orientation programs, to get students off on the right foot.
- Collaborating with high school teachers to revise high school curriculum in English and Math to meet the expectations of university faculty and the demands of their courses.
- Working with the Connecticut Community Colleges to develop a Dual Admission program to ease transfer of credits.
- Growing partnerships with businesses and community organizations, to stress our mutual interest in students who are college-ready from day one.

Working more directly with middle schools and in the state’s KnowHow2GO coalition, to encourage students to begin thinking about college sooner rather than later.

As we were doing this and more, Connecticut’s Department of Education was developing a comprehensive reform of high school graduation standards. We participated in that effort, known as the PK-20 Council. Unfortunately,

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the Council's recommendations ran into the economic recession, and a plan has yet to be legislatively approved.

The need has not diminished. If anything, it has intensified. This can be seen in many ways, from global competitiveness to local demographics. Much of the change is in our urban communities, often low-income, with schools that are hard-pressed to provide the educational foundation that is so desperately needed.

A landmark study, *New England 2020*, predicted that by 2020 nearly half of the 25-29 year olds in Connecticut will be minorities, and the number of young people with bachelor's degrees will shrink by more than four percent, even as the percentage of jobs requiring a college degree continues to grow rapidly.

Nationally, statistics reflect the slip in America's education ranking compared with other nations. The CSUS Board has taken the first step in our state. In doing so, we will not only be helping our students academically but financially, saving them money by reducing the need for remedial classes, improving retention, and increasing our graduation rates.

The new requirements include:

- 4 years of English, including composition
- 4 years of Mathematics, including Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra 2
- 3 years of Science, including two laboratory science courses
- 3 years of Social Studies, with U.S. History required

- 2 years of World Languages
- 1 year of coursework in the arts

Local districts cannot make these changes overnight. We approved the new requirements to be effective as soon as 2015, at our Board's discretion, to allow them time to revise course offerings and graduation requirements. We recognize the very real hurdles ahead, and that the objectives we seek cannot be achieved unilaterally.

We urge middle school students to take the courses necessary to be on the right track when they reach high school, so that when the requirements change at that level, they'll be ready. We look forward to working with local school boards in that effort.

In our view, the academic standards we have established are precisely what students need to succeed, in college and in life. It is our hope that by taking the action we did, when we did, and how we did, we have provided the residents of our state not with something to shoot at, but something to shoot for.

■ *Gail Williams is President and CEO of Alegre' Communications, Inc. in Danbury and a member of the Board of Trustees for the Connecticut State University System. This is adapted from her presentation to the American Council of Trustees and Alumni in Mount Vernon, VA on November 6, 2009.*

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