



Testimony of Mark E. Ojakian

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Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

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Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Willis, Senator Witkos, Representative Betts and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today in support of three bills of significance to the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) system. For the record, my name is Mark Ojakian, and I am the President of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system.

HB 5376 AN ACT CONCERNING AFFIRMATIVE CONSENT:

I strongly urge the Committee to support this bill, which brings a standard definition of affirmative consent to all of our state's institutions of higher education.

Nearly 22 million women and 1.6 million men report having been assaulted in their lives. A 2014 White House Report highlighted the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses, with one in five female students assaulted, while only one in eight report it. This has a devastating impact on the lives of students who are survivors of these assaults. We are united as a CSCU system to improve prevention, education, response, and support services. Further still, we are committed to not just providing a safe campus, but in fostering a campus culture that actively acknowledges and confronts the realities of rape, sexual assault and intimate partner violence on our campuses and in our communities.

In September of last year, we were notified by the Department of Justice, Office of Violence Against Women that we received the largest grant to date funded by this office to reduce domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking on campus. The SAFE grant, which is approximately \$800,000 dollars, will allow us to continue our efforts in establishing a system-wide infrastructure to maintain an accurate inventory of resources, policies and procedures, and training opportunities. In addition, it will enable us to collect and implement best and promising practices that will build capacity at the CSCU institutions to effectively implement initiatives that reduce sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence and stalking on campuses. The project will allow a scaling up of our current efforts for prevention and awareness, and promote consistent messaging, including through social media. These resources allow us to adopt a uniform approach on all of our campuses with an emphasis on prevention, training and reporting.

We have several partners on this grant including the Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, who have been supporters of this bill in the past, and the Connecticut State Police.

I am mentioning these efforts to make you aware of what we at CSCU have been doing for many years with regard to sexual assault on campuses. I believe we have a good approach but we can and should always seek to improve. In that light, we see this legislation as a chance to improve our efforts in this area for our 92,000 students across our 17 institutions.

Affirmative consent, as defined in the language proposed in this bill, means that it must be affirmative, conscious, voluntary, and can be revoked at any time. This language of the bill is consistent with, and expands upon, the language of the current CSCU policy: “Consent is the equal approval, given freely, willingly, and knowingly of each participant to desired sexual involvement. Consent is an affirmative, conscious decision – indicated clearly by words or actions – to engage in mutually accepted sexual contact.”

We thank the Committee for introducing this legislation and encourage passage to ensure that all Connecticut students have access to the same standard definition of consent. We stand ready to revise our policies to be consistent with this legislation, and ensure the continued development of education and prevention strategies through the Department of Justice grant and committed resources on our campuses.

SB 147 AN ACT ASSISTING STUDENTS WITHOUT LEGAL IMMIGRATION STATUS WITH THE COST OF COLLEGE:

I strongly urge the Committee to support the bill, which will help our institutions better address the needs of a currently underserved population. Fundamentally, this is an issue about equality and justice for our students.

Undocumented students who are Connecticut residents were forced to pay out-of-state tuition for our public institutions of higher education for years until Public Act 11-43 opened access to in-state tuition for these students, and many of you supported that important effort. While this knocked down one of the barriers undocumented students face in furthering their education, there are countless other barriers we must work to help remove. One of the most challenging of these remaining barriers is a lack of access to institutional aid for these students.

Currently students who meet certain need standards have access to financial aid through our institutions. For many of our students, access to institutional aid is the determining factor in whether or not they will be able to afford the cost of attending one of our schools. This need is determined based on a student’s completion of a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. Sadly, because undocumented students cannot submit a FAFSA, we cannot currently offer this institutional aid to them.

The true injustice of this is because a portion of all tuition that students pay is dedicated towards institutional aid; undocumented students are paying into a fund to which they have no access. These students are not asking for a hand out, they are asking to access a service for which they are currently paying. Because they do not have access to federal financial aid like Pell Grants, institutional aid is in many ways the only aid that is available to them.

Several states, including California, Minnesota, New Mexico, Texas, and Washington, have all enacted similar policies to open up their financial aid to undocumented students. These states tried various models. For example, in Texas they created a FAFSA alternative that undocumented students filled out to determine their level of need. Unfortunately, in each of these states, there was a start-up cost to develop these programs and the increased workload on financial aid offices. In each of these states, funding was appropriated by their legislatures to cover these initial costs. We are asking the General Assembly to do the same should this bill move forward.

In a year that we are facing layoffs and budget cuts, it would be extremely difficult to absorb the costs of this new initiative within available appropriations. While the cost of this program to the state may be hard to bear at this time, the human costs of this lack of access is even greater. I urge you again to support this important piece of legislation.

We have been meeting with groups representing undocumented students to try to work together to resolve this critical issue. Educating our residents is part of our core services, and making sure it is accessible to all residents is our philosophy. We welcome the opportunity to continue this discussion with those groups and the legislature to find the best way forward on this issue. Furthermore, allowing more students access to our schools has the potential to increase our enrollment which is a net positive for everyone.

SB 273 AN ACT CONCERNING REVISIONS TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION STATUTES:

While this bill is not as impactful to our students as the previous two bills that I have already testified on today, it is still an important piece of legislation to our system, and I urge your support. This bill makes technical changes to our enabling statutes to reflect current practices and policies at the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system.

This provision enables us to clearly distinguish the collective system of 17 institutions, which are the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, from its governing board, the Board of Regents for Higher Education. Over the years there has been some confusion about the Board of Regents title and how it specifically applies to our system.

For instance, currently by statute I am the President of the Board of Regents for Higher Education. Nicholas Donofrio is the Chairman of the Board of Regents.

While my title is President of the Board of Regents, I serve as the president of our system of 17 higher education institutions. My responsibilities include, among things, building interdependent support and facilitation of cooperative synergy between the 17 institutions that comprise the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system.

Chairman Donofrio serves as the leader of the Board of Regents, the governing board which oversees our system and establishes its policies.

The legislation before you today seeks to put into statute the reality of our titles, our responsibilities, and our current practices. This changes my title from President of the Board of Regents for Higher Education to President of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system, and makes conforming changes to this effect through the rest of our enabling statutes.

I want to thank this Committee again for raising these important bills for our students and our system, and urge your support for them. I welcome any questions that you have for me at this time.