Faculty Advisory Committee Remarks to the Board of Regents, May 2015

Distinguished Regents and President Gray, we thank you for the opportunity to be here today to present for the Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC) and the more than 6000 teaching and administrative faculty and support staff across the system.

Between the Board and the faculty, there is much common ground and interest.

Like you, we bend our purpose, energy, and intellect toward realizing excellence, access, and affordability for our students and for the system of public, higher education in Connecticut.

We are dedicated to advancing career and life goals for our students and the citizens of Connecticut. We believe the work of the colleges and universities provides educational value and opportunity to our students, and that our institutions play a vital role in creating an educated population that contributes to general prosperity and enriches the artistic, social, cultural, and political life of our communities. We are committed to the particularly American value of advancing public educational institutions to extend these ambitions as deeply and as widely as we are able.

Yet, as you know, we have arrived at a challenging moment for the system's leadership and in finding a means to harness our collective will and purpose. Votes of no confidence in President Gray and Transform CSCU 2020 have been proceeding across the governance bodies in the system. As of this date, the faculty governance bodies at four state universities and four community colleges have voted on a no-confidence resolution in some form, and all voted to support the resolution.

As the members of the FAC, we feel obliged to give voice to these votes. To serve our constituency, the Board, our students, and the state, we must be candid and reasoned in outlining our current differences. We recognize that the members of the Board may perceive things from a different perspective, but we also expect the Board not to dismiss the votes as a distraction. The problems before us cut to the core of our mission. It is the main event.

The faculty has an abiding interest in having effective and stable system leadership. Since the merger, this has been a continual challenge, and we, by no means, want to further this instability especially in this fragile political and budgetary context. There are many observers, both inside and outside the system, who have now come to view the merger as a failed experiment. The members of the FAC are not among them. Although the respective missions of the state universities, the community colleges, and Charter Oak must remain distinct, we are confident that there is value in intercampus collaboration under the leadership of an effective administration.

The faculty has also repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to collaborate with the system office to meet common goals and priorities. In designing and implementing TAP, in responding effectively to the challenges of PA 12-40 (the developmental education bill), in reviewing and refining mission statements for the system and the distinct units, in putting together our recent conference on governance and student success, and in the initial planning for Excel CT and Transform, the faculty has engaged in meaningful partnerships with the Board and the system office.

The votes of no confidence did not arise in a context of ongoing animosity or endemic mistrust. The votes were not organized or fermented by a charismatic faculty leader. Instead, the lack of confidence
in the plan grew independently on the campuses, and this frustration fostered an unprecedented level of inter-campus communication, organization, and solidarity.

Several factors contributed to bringing about this condition.

1. The hiring of Boston Consulting Group

The fact that we are presenting this report today is evidence enough of BCG’s inability to move Transform toward completion and implementation, but one does not need the advantages of hindsight to have anticipated this outcome.

The members of the BCG team had little experience with higher educational institutions and they had no experience with community colleges or a state-wide higher education system. They had nothing to offer of substantive value. They had no understanding of our system of shared governance, and thus the architecture of the plan completely failed to provide any guidance on a process for review, modification, approval, and implementation.

While developing a plan that has been described as “student centered,” BCG did not talk to a single student aside from the two student regents. They had no direct understanding of the qualities of our individual institutions, the challenges we confront, and the programs we provide.

Even aside from the dubious quality of BCG’s work, their excessive hourly charge and the $1.97M cost in the context of the escalations in student debt and the everyday fiscal constraints we all face fueled frustration and animosity on the campuses.

2. The size and scope of Transform and the integration of functions

When BCG completed its work, Transform consisted of 36 roadmaps with 743 milestones. If the plan came to pass as described, it would have significantly increased the centralized control of a state bureaucracy over the life of the campuses. This would have added administrative cost, increased regulatory oversight, and provided no direct services to students.

In FY 2014, we lost an entire year’s work of progress on the Board’s Transfer and Articulation Policy (TAP) because the system office could not keep track of what was certainly its highest academic priority. In 2012, after the passage of PA 12-40, the bill on developmental education, the FAC and the PA 12-40 Advisory Group made a strong appeal to the system leadership regarding the importance of collecting good base-line data for what was a natural experiment. Only now, 3 years later, are we beginning to collect this data.

If the system office was unable to meet its responsibility when it had only two high priority academic items, how is it possible to have confidence that it could keep track of 36?

Just as importantly, the collective time and effort by faculty and support staff to achieve all of these milestones would have been enormous, and much of this activity would be oriented toward integrating programs into a centralized system. We believe faculty will and purpose is better utilized in the service of our students, our disciplines, and our institutions, not a state bureaucracy.
3. The lack of academic vision or a rationale for change

The initial impetus for Transform was not an academic vision, but to seek symmetry in state support in the wake of UConn’s Next Generation plan. While there were some modest achievements on this front last year, a vision for change that would warrant significant state investment never came to pass, and given the current fiscal realities, seems now to have been wholly abandoned.

The 36 initiatives that became the content of Transform were never grounded in a coherent vision of change. Much of it seemed hastily constructed. Portions were muddled in obscure or incoherent language. But more importantly, the initiatives within Transform were not the product of a deliberative process or a careful review of the challenges, problems, and opportunities that operate on our campuses. If we reached all 743 milestones, where would we be? What problems were we trying to address? What vision did we seek to achieve?

Last summer, the system’s provost sought a meeting with members of the state university’s faculty leadership group to consider how we might contribute an academic vision into the planning process. That group wrote the CSU academic imperative, which was endorsed by all the faculty senates, and it was submitted to President Gray. A second academic imperative from the community colleges also followed. President Gray acknowledged and accepted the documents and suggested that they might be used as a type of preamble to a completed plan. Yet over the next nine months, there was no indication that the imperatives were being used to modify or direct Transform to insure that the pieces corresponded to an academic vision. The documents have proven to be nothing more than words on a page.

4. Echoes of a national dialog

On several occasions, President Gray has referred to a revolution taking place in higher education, and implied that Transform would launch Connecticut into that revolution. In his remarks to the state legislature last December, he stated that this was the opportunity of a century. Much indeed is taking place nationally, but it was never clear to us how President Gray envisioned the contours and fissures of that revolution or how this system would so engage.

Spiraling escalations in student debt and diminishing levels of state support for public institutions have predicated a search for technological solutions to a fiscal squeeze. At the same time, hundreds of millions in investment capital is poised to capture parts of the “higher education market” with learning management software and proprietary course content. The University of Phoenix, Arizona State University, and Southern New Hampshire University have each experienced some success in the online course marketplace with differing institutional strategies and priorities. A variety of for-profit universities, some with very dubious academic standards, have also sought financial opportunity in this brave new market. Some have even recently argued that we are approaching “the end of college” (Carey 2015). Still others have suggested that the pursuit of “academic reputation” has become a fool’s errand and a luxury that only the most elite research universities can now afford (McKinsey 2012).

Are we, indeed, watching as the growing inequality in our society is producing a two-tiered educational system with real classrooms for the well-off and virtual classrooms for everybody else? Is the democratic impulse to provide broad levels of public support for higher education being undermined by the mal-distribution of wealth?
Within Transform, the blended learning initiative and the state-of-the-art classroom certainly indicate a decision to opt into a new technologically mediated classroom. President Gray has also written of a vision in which he recommends that professors become facilitators in a new student-centered learning process.

Yet how the features of Transform lead toward some level of participation in the higher education “revolution” is entirely unclear. The lack of specificity is itself a problem. If we are deciding to participate in a revolutionary transformation of our higher-education delivery system, then this decision ought to be open for public discussion and review with the public, the state legislature, the faculty, and the Board, and not finessed behind myriad details. Just as importantly, the transition to online classrooms is certainly not a fiscal panacea. Without changes in classroom size, teaching load, facilities, or full-part time teaching ratios, moving classes online can become more expensive due to licensing and software costs. Several complicated questions and policies regarding implementation, ownership of intellectual property, and the role of faculty are pivotal and need to be specifically addressed (See Bowen 2014).

Many faculty are of the opinion that the lack of clarity in Transform on the core question regarding the role of technology and innovation is intentional. That is, if pedagogy is to be replaced by learning management systems, if content is to be purchased through proprietary providers, if classrooms are to become virtual, and if the relationship between teacher and student is to be disintermediated by a disruptive technology, then, yes, it is reasonable to expect that we will choose to not collaborate in the demise of our profession and our craft.

5. On process

As a general rule, form follows function, but, in this case, process followed form.

Transform bundled initiatives inside a single vessel under a common banner. Many of the initiatives would have been well-received by faculty, support staff, and administrators, but it was the bundling itself that yielded a form that stymied progress and resulted in a continual shifting of the parameters of engagement.

Last fall, we were informed that Transform would go to the Board in January. The FAC asked repeatedly what would go to the Board for review and approval. Would it be a vision statement, a broad conceptual outline, the list of initiatives, or the initiative roadmaps, milestones, and narratives? We never got a clear answer to that question. In our view, a simple endorsement by this Board of Transform in its current form would have been at odds with the Board’s fiduciary responsibility. At a conceptual level, for example, we might all agree that improved metrics, seamless transfer, organizational efficiency, and cross-campus registration are worthy objectives, but realizing each of these requires its own careful and deliberate crafting of both a policy and an implementation plan. The roadmaps were more than a conceptual objective, but less than a deliberative policy.

The campus governance bodies were equally unable to find a means to address responsibly the bundled collection. We were never able to understand the procedural linkages between the approval of Transform as a whole and the deliberative mechanisms to review, modify, approve, and implement each initiative. The inability to perceive avenues for effective advocacy on behalf of the interests of students and faculty led the FAC last November to resolve not “to endorse Transform in its current form.” Following that vote, the timeline for Board approval was extended until March. The campus governance
bodies moved to, in effect, “debundle” Transform, by indicating that the vast majority of the initiatives ought not fall under the province of the system office, but should be addressed at the individual campuses.

Meanwhile, the system office continued work on the initiatives in what was now being described as Phase Two. Both the content and the form of Transform remained unchanged and a timeline for Board review and approval seemed indefinitely postponed. The challenging negotiations over the role and authority of what proved to be the very short-lived new steering committee was itself a symptom of the inability to specify a review process for the bundled form.

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The FAC recommends that the system office empty the vessel that is Transform. There is no longer any value in bundling them together under a common banner. Worthy individual initiatives can be pursued with a corresponding deliberative process of review and collaboration.

If the state can pull its way through its current fiscal challenges, we also stand ready to collaborate for a new plan for state support.

To advance access and affordability there is much that we could do in a state with the largest educational achievement gap in the country. Such a plan might include subsidized childcare on our campuses, extending educational and career-training opportunities into correctional facilities, and providing scholarships for students in high priority school districts. In addition, if we are going to provide specific educational programs for business and industry, then we should be inviting them to be real “stakeholders” involved in efforts to promote our programs and to insure that supporting the state colleges and universities is high on the agenda of business and industry groups.

Achieving excellence requires the diligent pursuit of the academic missions of our institutions and the relentless building, refining, and sustaining of quality programs. There are no short cuts. Our aim in the pursuit of excellence should be to turn our colleges and universities into institutions of choice, rather than mere convenience or affordability.

One thing is for certain: if we do not find a means to collaborate, we will transform nothing.