PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST
IN CONNECTICUT
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Through a reform strategy called Students First, the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) has embarked on a process of restructuring the 12 community colleges in the state. This effort involves the consolidation of the 12 separate colleges into an institution with a single accreditation and the adoption of the Guided Pathways framework for student success across the campuses. The intent of Students First is to equitably improve the outcomes of students enrolled in the system by streamlining processes and procedures and centralizing back-office functions so resources can be reallocated to provide greater student supports at the campus level.

This report primarily aims to document how the work of Students First is occurring at the mid-point of implementation and to share some early lessons. The target audiences are the various stakeholder groups within Connecticut (including college faculty and staff, policymakers, and community leaders) as well as individuals across the nation who may be considering similar initiatives. The core of this publication comprises insights about Students First drawn from individual interviews with faculty and staff across the system. Fourteen interviews were conducted to gain an honest assessment of how Students First is being received, what concerns have arisen with the plan and its implementation, and how system leadership might make adjustments that will help the effort be more successful.

Before summarizing the main themes from the interviews, the report begins with an overview of the Students First plan including:

- The national trends that have influenced the work
- The rationale for the changes in Connecticut
- The components of the Students First plan
- The approach to organizing the implementation process

Following a rundown of the interview themes, a few high-level lessons are shared about what has been learned at the rough mid-point of the Students First implementation. The report concludes with a summary of the actions that have been taken and the items that have been put in place through Spring 2020 and an overview of the key next steps in the implementation process.

It is important to note that the interviews summarized in this report were conducted in early 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold and upended everyday lives.
Even before the economic downturn resulting from COVID-19, higher education institutions faced considerable financial challenges. In the public sector, state support for colleges and universities has not recovered from the 2008 Great Recession. In fact, in all but three states, 2018 funding per student was still below the pre-recession level. In Connecticut, the funding per student in 2018 was 20 percent less than before the financial crisis.

The diminished state funding has translated into an increased tuition burden for students, which on average has risen by $2,651 nationally (36 percent) since 2008.1 During this same period, rising student debt has resulted in calls from state policymakers for tuition restraint. Further exacerbating the financial problems community colleges, in particular, have experienced decreased revenue due to declining enrollments. Sinking state support, modest tuition increases, and dwindling student enrollment have put institutions in an incredible bind financially. Again, all this was before the pandemic.

In 2018, the late Clayton Christensen famously predicted that “half of American colleges will be bankrupt in 10 to 15 years.”2 Even before the enrollment drops due to the pandemic, an analysis by the Chronicle of Higher Education indicated that 6 in 10 colleges or universities were missing their enrollment targets. These enrollment declines have only exacerbated a precarious financial situation, leading some institutions to pursue mergers or close their doors altogether. According to ongoing tracking by the Education Drive blog, 65 colleges have closed or merged across 28 states since 2016.3 Given the current environment, this number is projected to only increase. These trends appear to confirm the beginning of Christensen’s prediction.

While the number of college mergers has increased, most of these consolidation conversations emerged first among private, non-profit colleges that have small student enrollments and whose financial margins have been tight for some time. However, in the past few years, these conversations have become more pronounced among public sector higher education institutions as well. One of the more prominent examples has been the 10-year process in Georgia to merge institutions in the University of Georgia System and the Georgia Technical College System. This effort has led to a decrease in the number of institutions from 35 in 2011 to 26 in late 2019.4

Several other states are also contemplating merging or consolidating public institutions including Alaska, Maine, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Wisconsin, and, of course, Connecticut. A recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education notes that not all consolidations are the same and vary based on local context: “In some cases, like Georgia, it [consolidation] means a wholesale reorganization of the institutions in an existing public system into a smaller number of new ones. In others, like Maine and, potentially, Pennsylvania, consolidations involve merging a few colleges that are part of a larger system. But the strategy can also call for combining institutions under a single accreditation, an approach that is being pursued in Maine but was rejected in Alaska. Or it might be some combination of features, as is being considered in Connecticut.”5

It is unclear what the best model or approach for consolidating might be, but, given the deepening fiscal challenges in higher education due to the pandemic, these deliberations are likely to emerge in other states as well.

Another important national trend that is also playing out in Connecticut relates to increased questions about institutional graduation rates. Since the federal government began collecting graduation data in the
NATIONAL TRENDS INFLUENCING STUDENTS FIRST (CONTINUED)

late 1990s, there has been greater awareness among the
general public about mediocre student outcomes. This
scrutiny has led to mounting pressure on higher education
institutions — particularly community colleges — to
improve completion rates. These demands have gained
more urgency over the past decade as it has become
increasingly clear that some postsecondary education
is required for individuals to be competitive in the global
economy and secure a family-sustaining income.

In the past 15 years, there has been considerable federal
and state policy action and substantial philanthropic
investment to help students complete a postsecondary
credential. While these efforts have been met with modest
success and led to an uptick in educational attainment,
there are still wide disparities nationally along racial, ethnic,
and socio-economic lines. One of the primary critiques
of early reform efforts is that they have been focused on
discrete pilot programs that focus too narrowly on isolated
student challenges and/or do not impact enough students.

As reform efforts have evolved in the past decade, it has
become clear that adjustments on the margins would not
result in the needed changes to equitably improve student
outcomes and that institution-wide transformation is
needed. The Guided Pathways framework has emerged as
the most prominent college-wide reform effort.

Put simply, Guided Pathways is a holistic approach to
redesigning the student experience from initial enrollment
through the completion of a credential and into employment
or further education (for transfer students). This framework,
which was developed and endorsed by all major national
community college intermediaries and organizations, is
focused on an institution-wide approach to streamline the
students’ experience so they can make clear choices about
their program of study and receive support when they
need it. The pull-out section on the next page provides a
concise summary of the four common-sense components
of the Guided Pathways framework.

Guided Pathways has truly become a reform movement.
As Figure 1 below emphasizes, there are hundreds
of colleges across the country working to adopt this
framework. In 2015, the American Association of
Community Colleges launched the first of two national
cohorts of colleges to implement the best practices
described above. There are also a significant number
of state-level initiatives aimed at implementing Guided
Pathways at all the community colleges. Similar to
Connecticut, the 16 Student Success Centers (SSC) across
the country have played a leading role in supporting all the
colleges in their respective states as they embrace these
transformational reforms. These SSCs are small state-level
organizations that are designed to help all community
colleges adopt evidence-based practices. There are also a
growing number of individual colleges implementing this
holistic approach to improving student outcomes.

FIGURE 1: GUIDED PATHWAYS COVERAGE MAP

Source: Unpublished map created by the Community College Research Center

Updated December 2020
THE FOUR PILLARS OF GUIDED PATHWAYS

Pillar #1: Mapping Pathways to Student End Goals
Reform efforts in this area focus on implementing clear maps for all college programs to ensure students know which courses they need to take in what sequence. Best practices for this pillar include:

- Establishing meta-majors/career clusters to align and communicate college programs.
- Developing clear connections between programs and careers and transfer pathways/outcomes.
- Creating course schedules that align with program maps and delineate the course sequences that include critical courses, embedded credentials, and progress milestones.
- Aligning math requirements (and other core courses) with each program of study. Integrating streamlined information on the college’s website to reflect the new program maps, meta-majors, and career/transfer information.

Pillar #2: Helping Students Choose and Enter A Pathway
Reform efforts in this area are focused on making changes to the college’s processes and policies around onboarding students to ensure they have adequate support and information to get the best start. Best practices for this pillar include:

- Developing a robust first-year experience to help students explore career options and the connection to relevant programs of study.
- Implementing full program plans for students that are based on requisite career exploration and include potential transfer pathways.
- Integrating the use of multiple measures to assess students’ needs and academic preparation for college-level courses.
- Adopting an approach for contextualized, integrated academic support to help students pass program gateway courses.
- Extending partnerships with high schools to motivate and prepare students to enter college-level coursework in a program of study when they enroll in college.

Pillar #3: Keeping Students on the Path
Reform efforts in this area focus on implementing processes and systems to know if students are on their chosen program path and ensure they have adequate supports along the way. Best practices for this pillar include:

- Developing an approach for ongoing, intrusive advising to proactively monitor and engage students as they progress through their program of study.
- Establishing a system (including technology) for students to easily track their progress.
- Creating procedures to identify students at risk of falling off the path and protocols to provide needed supports to get them back on track.
- Designing a structure to redirect students who are not progressing to a more viable path.

Pillar #4: Ensuring that Students are Learning
Reform efforts in this area focus on enhancing the college learning environment and ensuring students possess the knowledge, skills, and competencies that will help them succeed in their career or further education. Best practices for this pillar include:

- Developing learning outcomes that are program specific and align with the requirements for success in further education and employment outcomes.
- Establishing systems and procedures for the college and students to track mastery of learning outcomes leading to credentials, transfer, and/or employment.
- Creating a learning environment that allows students to apply and deepen their knowledge through project-based opportunities and promote collaborative learning.
- Utilizing learning outcomes assessments (and other data) to improve teaching and learning through program review, professional development, and other intentional campus efforts.
RATIONAL FOR CHANGE IN CONNECTICUT

With the national context in mind, the underlying rationale for Students First in Connecticut is to address two significant, interrelated problems: Low student outcomes — particularly among underrepresented groups, and considerable financial constraints at colleges due to state budget cuts and enrollment declines. This section briefly elaborates on both of these issues.

In 2017, President Ojakian was charged by the Board of Regents to develop a management plan to put the CSCU system on a predictable and sustainable path for the future. As they outlined Students First, CSCU leadership focused in particular on the financial problems within the community college system and efforts to avoid closing individual campuses, though student success was also part of the charge.

As highlighted in the interview summary below, this initial emphasis on finances rather than student outcomes became a considerable sticking point among the opponents of Students First. Regardless of the shortcomings in messaging, when you couple the student outcome trends with the college financial issues, it becomes clear why the CSCU leadership as well as policymakers in the state were looking for a new approach to providing postsecondary education in Connecticut.

According to CSCU analysis, Connecticut community colleges in 2017 had the lowest three-year graduation rate compared to other states in the region. Furthermore, NECHE flagged graduation rates at 9 of the 12 colleges in the state as a concern. A closer look at the student outcomes data by race, illustrates that the state and colleges also have a significant equity problem.

Using publicly available data from CSCU for the 2018-19 academic year, the success rate (i.e. completions plus transfer) for white students was 39 percent compared to 25 percent for Black students and 27 percent for Latinx students. You could argue that results for White students are nothing to brag about, but the 14- or 12-percentage point difference between them and the Black and Latinx population is very problematic. It is even more alarming when you consider that two-thirds of minoritized postsecondary students attend community colleges in Connecticut. Low student outcomes are leading to legitimate questions about college performance from policymakers and the general public.

In terms of the financial situation, CSCU and the colleges have been challenged by several intersecting issues. First, like many states, the Connecticut legislature has disinvested in public higher education. Based on publicly available CSCU data, funding had recovered somewhat after the 2008 recession, but peaked in 2015-16 at $269 million for the 12 colleges, and has since declined to $20 million less in 2017-18.

Normally, when states cut funding, colleges partially cover the difference through tuition increases. Connecticut colleges have increased tuition some, but they have attempted to hold tuition down to avoid shifting the burden to students. This approach has been complicated by declining enrollments. Again, using CSCU data, the fall 2018 enrollment was just under 48,000 students at the 12 colleges compared to more than 55,000 in fall 2014.

Some of the enrollment declines can be attributed to the improved economy that leads to fewer people pursuing postsecondary education. However, Connecticut is also contending with a decline in college-age students as a result of a declining population. It is projected that the colleges, which are already struggling financially, are likely to see another 8 percent decline in enrollments over the next decade.

CONNECTICUT’S RECENT JOURNEY TO REFORM HIGHER EDUCATION

Before turning to an overview of the Students First plan, it is important to first place its development in a larger context for higher education policy in the state. Students First emerged as a concerted strategy in spring 2017, but it was preceded by substantial gubernatorial and legislative changes to restructure higher education governance in the state. The most prominent action was the creation of the CSCU system, which was proposed in early 2011 by then-Governor Dannel Malloy (D) and approved by the Democratic-controlled legislature that same year.

The act merged two existing separate systems – the 12 community colleges and the 4 state universities – with an online college (Charter Oak State College) under the newly created Board of Regents for Higher Education (BOR). The University of Connecticut, as the flagship institution, maintained its independent board.

The governance changes were, in large part, a reaction to the significant budget challenges resulting from the great recession from 2007-2009, but also frustration among policymakers that student outcomes and transfer
between public institutions were not where they needed to be. The goal of the 2011 governance change was to create greater oversight of public higher education institutions in the state and to realize cost savings from the consolidation of the various system offices.

In the four years following the adoption of the 2011 governance changes, the newly-formed CSCU experienced considerable instability and turnover in senior leadership. During this period, there were four different system heads before Mark Ojakian was named as the new President of CSCU in 2015.

Ojakian has held this position since 2015 but announced his retirement in the summer of 2020. As the former chief of staff to Governor Malloy, Ojakian not only brought stability to CSCU, but he also brought key political connections and firsthand knowledge of the thinking that led to the governance changes in 2011. With the new leadership in place, Ojakian and his team turned their attention to the lingering budgetary and performance challenges that had led to the creation of CSCU four years earlier.

The state budget was still problematic. State investments in higher education had partially recovered from earlier in the decade, but those gains peaked in the 2015 fiscal year as state policymakers again were wrestling with budget constraints. At the same time, enrollments were declining as the economy recovered and people went back to work, which exacerbated the financial challenges for community colleges.

Amid these budget challenges, student outcomes were not improving overall and the equity gap between Black and Latinx students and White students was getting worse instead of better. CSCU leadership was primarily looking for a way to address the problem of financial instability, but there was also growing concern about low student outcomes. Students First emerged as the main vehicle to address these issues.

### The Students First Plan

As mentioned earlier, having been charged by the BOR to come up with a plan to put the system on sustainable path for the future in April 2017, Mr. Ojakian initially proposed two broad strategies to address the challenges CSCU faced:

1. **Administrative consolidation** of non-student facing/administrative personnel across the CSCU college, university, and system offices.
2. **Operational consolidation** of the 12 community colleges into one that is centrally managed and maintains its unique mission, geographic locations, and local community connections.

The first strategy, while not necessarily easy to accomplish, was largely within the purview of the BOR and the CSCU leadership. The second strategy of consolidating the community colleges, however, would require the approval of the regional accrediting agency — NECHE.

CSCU leadership and NECHE (at the time, still called New England Association of Schools and Colleges or NEASC) staff held a series of informal conversations in the summer and fall of 2017 for the purposes of communicating CSCU Students First strategies to NECHE staff and receiving advisement regarding how to proceed with the formal community college merger proposal. The NECHE staff recommended preparing a substantive change proposal, which CSCU then submitted in February 2018.

The NECHE Commission, an elected body of at least 27 individuals from member institutions as well as the public, reviewed the substantive change proposal. Two months later, in a setback for CSCU, the NECHE Commission did not approve this initial proposal. Two primary concerns were cited. First, despite the advisement to CSCU from the NECHE staff, the NECHE Commission argued that the substantive change framing was incorrect because they perceived the change to be the establishment of a new college, rather than a merger. Second, the Commission felt the original two-year window, which was a little over a year when they reviewed the proposal, was too short to adequately address all the organizational, curricular, and student support questions from the consolidation. As a result of the NECHE Commission’s response, the CSCU leadership had to regroup.

In June 2018, the BOR approved a resolution that reaffirmed their support for a singly accredited college but with three regions and 12 local campuses as the best approach to serving students in the state. The resolution also extended the timeline for implementation to fall 2023.
THE STUDENTS FIRST PLAN (CONTINUED)

It was also at this point that student success became a much more central focus with the revised Students First plan calling for “a dynamic community college that leverages talents and capabilities to help students attain their individual educational goals within available resources and responds to community and state needs.” The revised Students First plan, which is summarized below, was further refined, and resubmitted to NECHE in Spring 2020.

New community college leadership and regional structure
To satisfy regional accreditor standards, the plan maintains the 12 college-based chief executives, chief financial and chief academic officers until the transition to a singly accredited institution in fall 2023. With the transition to the single Connecticut State Community College there will be one CEO, CFO, and CAO that will oversee all 12 campuses.

The plan also establishes a structure with three regional presidents, who were hired in spring 2019. The 12 campuses will each have a local CEO who reports to one of the regional presidents. The role of the regional presidents is to promote greater connection and collaboration within their respective regions. The three regions, which are illustrated below, are based on an analysis of the communities served, employer partnerships, and student enrollment trends. See Figure 2 Below

Aligned college curricula statewide
The plan called for continued work to align curricula statewide. A general education core curriculum for the merged community college is being developed through relevant statewide committees. Faculty workgroups are engaged in making all curricular decisions in consultation with campus faculty senates and academic administrators. The curriculum revisions are occurring in three rounds between September 2018 and May 2021 to allow additional time for updating registration and student data systems and addressing any financial aid considerations ahead of the single college launch in August 2023.

Student enrollment and completion initiatives
The Students First plan uses Guided Pathways as the framework to improve student enrollment, retention, and completion. Guided Pathways, as previously described, is a national reform movement that involves streamlining college processes and procedures to help students navigate the institution more efficiently.

Through various committees, faculty and staff are collaborating with the CSCU Success Center to design new practices for the single college. In fall 2019, these efforts resulted in recommendations for a single application to the community college and consistent websites at both the system and the campuses to support enrollment, transfer, and transparency. The work will also involve adopting technology to enhance advising and student supports.

FIGURE 2 – MAP OF CONNECTICUT STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE REGIONS

Region 1: Capitol-East
Region 2: North-West
Region 3: Shoreline-West
Additionally, to reverse enrollment declines, improve retention, promote timely completion, and generate revenue, CSCU hired a Vice President of Enrollment Management to serve the colleges and implement new strategies across the regions to support enrollment.

Shared services and shared resources across campuses
A core feature of the Students First plan is the integration and centralization of key administrative functions. Institutional research, marketing, facilities, financial services, human resources, and information technology will be consolidated with leadership provided centrally to functional teams at the campuses. Cost savings from the consolidated functions are to be redirected to student supports on individual campuses.

In addition to the efficiencies to be realized through statewide shared services, the regional presidents will also be working to achieve savings and economies of scale by sharing resources across colleges in their areas including both administration and academic programming. By making better use of the talent in the system, any savings identified in the region will be reinvested in teaching and student supports.

The plan also calls for building the capacity to identify new funding streams to support student success and programmatic initiatives and dedicated resources for the hiring of a college-wide development officer to lead these efforts. The individual campuses will maintain their local foundations to raise resources from their communities. The regional presidents and campus CEOs will support the campus foundations while looking for opportunities to share costs where appropriate as well as best practices.

As part of the ongoing work to implement Students First, CSCU provided progress reports to NECHE in April 2019 and June 2020 and continues to pursue a substantive change to merge the 12 community colleges into a single accredited institution. Per feedback from NECHE, a critical aspect of securing approval for the consolidation will require that CSCU demonstrates that the “one” college is, in fact, operating as a single institution as 2023 approaches. Arguably the biggest challenge the CSCU leadership faces is to maintain the 12 separate accreditations until 2023, while simultaneously operationalizing the single college. This dual track creates a myriad of budgetary, staffing, and communications issues, which will be explored in greater detail later in the document.

HOW THE WORK OF STUDENTS FIRST IS GETTING DONE

Given the magnitude of the changes that will be made to implement Students First, the CSCU leadership has created several statewide committees, workgroups, and taskforces to manage the work. Figure 3 (see page 12) highlights the workgroup structure.

The group that is providing oversight for the whole process is the College Consolidation Implementation Committee (CCIC). The day-to-day work of implementation is managed by two steering groups: The Students First Academic and Student Affairs Consolidation Committee (SF ASA CC) and the Guided Pathways Task Force (GPTF). The CCIC has 17 members and is primarily composed of CSCU leadership and college presidents. This group receives reports from and provides approval for all proposals from SF ASA CC and GPTF as required. The CCIC also elevates proposals to the BOR as needed and appropriate.

With 46 members, the SF ASA CC is focused primarily on needed changes to the curriculum and policies and sorting through the process of consolidating the approaches at 12 colleges into one. More specifically, this group, which is composed of faculty, staff, and administrators from across the state, guides the alignment of academic programs, assessment, institutional data, websites, catalogs, etc. The SF ASA CC was formed in January 2018. Several workgroups are operating (or planned) under the purview of this committee:

- Mission and Vision
- General Education
- Faculty Discipline
- Academic and Student Affairs Governance
- Academic and Student Affairs Policies
- Community Connections
- Common Catalog
- Concurrent Enrollment
- Strategic Planning
- Assessment
The CSCU Success Center established the GPTF to oversee the various workgroups formed to implement Guided Pathways at scale for the Connecticut State Community College. With 29 members, the GPTF is made up of faculty, staff, and administrators from across the state as well as CSCU System Office staff. Similar to the SF ASA CC, the GPTF supports the following workgroups:

- Choice Architecture
- Recruitment Architecture
- Holistic Student Support Redesign
- Maps and Plans
- First-Year Experience
- Website and Streamlined Application
- Alignment and Completion of Math and English
- Career and Transfer Readiness
- Wraparound Services

As we turn to how Students First is perceived among practitioners in the field, it is important to highlight that there have been over 400 faculty, staff, administrators, and students who have been engaged in this process by serving on one of the various workgroups. While some individuals were elected to serve by their peers and others were appointed by the system or campus leaders, there were also a considerable number of people who volunteered to contribute their time and expertise.

**FIGURE 3 – STUDENTS FIRST WORKGROUP STRUCTURE**
This section summarizes the major themes gleaned from the fourteen interviews conducted in early 2020. Interviewees came from a variety of college faculty, staff, and leadership roles. Participants also included a couple of individuals from the CSCU system office. Interviewees were identified in partnership with system office staff and reflected a range of perspectives from those who strongly support Students First to others who are skeptical about the overall effort. All participants were promised anonymity. Therefore, no individuals are identified by name.

The themes and quotes below represent the prominent views shared during the interviews and reflect positive attitudes toward Students First, challenges that emerged throughout the process, and suggestions for how implementation could be improved so the entire effort can be more successful.

WHAT STUDENTS FIRST IS, WHY IT’S NEEDED, AND EARLY BENEFITS

This section explores what interviewees perceived to be the purpose and core components of Students First. Participants’ views of how the reform efforts are organized as well as the early benefits to the system are also explored.

“The primary purpose of Students First is to enhance student success for all matriculants who are in Connecticut state colleges and universities. It is basically a focus on equity and excellence to ensure that we provide not only access but the opportunity for those students to finish.”

As the quote above suggests, many of the individuals interviewed see the primary purpose of Students First to be streamlining the student experience and eliminating structural barriers to improve outcomes — particularly for disadvantaged students. Furthermore, most participants stated that the overall effort is also about creating “one” college through the consolidation of the 12 separate community colleges into a single-accredited institution.

“If we step back a little bit, the impetus for this is the equity gap and the achievement gap, and clearly our statistics at both the university level and the community college level – they’re abysmal.”

The quote above echoes a sentiment expressed by several participants that there is a growing recognition among many of the college faculty and staff that the current situation in terms of student outcomes is neither acceptable nor sustainable. They conveyed a sense of urgency about equitably improving student outcomes and concern that the individual colleges are not in a financial position to accomplish the task. There was a hopeful theme across the interviews that Students First, while not perfect, is intended to shine a light on and organize the system in a way to better address inequities among student subgroups.
When asked about the core components of Students First, most of those interviewed had a solid understanding of what the effort entails. The majority stated that implementing Guided Pathways and the related framework would lead to simplified structures that will make it easier for students to come to decisions about their educational and career options. Several participants shared a view that Guided Pathways will help campuses shift from a transactional mindset to one that is transformative for a student’s experience.

“...There are different processes at each of the 12 colleges. Students have to apply separately and there’s no ease of transition from one campus to another just to take courses to finish a degree. That over-complication creates a lot of barriers. So along with any economizing that might happen because of consolidation, I would hope that a more primary goal is making things easier for students.”

Again, while not all the interviewees support consolidation, most acknowledge the intent of establishing one accredited college as enabling students to move more freely among the campuses, offering more programmatic options, and providing the same level of support from location to location. There was also a clear sense that, if done right, creating one college might allow for greater collaboration and knowledge sharing and also allow the colleges to leverage resources in areas like technology, data, and reporting, and shared purchasing power.

Most of the interviewees indicated that Students First had created an opportunity to push people out of their silos and has spurred dialogue across campuses that have not happened in the past. While several participants expressed concern that the "one college" would diminish the mission and culture of the individual colleges, others felt breaking down barriers between institutions was a golden opportunity to better serve students. In the end, several see the emerging structures, such as standardized policies and practices and centralized back-office functions, as helping campuses change the way they operate for the better.

Many described the numerous statewide committees that have been organized to develop and implement the Students First plan. A number of those interviewed spoke of how these committees start at the ground-level with recommendations moving up the hierarchy of committees and then onto system leadership, but some indicated that the decision-making process was not clear. There was a broad acknowledgment that the committees have representation from across the system; however, a subset suggested there are still some groups that are not adequately engaged (i.e. front-line staff, faculty).
KEY CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED DURING IMPLEMENTATION

As with any sizable endeavor, there are likely to be challenges and set-backs. The implementation of Students First is no different. This section highlights the interviewee’s perspectives on a variety of issues or challenges that have emerged. The section is organized with subtitles to make it easier to follow.

COMMUNICATIONS ISSUES/CHALLENGES

“We haven’t found a way to really get down in very common language that this is why we’re doing this, and this is what we’re going to achieve for our students and our community. That’s just at the core of what we have to say. We’re too caught up in our procedures, process, and structure that we haven’t gotten to articulate the message at a very common, colloquial — or whatever term you want to use — way.”

This quote is indicative of sentiments from most interviewees shared--that the communications and messaging around Students First has been totally inadequate and primary reason for the resistance to the reforms. Many stated that the early messaging focused too much on efficiencies and cost savings, rather than student success. This, in turn, created a strong counter-message for those who were not in favor of Students First.

As the implementation process has progressed, several interviewees suggested there is a lack of a shared understanding about what’s happening throughout the system, what the overall benefits are, and an open discussion about what the challenges are. Further, some participants indicated that efforts to respond to criticisms have not been particularly effective. They suggest that direct responses to controversial issues are needed, but there seems to be a hesitation to address criticism head-on. Finally, several participants noted that because the consolidation is so closely connected with Guided Pathways and the sense that it comes as a directive from the BOR and the system office, some resist all of it.

System-level leadership pointed to another challenge in communication: that the college leaders at each individually accredited institution were not uniformly supportive of Students First, and that the presidents took it upon themselves to decide whether and when to communicate Students First messaging to their campus constituents. Since this relatively young system, created in 2011, did not necessarily have the organizational structure, norms, and expectations established at leadership levels to ensure consistent messaging, the communication challenges may have been amplified.

LEADERSHIP ISSUES/CHALLENGES

A subset of the interviewees shared the view that system leadership didn’t do enough to lay the groundwork at the start of this effort. Examples mentioned include the lack of approval of the initial plan by regional accreditors and the release of organization charts (or other documents) without providing sufficient information that heightened people’s concerns and anxiety. With few exceptions, most participants noted there is a lack of clarity about campus leadership and the role of the regional presidents. As the quote below indicates, interviewees said they have heard from others that they don’t know who is actually in charge.

“There is a lot of ambiguity in terms of leadership. Some of our campuses have a CEO in charge, and some still have Presidents in charge of the college. We have Regional Presidents and no one fully knows what their role is, or who reports to whom, or who is truly leading the charge. Who is steering the ship?”

Due to the lack of clarity of roles, there was a sense among some participants that rather than reducing administration and increasing supports for students, the system was adding more senior-level positions than before. A few participants also mentioned the challenging role of current college presidents. The presidents’ role is changing so they are in a tough position. These presidents have to do their current job and also be supportive of the changes that are coming. This has led to less than enthusiastic support from some campus leadership, which has also weakened the ability to rally support on campus.

GENERAL PERCEPTION/MINDSET ISSUES

In various ways, all of the interviewees indicated that this process has created considerable mistrust across the state, making it more difficult to implement the changes. Furthermore, the quote below represents a sense expressed by most participants that the uncertainty about how the changes will impact individuals, their jobs, or their programs has caused significant anxiety.
“...the best way to summarize all the concerns is that the message seems to be that this is about improving the institution’s effectiveness and the student experience. But the bottom line is that it also has to save money, and I think people worry about how you save money without getting rid of jobs?”

Several interviewees indicated that one of the major outstanding problems is the lack of clarity on governance and that uncertainty surrounding this issue is feeding a lot of the resistance. At the time of the interviews, the governance model for the one college had not been announced, and, as the quote below indicates, participants highlight this as a major sticking point for faculty throughout the system.

“...the piece on what governance looks like in this one college model. I think some of the individuals that are most vocal against Students First feel as though they won’t have any say. And, so, I do think more time and emphasis needs to be placed on what a governance model will look like.”

Participants also articulated several accreditation-related issues including the challenge of colleges maintaining their separate institutional accreditation while working toward the transition and the outstanding question of how programs with individual accreditation will be handled under consolidation.

Several people spoke about the need to do more to support the champions of Students First while also building support among those who are on the fence. Some said that not everyone can be convinced and the system should not focus too much on the most vocal opposition. There were also several comments about instances where individuals who have voiced support for Students First have been ostracized by colleagues. This dynamic has made it intimidating for others who are supportive to say so.

Most of the interviewees indicated that change of this magnitude is difficult and resistance to change should not be surprising — especially in higher education. Relatedly, several participants said that the amount of work involved to implement these changes (on top of other responsibilities) makes the 2023 implementation timeline unrealistic.

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ISSUES WITH THE STATEWIDE COMMITTEES, THE INCLUSION OF OTHER VOICES, AND ADDRESSING RESISTANCE

Many of the interviewees highlighted the significant number of people involved in the various committees and groups working on Students First. The consensus was that the system office has tried to be inclusive throughout this process. While most acknowledged the open invitation to faculty and staff to join in the dialogue, some indicated that more needs to be done to engage those on campuses who are not involved, such as front-line staff (not just directors) and a broader representation of faculty from across the disciplines. To address this issue, there were suggestions that other venues needed to be created for people to ask questions, share their concerns, and generally contribute to the conversation.

Many participants also talked about the vocal group of detractors (referred to as “reluctant warriors”) who are drowning out other points of view. As noted earlier, the intensity of this opposition is making it uncomfortable for those who are supportive of Students First to say so publicly, but some of those interviewed also voiced frustration that, despite invitations from system leaders, groups opposed to consolidation have not offered any alternative approaches.

“There probably could have been more active engagement with the union leadership earlier on. Not necessarily to try to get them on board, so to speak, but just to make sure that that communication was happening.”

In most of the interviews, the participants discussed the role the unions have played and the resistance they have organized to Students First. As the above quote suggests, some thought there could have been more done to involve the unions in a more productive conversation. Some also noted that the pushback from the unions has not been particularly well organized, whether it was varying approaches to votes of no confidence across campuses or more recent messaging pushing members not to participate in statewide committees.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ROLE AND VOICE OF THE SYSTEM OFFICE

Several interviewees shared that there is a perception in the field that the system office is dominating the implementation process and has an oversized voice in the process. Most who raised this issue generally saw this as appropriate given the magnitude of the changes. However, as the quote below indicates, some also expressed concern because the system office staff don’t interact with students, don’t know what it is like to work on the front lines, and some don’t have a background in higher education.

“Most of the work isn’t happening at the campuses. It’s happening in the system office and that’s another thing that I’m concerned about. I know the vision is to have this headquarters that is not on campus. And I think that’s going to be tough because I think then you’re increasing the number of people that are not on a campus doing this work.”

Relatedly, some participants highlighted the controversial role of the Guided Pathways managers. Most of the interviewees indicated that the establishment of the managers’ role has been a good thing and these individuals have a strong background of working in the trenches with students. However, some have the perception the managers, who have voting power on the statewide committees, are only representing the system office. As a result, the managers have been snubbed by campus colleagues.

NEED FOR DEEPER ENGAGEMENT WITH EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

In keeping with the sentiment that there are voices that have not been adequately heard as part of this process, participants have encouraged more outreach to students, their families, and alumni. As the quote below highlights, many of the interviewees also suggested that there should be a more concerted effort to engage community organizations and leaders about how Students First will impact them.

“We need to engage the local communities. I mean high schools. Talking with the counselors because this impacts their students. Community organizations that serve many of the students that are coming here. I mean grassroots organizations and actual people that live in the community. So, talking to them about what these changes mean for them.”
A handful of the participants pointed to the need for the system office to effectively engage state policymakers throughout the process. Interviewees noted that policymakers will not only make decisions about funding for the system, but they also want to know that the system of colleges is operating as effectively as possible for the citizens and communities in the state.

**STEPS THE SYSTEM LEADERSHIP CAN TAKE TO IMPROVE IMPLEMENTATION**

Interviewees were asked for suggestions that would make the implementation go more smoothly and, ultimately, lead to **Students First** being more successful. This section highlights these themes.

Following on the communication issues above, several participants urged the system leadership to do more storytelling that clearly articulates why all these changes matter, what progress is being made, and the challenges ahead. They suggested getting away from jargon (ex. Guided Pathways) and the focus on process or procedures and emphasize the underlying philosophy expressed in common language.

“Going too fast can hurt you in the long run. It’s all well and good to have a timeline as far as trying to make sure the money works and all that. I know there’s a lot to balance. But if you go too fast in trying to create something that’s actually going to work, then you’re going to create something that’s a mess.”

In addition to the storytelling, many interviewees suggested that the system leadership should be more realistic about how they talk about the timeframe for implementation. As the quote above suggests, it was advised that the focus should be more about a period of transition and less about the date when the “switch gets flipped” to the one college.

Building on the previous comments about stakeholders, many of the participants noted the need to deepen authentic engagement with a range of voices, including key groups within the system (especially the unions) as well as the communities the campuses serve. Even among people serving on the statewide committees, interviewees noted that many are not taking ownership of decisions. Furthermore, some people on the committees feel like their presence is seen as endorsing something that hasn’t been finalized or decided. Most noted that a richer level of engagement will help to build deeper buy-in and commitment to **Students First**.

Another important point several people raised was the need to address questions and confusion about the system, regional, and campus leadership. Interviewees said bluntly, people need to know who is in charge and what the relationship is between the different roles. As the quote below implies, the lack of clarity contributes to the sense that there are simply a lot of new senior-level positions under the new structure. Related to this, some of the participants indicated that the current campus leadership is not on board with the **Students First** plan and that will need to change if the effort is going to be successful.

“There’s a lot of bloat in the system office right now. People are not understanding. For example, why do you have college presidents or CEOs and regional presidents. Why? Those are big-salary positions. There are positions where you accomplish things, like counselors, advisors, faculty, financial aid people, those kinds of people versus our regional president. What is their function and why do you need to have the other one? They need to really look at that extra layer of people.”

Finally, most of the participants acknowledged the challenge of having to wait for the regional accreditors to approve the consolidation. Several suggested that once there is clarity on accreditation some of the resistance should settle down as things that have been abstract to date (i.e. governance structures) can, importantly, become more concrete.
WHAT THE FUTURE WILL LOOK LIKE FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN CONNECTICUT

The individuals interviewed were asked what they envisioned the future state would look like once Students First was successfully implemented. This section reflects some themes from their responses. It is worth noting again that these interviews occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic.

There was a strong sense among most of the interviewees that, if Students First is fully implemented as designed, the student experience will be greatly enhanced and outcomes will improve. Relatedly, several participants, echoing the sentiments in the quote below, noted specific aspects of Guided Pathways that will lead to higher retention and completion rates including the hiring of more advisors to guide students on their journey and building better structures to monitor, track, and communicate with them.

“If we embrace Guided Pathways, I see a plethora of possibilities. I see my students, thriving and being resilient. If we don’t put the support system in place and we move in the direction of more administrators, then this won’t work. It has to be about staff and faculty close to the students.”

In several interviews, there were comments about how consolidation will change what it means to be a system of colleges, and to be successful, leadership at the state and campuses will need to help faculty and staff reconcile this shift. Furthermore, several noted that it will take some time and effort for communities to understand the changes.

Finally, while the majority of the interviewees were optimistic about Students First, many said the key to success is to increase resources to support students. A subset of the participants expressed concern about the seeming growth in the administrative structures and how this might work against the goal to boost frontline student supports.

The intent of this publication and the interviews summarized above has been to capture the perceptions about Students First at roughly the midway point in the implementation process. The participants shared their honest assessments about what is working and what is not.

Interviewees revealed varying degrees of support for the goals of Students First and the implementation process, with some conveying considerable hostility to all or most aspects of the work. Others were strong proponents of the changes. Overall, it was clear each of the individuals interviewed was strongly committed to the students in Connecticut and eager to see them succeed.
As noted previously, no large reform endeavor is going to be free of controversy or challenges. The colleges across the country that have been successful in implementing Guided Pathways have spent several years doing so and most have had setbacks along the way.

Adopting significant institutional reform efforts like Guided Pathways takes time. Layering on the consolidation of 12 individual colleges into a single-accredited institution to Guided Pathways only magnifies the complexities of the process and, importantly, increases uncertainty and ambiguity for those impacted by the changes. Even if all other aspects of the reform effort were flawless, it is human nature to resist change when the outcomes are unclear.

Perhaps the largest lesson to date has been about the challenges of communicating what will happen when and how people are going to be affected. The communications issues, which are not surprising in the context of an effort of this magnitude, have contributed to the mistrust among frontline faculty and staff. This suspicion has given way to a growing amount of resistance, which has resulted in votes of no-confidence in local and system leaders and calls from union leadership for members to cease all participation in the various workgroups that are guiding the implementation of Students First.

A second more specific lesson relates to the early messaging employed to raise awareness of Connecticut’s challenges and the need for changes. It was clear from the interviews that these communications about Students First were overly focused on the financial problems of the system and how consolidation was the only way to avoid campus closures. While these points were not invalid, they were not particularly effective in persuading faculty and staff across the system to support the reform efforts.

Early messaging didn’t sufficiently articulate how the changes would help students. The subsequent pairing of the implementation of Guided Pathways has added substance to the benefits for students. It is yet to be seen if this adjustment will help to quell the resistance among faculty and staff.

It is well within the purview of the BOR to change the system policies and procedures necessary to implement Guided Pathways. However, the BOR does not have sole discretion to consolidate the 12 individual campuses without NECHE’s approval. While CSCU leadership has been in contact with NECHE staff throughout the process, a third important lesson is that interacting with NECHE staff is not the same as garnering the approval of the NECHE Commission.

Based on NECHE’s response to the initial Students First proposal submitted by CSCU, it is clear that the NECHE Commission did not see a sufficient plan nor an appropriate timeline for implementing such an ambitious change. This set back with the regional accreditor, while not fatal, has created credibility issues for the CSCU leadership and exacerbated the communications challenges raised above.

One of the issues that has plagued the implementation process is the insufficient coordination and staffing of this complex undertaking. While the workgroup structure provided a mechanism to engage a significant number of people across the system, there was not a dedicated person in the CSCU system office who was primarily responsible for implementation. This complicated work was handled by many CSCU staff who also had to continue to do their regular jobs. The diffused management of implementation coupled with limited project management infrastructure has meant the process has been less efficient than it could have been, which likely contributed to the communications issues cited throughout this publication.

Despite the challenges emphasized in this section, CSCU leadership has had the fortitude to continue to move implementation forward. They have pressed on where they could, adjusting along the way. To this end, there has been ample progress implementing Students First. The next section highlights some of the important milestones in this reform journey.
Since the CSCU leadership submitted the revised Students First plan to NECHE, there has been considerable progress made implementing the various pieces of the blueprint. Based in part on the Students First implementation timeline as well as input from CSCU staff, this section provides some highlights of the progress made as well as some key next steps.

**IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS THROUGH SPRING 2020**

While the timeline for launching the single college in fall 2023 seems far off, there have been a significant number of decisions made and items accomplished as part of the implementation.

**NAMED THE COLLEGE AND CREATED THE MISSION AND VISION**

One of the most basic questions is what the new college is to be called. In May 2020, the BOR approved Connecticut State Community College as the name of the institution. Developing the mission and vision statements for the new college have also been important milestones. The BOR approved the following statements:

- **Mission:** The Community College of Connecticut provides access to academically rigorous and innovative education and training focused on student success. The College supports excellence in teaching and learning, makes data-informed decisions, promotes equity, advances positive change for the students, communities, and industries it serves, and awards associates degrees and certificates.

- **Vision:** The Community College of Connecticut will be recognized for exceptional student success, educational leadership, and transformative collaboration with business and industry, government, educational, and key stakeholders while advancing diverse opportunities for Connecticut’s citizens and communities.

**COLLABORATED WITH KEY EXTERNAL PARTNERS**

Throughout the implementation of Students First, CSCU leadership has worked with a number of external partners. The most prominent has been the ongoing dialogue with NECHE to secure approval for the single accreditation. Another key partnership has been with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to gain input on the consolidating administrative functions and aligning curriculum for the single college. NCHEMS has been instrumental in helping CSCU leadership grapple with the challenge of maintaining separate accreditation for the current 12 colleges while also standing up the single college. CSCU also worked with the Federal Student Aid staff in the Boston region to ensure that the implementation would not inadvertently impact financial aid for students.

**APPOINTED NEW COLLEGE LEADERSHIP**

A key step in creating Connecticut State Community College is to name the individuals who will lead the new institution. In May 2020, David Levinson, previously the President of Norwalk Community College, was named the interim president. The Chief Academic Officer (Michael Rooke) and Chief Financial Officer (Kerry Kelley) have also been filled as interims.

These positions along with the President are required for any institution to meet regional accreditation standards. These senior level positions have been appointed by the BOR on an interim basis until full formal searches can be conducted. Additionally, the Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs (Alison Buckley) and several Associate Vice Presidents and Directors have also
IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS (CONTINUED)

been hired to support the transition to a single college. Finally, as noted previously, three Regional Presidents have been put in place and the search process is underway to hire the 12 campus CEOs.

ESTABLISHED FULL ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

One of the big questions throughout the interviews was who was reporting to whom. Faculty and staff throughout the system rightfully want to know what the reporting lines will be. To address these questions, system leadership publicly released drafts of the organizational chart for the Connecticut State Community College. While some adjustments will likely be made as implementation continues, these charts can be found on the CSCU Students First webpage.25

ADOPTED CRUCIAL BOARD POLICIES

As part of the implementation process, the BOR adopted several policies to advance changes that needed to happen across the campuses.26 They are:

- **General Education Core** – Established a consistent 21-25 credit curriculum for the merged community college
- **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** – Adopted indicators disaggregated by student subgroups
- **Areas of Study** – Established common meta-majors for all campuses
- **Holistic Case Management Advising** – Created a structure with Guided Pathways Advisors to reach a ratio of 1 advisor for everyone 250 students by 2023.
- **College and Career Success (CCS 101)** – Adopted an FYE course that is required for all students

CONTRACTED WITH TECHNOLOGY VENDORS

Leveraging technology to more efficiently support students has been a key goal throughout this process. A contract has been signed with Ellucian to consolidate the 12 college student information systems into one. Additional work is under way to implement software solutions to support the academic catalogue and curriculum as well as the student success model.

KEY NEXT STEPS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

While much has been accomplished, there is still a significant amount of work ahead. One of the key outstanding questions is NECHE’s final approval of the single college. As noted previously, the CSCU leadership has been in ongoing communications with NECHE, submitting formal updates in April 2019 and again in June 2020. The CSCU leadership has continued to move forward with implementation while this issue is still pending. Standing up the single college while simultaneously maintaining the accreditation of the 12 separate colleges will continue to pose ongoing challenges.

Other crucial decisions that are yet to be resolved include the creation of the shared governance process for the new college and the policy governing the alignment of college math and English. Board policy about college math and English is expected in spring 2021. Defining shared governance for the single college has been a significant sticking point throughout implementation, but this work is in the final stages as well. Relatedly, with the General Education Core and the Areas of Study in place, faculty workgroups have been engaged in the effort to align the curriculum across the campuses. The first group of programs is slated to start through the shared governance process in late 2020.

Finally, a critical strategy underlying the Students First plan has been to centralized key back-office functions such as Financial Aid, Admission, Registration, and Advising at the state-level. These dialogues have been ongoing and significant progress has been made. A key next step will be to establish service-level agreements with each of the campuses that will delineate how these relationships will look and be supported. These service level agreements are slated to be implemented beginning in the early spring of 2021.

FUTURE PUBLICATIONS

As noted at the start, this publication has focused primarily on how the work of Students First has been organized and accomplished to date.

With nearly two and a half years until the first students enroll in the Connecticut State Community College, there is a substantial amount of work to be done before fall 2023. The effort to this point has not been without considerable challenges, but there has also been much accomplished. The goal of this publication has been to document both.

Moving forward, there is a tentative plan to produce additional publications. The next would focus on the completion of the implementation process through fall 2023 with a subsequent report chronicling the early impacts of Students First and the consolidated Connecticut State Community College.


7 Guided Pathways Resource Center. (2020). Full Pathways Model.

8 CSCU. (March 26, 2019). Students First Overview.


12 CSCU. (March 26, 2019). Students First Overview.


15 NECHE. (April 2018). Summary Response to Students First.

16 Connecticut Board of Regents for Higher Education. (June 21, 2018). Resolution concerning Endorsement of Revised Students First Plan.


20 CSCU. (2020). Students First Academic and Student Affairs Consolidation Committee.


22 CSCU. (2020). Students First Timeline.


