

Testimony Regarding the Reopening of Universities and Colleges

Presented to

Connecticut Legislature: Higher Education Committee

August 13, 2020

Dr. Catherine R. Baratta, LMSW, MPA
Associate Professor of Social Work
Central Connecticut State University

Contact information: 115 First Street
New Britain, CT 06051

Cell phone: 860 335-4391

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today. I am a 21-year CCSU tenured Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work. What I would like to comment on is the impact of the Board of Regents (BOR) members continuing disregard to the point of belittling of CCSU faculty. BOR is ignoring faculty experience, institutional knowledge and expertise in our respective fields. This is not new; it began at the onset of Students' First. What is new, however, is how the pandemic has magnified it and I would argue brought to the surface how students and their classroom experiences have been negatively impacted. As we prepare for the fall, I find it ironic that so many decisions that are supposed to be for the benefit of our students are not. As a faculty member I am in the front line thus the accessible target for blame whether warranted or not, which in turn reinforces the BOR perspective that faculty are not important stakeholders with anything to contribute.

Despite the pandemic I will tell you that I am shocked regarding the angst I feel and how exhausted I am, and I put it squarely on the shoulders of BOR members. We are devalued; hence I am devalued. I take so much pride in my work, and now all I see are obstacles. It is both absurd and unnecessary. The only consolation is that so many of my colleagues feel the same way. As a result, our students who have suffered all along because of the pandemic, will feel the impact during the fall semester adding to the list of worries including their loss of the college experience as they know it. I am now going to share with the committee one recent experience, an illustration that demonstrates how this impacts the classroom and students.

The roll out of Black Board Collaborate (BBC) on August 5 was exciting but that left only 21 days to learn before the first day of classes. For me to become proficient, and able to anticipate and assist student difficulty using the software in the context of my specific courses is ultimately my responsibility. The roll out was two months overdue for me to be able to be prepared. I am stuck between a rock and a hard place. Fortunately, CCSU immediately developed workshops to introduce us to it. The presenter had as much information that she was able to teach herself in the hours since it was rolled out. It wasn't a lot; some features did not cooperate, and I appreciate her honesty. No problem. Just provide the link to the instruction manual and I will get to work. Participants were told that manuals for faculty and students will be coming from the System Office at some point. Some point? That is not acceptable. How helpful is this? It is not to me.

I am aware not only how our students think, but also their abilities, and how they would use an "instruction manual" for technology. Many of our students will be intimidated right out of the gate and will never access it. Others will quit because they cannot get an answer immediately. Some will not even bother to spend time they do not have. In turn, I am going to be inundated with emails, as I should be, and their frustration will continue to increase when I reveal that I can't help at this time. A few students will just skip over me and go straight to the Dean and even our President, to tell them that no one will help before it will circle its way back to me with the "mandate" to help them.

For the maximum benefit, as I have in the past, I would have reviewed and created supportive material for social work students to navigate. If I did not provide that information prior to the start of the semester, they would receive it the first day of classes. I was trained to provide all information and resources to students the first day of class. The variation among our students regarding skills and abilities are expansive. We have students who are English as second language learners, students from high achieving school districts and those school districts trying the best they can. On the one hand I am working with a student to bring her up to the level that she needs to be at in order to be successful in the course, and on the other hand, I am challenging a student to strive to a higher level of abstraction. I

know how to present information in a manner that social work students will understand. But this option is not available to me and time is just about to run out, and so my commitment to provide the best education I can to my students is compromised. This is not acceptable to me and it shouldn't be for any of my students. I have to start the first day of classes already behind.

I am focused on Black Board Collaborate because it is university supported and many of our students have some familiarity with the original BB. I encourage students to seek assistance from the IT Help Desk because it is a transferable skill that our social work students need to learn. Learning how to ask appropriate questions, follow up questions and using the information given them is an experience that each student needs to master. Social workers expect clients to use their resources and often must teach them to do this. We are preparing them for the workforce.

Also, in the workshop about using BBC the very first thing I learned was it only shows 4 students on the screen. We were told that the feature to see more students (how many?) will be uploaded down the road. How is this ok for a learning management system? How is a decision like this made without the people who are to use the software? It is simply absurd. Where was the due diligence? Now I will have to bounce back and forth between WebEx and BBC and hope WebEx is far more stable than it was during the spring semester. No doubt, like last semester, a student will be ready to move us to Zoom if a problem occurs, but we will be limited because it is a free account.

With that said, students are very frustrated that I am not using Zoom. For me to do so, I would have to purchase it myself and be the Help Desk for students. I cannot do this. Some faculty members have purchased it and use it. The result: students are confused why some faculty use zoom because it is so easy, and the rest of us makes it "so hard" for them. It then becomes another source of frustration for and between me and my students.

I take very seriously my responsibility to educate future social workers. Not only must I make sure that students learn and demonstrate their skills, knowledge and values, I have an obligation that we graduate students who will engage in ethical practice throughout our communities, and with some of the most vulnerable populations. I am accountable to every future client our students will encounter. It is my responsibility to be certain that ethical social workers are prepared for the public. I fear my abilities to do so have been unnecessarily stymied. I want to conclude with an illustration to demonstrate why this matters not only to the committee but the CT residents:

Upon graduation, a student with a bachelor's degree could be hired to be the only social worker, for example, at a 80 bed nursing home facility. A social worker's principle responsibility is to coordinate the care for each resident. I am concerned that my lack of preparation for the fall, will compromise the future abilities of our current students as they enter the workforce. People have told me, "just enough will be good enough." Not in social work. No one wants a nursing home social worker to tell a family member that "we are doing "just enough" to help your parent." I wouldn't want my father in that nursing home. If it isn't good enough for my family, why should it be could enough for yours?

In conclusion, while on paper everything may look good for all the BORs plans, reality is a different story because faculty have been excluded. For the sake of every resident in Connecticut, I urge members of this committee to intercede and remedy the situation. The BOR's behavior towards CSCU faculty workforce, has been problem all along and now because of the pandemic is becoming obvious in how it plays out in the classroom. Thank you for his opportunity.