

**Higher Education & Employment Advancement Committee Testimony**  
**Thursday, August 13, 2020**  
**Rotua Lumbantobing, Ph.D.**  
**Danbury, CT**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Rotua Lumbantobing and I am an economics professor at Western Connecticut State University. As an economist, I am astounded by all the bad economic decisions that the Connecticut Board of Regents of Higher Education has so far made in preparing for the fall reopening at the four CSUs.

With the economy in a deep recession partly necessitated by the pandemic, many higher education institutions are scrambling to attract students back to campus, reasoning officially that students crave/need that “college experience” while worrying inside about the potential loss of tuition and dorm revenues if this doesn’t happen. One would think that public universities are shielded from this potential calamity because of state support. Alas, this is not the case for those in Connecticut. The University of Connecticut is going forward with their plans to conduct in-person classes this fall, and so are the four universities in the Connecticut State University (CSU) system, despite more and more studies on the much elevated risks of contracting Covid-19 in the indoors setting with poor ventilation system for an extended period of time, which is exactly what most college classes are held in. The state of Connecticut so far has refused to improve classroom conditions and make testing widely available as part of public safety based on the most updated research on Covid-19, relying instead on the minimum standards from the state Department of Public Health and the CDC guidelines.

The reason for the need to attract students by providing the so-called college experience while refusing to ensure the safety of faculty, staff, and students is obvious: financial. Between 2008 and 2018, the state of Connecticut has cut public funding for state universities by 21%, an average of \$3,311 (adjusted for inflation).<sup>1</sup> This resulted in an increase of 37% in tuition or about \$3,282. In addition, students have to think about the increase in other costs of attending college, such as room and boarding, books and supplies, and cost of transportation. The defunding of public colleges and universities in Connecticut—and across the country – came at the time when they enrolled more and more students of color, who disproportionately come from low-income households and count on college education as an important component of upward mobility. The fact that the CSUs are operating on the absolutely minimum standards for fall reopening, compared to the University of Connecticut, which plans to have random weekly testing on their residential students, highlights the disparity among these public universities (not to mention compared to private universities such as Yale University and Wesleyan University).<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the plans underscore the unequal treatment of students of color, who are more likely

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<sup>1</sup> State Higher Education Funding Cuts Have Pushed Costs to Students, Worsened Inequality (<https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/state-higher-education-funding-cuts-have-pushed-costs-to-students>).

<sup>2</sup> University of Connecticut’s plan of testing can be viewed at <https://uconn.edu/public-notification/coronavirus/>. Yale’s reopening plan is detailed at <https://covid19.yale.edu/health-safety-guidelines> while Wesleyan’s is at <https://www.wesleyan.edu/healthservices/reactivating/health/testing.html>. Both universities plan to test residential students twice weekly.

to enroll in one of the CSUs than at the other universities.<sup>3</sup> This is unacceptable – our students deserve much more than this! They deserve nothing less than affordable, quality college education offered by universities that care about the safety of everyone involved.

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<sup>3</sup> In 2016, the percentage of students from underrepresented/minority groups at CSUs ranged from 17.6% to 30.7% compared to 14.3% at University of Connecticut ([https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/f618d8\\_8604bbcfad2d4319a7c8c0f2e20acc9c.pdf](https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/f618d8_8604bbcfad2d4319a7c8c0f2e20acc9c.pdf)).