

For at least the last 15 years the block grant has lagged behind inflation, effectively cutting our funding every year since the great recession and for at least ten full years before the consolidation plan was hatched—a plan that aimed to reduce the community college budget even more.

Today, you will hear about the devastation caused by a budget shortfall of \$130 million over the 24-25 biennium. A shortfall that necessitated that the newly opened institution-- the only open enrollment public institution in the state-- cut hundreds of jobs and many necessary services starting on day one of its existence.

But that devastation is also a result of the six years leading up to the opening of the college during which many millions of the block grant provided by the state were diverted to fund a project for which the state provided no separate allocation and for which no spending was officially authorized. And during which at least \$34.5 million (the number reported by CTState administration) was drained from the colleges by leaving vacated positions unfilled. During which, also, the system office's relationship with the community colleges was intrusive and destructive, while they just neglected the universities—allowing space for the catastrophe at Western.

This crisis has been years in the making and was foreseen in 2017 when, roughly simultaneous with the creation of the fiscal guardrails in their current form, the Students First plan to create a single community college was approved by the Board of Regents. The only way to make sense of the plan is to understand it as just another austerity mechanism to deal with the state's debt and pension liabilities. It was never about delivering education at all.

The Plan was criticized from day one- by the Faculty Advisory Committee to the BOR, by the dozens of resolutions from faculty and staff governance bodies, the statement of unity of the 5 constituent unions in opposition to the plan. And the votes of no confidence in the BOR, Students first Plan and CSCU President. But the plan moved forward without pause.

The plan promised to save money without closing locations and with no reductions in student-facing staff but on paper it multiplied levels of administration. Its proposed organizational chart clearly revealed a more expensive and top-heavy structure.

It proposed to achieve 'efficiency' by streamlining so-called back-office functions into a centralized shared services model, administered by the CSCU system office. But by no understanding of the word 'efficient' has that been the case: the services have been woefully substandard due to understaffing, disruption, and a flawed design. And they have multiplied costs—chunks of the block grant that are now under the system office's sole control without transparency about exactly how it is charged.

It claimed that labor costs would be ZERO dollars. But administrators also presented this committee with lists of the hundreds of faculty and staff who built curriculum and procedures and staffed the dozens of committees and workgroups over several years to make this happen.

Proponents claimed, once the costs started becoming obvious, that it would achieve equity and antiracism even though it was premised upon a plan to reduce spending on a student population that already disproportionately faced challenges caused by historical disinvestment in their communities- for many, because of their race.

Leaders advertised the possibility of single application, taking classes at multiple campuses, even though single accreditation was unnecessary for those benefits. Even though faculty and staff brought folks from other states who had managed to do the same with a consortium of independent institutions. And while the pathways for transfer to our state universities were neglected for this new project.

They projected such preposterous success that they proposed to hire 174 positions on one-time funding, assuring us all that the positions would pay for themselves by FY25. Not only is it clear that that was never a believable claim, the very model of advisors who were expected to talk students into taking more classes to cover the cost of their own salaries is an exploitative model.

This committee passed bills requesting cost updates but nothing useful was provided in the reports the system submitted.

When the CSCU system was formed, the legislature forfeited the possibility of real oversight of the majority of public higher ed. The result has been catastrophe. 5 presidents in the first six years. WE are currently suffering the consequences of the brainchild of the only CSCU leader who stuck around long enough. And here we are now. With a poorly conceived institution. A new administration and an overworked and under supported staff who cannot save it without resources.

In the CSCU system, nine of the 15 BOR members are appointed by the governor. One individual has entirely too much influence over public higher ed statewide. Meanwhile, each of you is accountable to your constituents for the level of state services in their area.

The consolidation has now made it even harder for any legislator to determine whether anything resembling a college exists in their districts anymore. Single accreditation means that each of these locations is merely a branch and can go without many essential components of an institution of higher education. And with the state of our current funding, it's looking less and less like something we'd rightly call a community college exists at all in the state.

CSCU administration is asking for only enough money to save the jobs of full-time, permanent employees. They have conceded to cutting hundreds of courses and part-timers who provide tutoring, accessibility services, library support, ESL, career services—the very aspects of the institution that make it possible to address the many inequities that exist in our state through higher education and preserve public higher ed as a place that affords true opportunity. At no point has the system office leadership revealed an understanding of and commitment to the needs of the people of this state.

In addition to funding to keep us in tact now, going forward, to avoid such catastrophes again, we will need:

- An assessment of the role of the Chancellor's Office. What does it cost? What does value does it provide? Does the math work out? Is the state prepared to provide another allocation to that entity to limit and define its costs?
- A funding formula tied to the sort of public higher education system a state with our wealth, and with our long-standing inequities and challenges, would hope to provide for its residents
- A full accounting of how the one-time money that has passed through the system over the past few years- including APRA and HEERF was used and what remains. Part of this accounting should reveal just how much we spent to build an institution that was designed at cross purposes from its advertised and required functions.
- An adjustment to the fringe benefit recalculation so that it doesn't penalize CSCU, and the community college in particular
- Transparency in the shared services costs and a new structure for them.

We desperately need you to find the flexibility in the spending cap that will allow for one-time funds to keep us alive this year and will allow for our budget to fit within the spending cap restrictions in the next budget year. But we also equally need some structural change that makes oversight and accountability possible to assure that the communities that our community college serves are not deprived. When we get this money, we will need to have some say in how it is spent because, as you can see, all the generosity in the form of one-time funds has only facilitated the path to consolidation and sealed the deal on a plan that was always meant to end in fiscal crisis and layoffs IF it ever really was to save the money it promised; that was only ever meant to disinvest in and betray the mission of the largest public higher ed student body that has the largest population of people of color, people in poverty but who will also overwhelmingly stay in CT and compose our workforce and our future.