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Higher Ed Affordability Desperately Needs Study Despite Christie Veto

Faculty and staff voice support for reintroduction of bi-partisan legislation

EDISON...College and University faculty and staff are calling for passage of legislation to study college affordability for New Jersey students and families. The advocates join State Senate President Steve Sweeney who is reintroducing the measure in today's Senate Higher Education committee meeting despite the Jan. 13 veto of the same bill by Governor Chris Christie. The bill had unanimous bi-partisan support from both houses of the legislature when the Governor vetoed it.

"With student debt surpassing credit and mortgage debt to become the largest debt for Americans, this issue is too important to neglect and deserves a second hearing," said American Federation of Teachers New Jersey (AFTNJ) President Donna M. Chiera. "New Jersey has an unfortunate combination of high tuition and limited capacity that makes it the number one state for exporting high school graduates." AFTNJ is the largest union of higher education workers in the state, representing more than 20,000 full and part-time faculty, graduate student workers and professional and administrative staffers.

Governor Christie vetoed the ten-person commission to study college affordability measures and offer recommendations claiming it would be redundant to the efforts of Secretary of Higher Education Richelle Hendricks. "Unfortunately Secretary Hendricks' office has released no relevant information nor shown any indication of addressing this major challenge for New Jersey students," said Chiera. "If the Secretary is addressing this critical problem she should release any details of her efforts and solicit input from student, faculty and staff stakeholders. Otherwise, the Governor should reconsider and sign the legislation creating this commission."

Two AFTNJ members addressed the Senate Higher Education committee to encourage passage of the legislation.

Rutgers Professor Dan O'Connor, President of the NJ State Conference of the American Association of University Professors (NJ AAUP), said that forming a commission would broaden the involvement of stakeholders and bring together the voices of students, parents, professors, university personnel and leaders. "Thus, the rationale used by the Governor to veto this important initiative pales when compared to Senator Sweeney's inclusion of a representative constituency of NJ citizens," said Dr. O'Connor. The NJ AAUP represents more than 7,500 faculty and professional staff at 13 higher education institutions.

Sarah-Ann Harnick testified about the urgent need for relief for students. As an Assistant Director at the Office of Campus Life at New Jersey City University, Harnick works closely with students and sees them suffer with the tremendous strain of high tuition and fees. "I am here today to convey our support for a commission which would examine issues and develop recommendations to ensure New Jersey's ability to provide high quality, affordable higher education," said Harnick.

Harnick is the Legislative Representative for the Council of New Jersey State College Locals, American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, which represents more than 9,000 faculty, professional staff and librarians at New Jersey's nine public four-year colleges and universities.

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The American Federation of Teachers New Jersey (AFTNJ) represents 30,000 education workers in New Jersey, including 20,000 faculty, staff and graduate workers at Rutgers, the nine state four year public colleges and universities, NJIT and ten community colleges. The union federation represents 10,000 prekindergarten to 12 education workers in districts, private and charter schools.