



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: JULY 12, 2011

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Classroom and Campus Professionals Call for Public Hearings In Wake of Higher Education Cuts
Stakeholder Input Needed Before Considering Kean Task Force Recommendations, Bonding and Mergers

TRENTON...Governor Christie's last-minute higher education budget vetoes will force many New Jersey students out of school and limit opportunities for others to start. New Jersey educators have a better plan than increasing college and university tuition while bonding instead of budgeting. A working group of unions representing more than 30,000 public and private higher education faculty and staff are calling for controls on tuition, more public oversight and stakeholder representation on governing boards to improve accountability from executives. These recommendations stand in stark contrast to this year's Tom Kean-led Governor's Task Force on Higher Education, which seeks more unchecked power for university and college Presidents without rallying significant opposition to the continued decline in state support.

"We agree with the Task Force report that it is time for Governor Christie to follow up on his commitment to increase funding for higher education and reverse the ongoing trend of diminishing state support," said Rutgers Communication and Information Professor Dan O'Connor, President of the New Jersey State Conference of the American Association of University Professors. "Still, a stable funding source will only reduce the burden on working students and families if college and university executives manage finances in a transparent manner," said O'Connor, a co-author of the response.

However, the absence of state oversight has already led to a counterproductive lack of coordination among state schools, according to William Paterson University Sociology Professor Susanna Tardi, an Executive Vice President of the American Federation of Teachers New Jersey, another collaborator on the response. The Kean report proposes eliminating the State Commission on Higher Education, which includes student and faculty representatives. Such representation is vital and the Commission should be empowered instead of weakened, according to Tardi. "A strengthened commission, without political influence, should help monitor management excesses and keep resources focused on supporting student achievement," she said.

In addition, Tardi noted that the Kean report is written from the perspective of the Presidents and has a decidedly anti-worker bias, calling for the elimination of civil service protection and the breakup of a longstanding system of statewide coordinated collective bargaining at the state schools. "These recommendations in the Kean report show a lack of respect for those who work directly with students every day in the classrooms and on campuses," she said. "Ironically, these proposals stand in stark contrast to the statewide calls to improve efficiency by sharing municipal or county services and merging administrative functions."

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Perhaps the most dramatic Kean Task Force recommendation is the proposed move of University of Medicine and Dentistry (UMDNJ) medical schools to Rutgers University and the “fundamental transformation” of the rest of the institution. The Governor created a separate task force to issue recommendations on the merger. Unfortunately, that group suffers from the same fundamental flaw as the Kean Task Force—a total lack of participation from workers or students of the institutions, according to Ann Twomey, President of the Healthcare Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE) which represents 4,000 nurses and professional staff at UMDNJ. The solution to safeguard the public trust, workers’ rights and protect vital assets such as Newark’s University Hospital, is having open hearings on the process and empowering community voices, according to Twomey.

Public input and community involvement in the decision-making process is also the ultimate recommendation of the entire higher education working group. Instead of a rush to push short-sighted legislation, propose bonding without dedicating revenues to service debt and forcing haphazard mergers, the groups conclude with a call to “delay action on the Task Force recommendations and immediately conduct public hearings on the future, mission, funding, affordability, access, and governance of public higher education in New Jersey.”

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The American Federation of Teachers New Jersey (AFTNJ), the New Jersey Conference of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), and the Health Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE) have released a “Joint Analysis and Response to the Kean Commission Task Force Report.” A full copy of the report is available for download at www.aftnj.org.