TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE

AFT NJ State Federation, AFL-CIO

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The Honorable Sandra B. Cunningham, Chairperson, the Honorable Nellie Pou, Vice-Chairperson and the Honorable Senators Thomas H. Kean, Paul A. Sarlo and Robert W Singer

Good morning. My name is Susanna Tardi. I am a professor of sociology at William Paterson University and the AFT NJ State Federation Executive Vice President for Higher Education. On behalf of my colleagues testifying here today and the 30,000 faculty members, librarians, staff, health professionals and allied employees we represent, the leaders of the American Federation of Teachers—New Jersey State Federation (AFT NJSF/ AFL-CIO), the New Jersey Conference of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), and the Health Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE/AFT-AFLCIO), I want to express sincere thanks for inviting us to share with you our concerns and recommendations regarding Higher Education in the state of New Jersey.

As faculty and staff, our goal is to provide you with a frontline perspective of the factors that contribute to the conceptualization and measurements of student success, the importance of teaching, scholarship and service to economic development, and our recommendations for improving the quality and integrity of Higher Education in our State. We intend to keep our presentations short but pointed to allow for you to elaborate on any issue or ask any questions that you may have. Much of what today’s panel participants will be addressing involves the Joint Analysis and Response to the Kean Commission Task Force Report on Higher Education which has been included in your packet. Included in the Joint Response are two reports published by The American Federation of Teachers, both of which focus on student success, the area about which I will focus.

This semester, I began my twentieth year as a professor at WPU. I am the senior research methodologist in the Sociology Department, have taught courses from the introductory level to the graduate level, have consistently served as an academic advisor, and have been an engaged faculty member in the Faculty Senate for the past 12 years and the Local Union President for the past 10 years. While I am proud of all of the roles in which I have participated, I am first and foremost a professor, an educator who believes that “students first” is not just a slogan, but a commitment. So, I ask the question, what does student success mean and how is it to be measured? As noted in the AFT Student Success Report, I agree that there is a need for a broad rather than narrow conceptualization of “student success”. The conceptualization should precede the measuring instruments. A colleague of mine, Balmurli Natrajan, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of WPU’s University Core Curriculum, which is our newly implemented general education revision, recently noted that “just as GDP or per capita income do not really capture the health of an economy (economies can grow very fast and with high growth rates while simultaneously generating great inequalities and not reducing poverty levels), the usual measures of graduation rates, standardized test scores, GPA, are at best, partial measures, at worst, misleading measures of the health of our educational institutions and its products, our students”. If students are our priority, then we have an obligation to focus on a model that defines student success based on individual student goals. Some students have a goal of earning a degree to attain their career goals, others are coming to become certified or maintain certification in a given area, others are seeking to be retrained, and yet others are interested purely in academic enrichment. Public and private colleges and universities have and in my opinion should, retain different missions, however, they all need to not only provide labor force replacements--excellent teachers, nurses, natural and social scientists, business leaders, economists, artists etc.--for the future, but to agree that student success has a social obligation component. Student success involves enhancing reasoning (critical thinking), ethical behavior, and producing role-models and leaders for the betterment of the citizens of New Jersey and beyond the borders of our state and nation. Measurements for this kind of success cannot be determined solely or even predominantly by some national standardized test scores, student retention statistics, graduation rates or other expedient but not necessarily comprehensive measures. I am in no way suggesting that low graduation rates should be ignored, but rather they be examined within the context of each college/university mission. There needs to be an understanding between the State and the institutions that colleges and universities are not mere “diploma mills”.

Studies indicate that faculty mentoring has a positive impact on student retention. The earlier the connection between the student and a faculty member, the more likely a student is to remain at the college/university. Unfortunately, colleges and universities place little value on these faculty service activities, preferring to reward faculty for only scholarly work.

Faculty and staff, in the frontline of Higher Education need to be at the center of any policy discussions involving Higher Education. All too often, administrators and/or governing boards reach decisions on academic issues in the absence of input from the various constituent groups that are integral to the institution. Shared governance is often illusionary; decisions are made well in advance then are aired at a faculty or university Senate meting or “town hall” meeting after the fact. Shared governance by way of administrative accountability is key to student success. While on paper, college and university Presidents are accountable to Boards of Trustees, these bodies frequently simply rubber stamp decisions. There is currently no mechanism in the State which holds members of a Board of Trustees accountable for their decisions. Public Institutions of Higher Education need to be student centered and fully accountable to the public.

Historically, the significant fiscal and academic problems that have confronted our Higher Education institutions are due to a lack of administrative accountability since the dissolution of the Division of Higher Education. In other states, there are chancellors of education to provide checks and balances on the administration. While the Governor has appointed a Secretary of Higher Education, thus far we have seen no concern expressed or involvement in Higher Education issues by the Secretary.

In summation, my recommendations for student success are:

* Broader conceptualization of student success
* Establishing more meaningful measures for student success
* Increased support for mentoring and advising
* State clarification of the role of Higher Education
* Shared governance
* Administrative Accountability

Senator Cunningham, I thank you and the other Senators for the opportunity to share my thoughts on student success.