

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE ASSEMBLY HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Susanna Tardi, Ph.D.

AFT NJ State Federation AFL-CIO

Executive Vice -President—Higher Education

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Honorable Chair, Riley, Honorable Vice-Chair Giblin, and Honorable Committee Members, DiMaio, Gove, Jasey, McGuckin, Pinkin and Stender:

Good morning. My name is Susanna Tardi and I am testifying today as a concerned Sociology Professor from William Paterson University and as 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 the Higher Education proposed Assembly Bills.

First of all, I would like to commend Assemblywoman Riley and Assemblyman Cryan for raising awareness on the issues confronting higher education in our State by sponsoring a number of Bills aimed at higher education reform. I am certain that you are providing this opportunity to hear testimony on the proposed higher education legislation for three reasons: 1) your desire to provide access and affordability regarding higher education to all students in our State; 2) your commitment and concern to maximize student success for all college/university students in the State of New Jersey; and 3) your interest in developing performance based funding formulas for public higher education which are based, in part, on reported graduation rates.

Faculty and staff support legislation that will relieve students of the enormous student debt that they have confronted and will continue to confront if tuition is

not controlled. We support legislation to reduce tuition costs or at least freeze tuition for an entering cohort of students, providing the subsequent cohorts are not made to bear the burden of significant tuition increases. We also believe that legislation providing low interest loans will help students reduce their workforce hours, focus more on their academics, and reduce student debt.

Regarding graduation rates, we agree that four year graduation rates at some of the State colleges/universities are appalling and six year graduation rates can be significantly improved. We do not support closing colleges/universities based on graduation rates. Graduation rate is a seductive metric. It seems to be a simple, easy to understand, and meaningful benchmark that can be used to measure performance, compare different institutions, and develop education policy. The reality is that graduation rate is viewed by most experts as a deeply flawed indicator which is complex to measure, interpret, and use. Graduation rates do not reflect the changing demographics of college enrollment and, as a result, are becoming less and less relevant as a good measure or predictor of student success or institutional performance. Graduation rates are based only on the graduation performance of first time, full time students and exclude the growing proportion of transfer, part time, and graduate students. Graduation rates also don't distinguish between students of different socio-economic backgrounds or students who enroll with strong academic skills versus those that require significant skill remediation. The percentage of the student body represented by graduation rate statistics varies significantly among different institutions.

Despite the limitations of graduation rates, this metric is enjoying popular, widespread misuse as a proxy for effectiveness and quality, and has become a significant part of the accountability and performance funding conversation. Early attempts to base performance funding formulas on graduation rates had a negative impact on higher education access and quality and were quickly scrapped. Colleges increased admission selectivity which was detrimental to minority and low-income student enrollment. Colleges also began to reduce graduation credit requirements, make course content less rigorous, and encourage more lenient grading – all in an effort to move students through the system. Several lessons were learned from these early missteps in performance funding. First, there is significant risk in overemphasizing the extent to which graduation rates are used to judge institutions and establish performance funding levels. Second, to account for different institutional missions and student body

demographics, it is likely that each institution will have a different graduation rate benchmark from which to assess its performance. Third, a balanced scorecard of different indicators is the best approach to establish education policy, assess performance, and encourage and reward responsible behavior.

Studies have shown that the academic preparation of incoming students is one of the most significant factors in predicting and explaining student performance and institution graduation rates. Data on remediation/basic skills clearly indicate that there is a relationship between remediation rates and graduation rates; as the remediation rates increase, the graduation rates decrease. This data needs to be interpreted cautiously. Our State Higher Education system is organized to provide all students the potential to earn a college degree. Each of our colleges/universities has a different mission. Do not conclude that the colleges and universities that address the needs of the population of students with remedial needs should “raise the bar”; that these students don’t belong in four year colleges and universities, or do not belong in college period. The data reflects a lack of preparation to “hit the ground running”, the way other students with non-remedial needs can. Despite the recent educational reformation in K-12, even if the changes have “fixed” the elementary and secondary school problems, the results will not be evident for many years.

Since our legislators have proposed performance based funding with an emphasis on graduation rates, particularly four year graduation rates, panic has set in at institutions with the lowest graduation rates and the highest remediation rates. The very mention of the words “performance based funding” is resulting in reactionary administrative plans for fear of reductions in state funding, rather than recommendations to enhance student success that are the product of shared governance. This is similar to the pattern seen in past failed attempts at implementing performance based funding when metrics drove negative behavior.

To illustrate how metrics drive questionable behavior, a number of NJ colleges/universities instituted new basic skills initiatives to decrease remediation rates. The overall objective was to have students complete their remedial needs in the summer prior to beginning their first academic year at the college/university and demonstrate basic skill proficiency by passing a test. Within a year, the number of incoming students reported as requiring remediation dropped significantly. Is it logical to conclude that years of deficiency

in basic areas such as reading, writing, and mathematics can be solved through a summer workshop or course? The faculty on the “front line” (those in the classroom) will tell you that these students may have improved but they are not “remediated”. However, the statistics indicate a decrease in the number of students needing remediation. These students will not be a part of future statistics involving remediation, yet they will continue to need mentoring and good academic support until they are truly remediated.

So how do we maximize success for this student population? At WPU we had a Sponsored Students Program for students who did not meet the characteristics necessary for regular admittance. These students had the highest retention and graduation rates, higher than students who were regular admits. This group succeeded because they were relatively small in size (200-300), received one-on-one advisement/mentoring from counselors, worked closely with faculty, and signed contracts whereby they agreed to participate in tutoring. The WPU Administration eliminated this program stating that the Sponsored Student Model was going to be applied to all students. The growth in academic support necessary to provide the one-on-one mentoring to “all students” is not feasible given flat funding from the State. It is important to note that reporting of remediation classification and rates varies from university to university. We support transparency and accountability, but encourage further examination regarding the ramifications of modifying reporting procedures.

Most of our four year colleges/universities have a 120 credit requirement for undergraduate degree completion. Student success is not about dividing the number of credits by the number of semesters in four academic years plus or minus one. In their first semester and possibly their entire first year of college, students with remedial needs should be assigned the **minimum** number of credits to maintain full-time status, so that they can continue improving their basic skills, focusing on their college level courses, while simultaneously working to pay for college, developing confidence that they can achieve, and establishing a GPA “cushion” prior to the complexity of the courses increasing. Setting a goal of striving to graduate in four years is, of course, fiscally responsible and ideal, but if our focus is on the quality of education, we must recognize that “one size does not fit all”.

The fundamental problem is the insufficient State funding that has been provided to our State colleges and universities. Unfortunately, there is no formulaic, “quick fix” to resolving the problem. Student success is not merely a statistic indicating no remediation needs, or the four or six year graduation rate. Developing a funding formula is a worthy goal, but there is no standard set of metrics that can be applied to all colleges/universities and respect individual college/university missions. Our long-standing commitment to providing all students in NJ access to higher education necessitates a thorough, systematic approach to maximizing student success. We applaud the Senate and the Assembly’s support to establish a Commission to carefully examine and make recommendations to engage in meaningful higher education reform in our State.

Respectfully, I wish to submit the following **recommendations**:

1. Examine the amount of money spent on the delivery of instruction in the classroom versus the administrative expenditures at each college/university.
2. Identify resources that can be shared by the State colleges/universities.
3. Require each college/university to form a working Committee with broad campus-wide representation including administrators, faculty, professional staff, and Union representation to develop a balanced scorecard that is aligned with the University’s mission to determine how funding should be established. The scorecards should be submitted to the Senate and Assembly Higher Education Committees for review and recommendations to the Secretary of Higher Education.
4. Focus on using performance based funding metrics as incentive measures, rather than punitive funding strategies that will negatively impact minorities and low income students.
5. Require colleges/universities to partner with K-12 to develop and implement on-line and in-class remediation programs in the junior year of high school for students who are “at risk” (deficient in basic skills).

When feasible, hold Assembly Higher Education Hearings on a rotating basis at the State colleges/universities. This will provide greater opportunity for faculty and staff participation, and increase the visibility of the Assembly Higher Education Committee members and their efforts to maximize quality education.

Assemblywoman Riley, I thank you and the other Assembly Higher Education Committee members for the opportunity to share my thoughts on accountability, accessibility, and student success, and I look forward to working with you in the future.