Advocacy at the State Level: Connecticut

Elsa Nunez
Eastern Connecticut State University

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Thank you for inviting me to join this distinguished panel today. I would like to thank Dr. Richard Boris and his staff at the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, as well as their colleagues at Hunter College and the people here at Baruch College, for sponsoring and hosting this conference. I also want to thank our moderator, Teresa Montano of the University of California–Northridge, as well as my fellow panelists. I am honored to be with you today. I am especially pleased to be with my colleague, David Walsh, president of the Connecticut AAUP.

The overall conference theme of renewal and reinvestment in higher education is very fitting, given the perilous economic times in which we find ourselves. What we do in these next few years could move us forward or set us back for a long time.

Our topic for this panel discussion is “Advocacy at the State Level.” In good times, advocacy is about making what we have even better. Right now, in Connecticut and across our nation, we are facing tough times, and advocacy takes on a different role. Today, advocacy is about maintaining essential educational services while preserving our educational workforce. It’s a major challenge, yet we cannot forget our ultimate purpose is to prepare our students for careers and lives as productive, engaged citizens.

The financial realities we have dealt with in Connecticut and throughout our country in the past year and a half have forced us to reevaluate the traditional relationship between college administrators and faculty. In the most narrow, clichéd sense, administrators want the freedom to make decisions and the faculty just wants to be left alone. The current economic crisis has given us an opportunity to reexamine and forge a new relationship between our management teams and our faculty ranks.

I am not naïve and I don’t suspect that anyone is willing to (nor should they) give up their fundamental identity. However, we are finding new ways to work together, not only to manage the current budget shortfalls, but to begin to create a new model for collaboration in the future.

In New England, our educational traditions have grounded us in the fundamental values of public education, helping us to focus on serving our students despite the economic troubles we face. Allow me to offer a quick glimpse back at the origins of public education in New England.

In the early to mid-1800s, Horace Mann, a product of a poor farming family and a one-room schoolhouse in Massachusetts, was at the forefront of creating a professional workforce for K-12 education. His vision for developing standards or “norms” for teachers and teaching methods led to the establishment of the first publicly funded “normal” school in the United States — that’s where the name came from. Today the first public normal school in the United States is known as Framingham State College in Massachusetts, a little over 100 miles from my campus.

Of course, Mann was not alone — colleagues like Henry Barnard and later Arthur Morrill extended the concept of normal schools and teaching standards to Connecticut, creating what today is known as the Connecticut State University System. It’s not a stretch to say that the teaching profession as we know it, especially in the public schools, owes its existence to Mr. Mann and his contemporaries. During the mid-1800s, they instituted more consistent classroom
conditions, standards and curriculum to better prepare teachers, a longer school year, and even better pay for teachers as they gained a more formal, professional status.

There’s another reason why I thought of Horace Mann when preparing my remarks today. The reason he worked so hard to improve teaching and validate the teaching profession is because he recognized that a free society is only healthy if its people are sufficiently educated to govern themselves.

The Greek philosopher Epictitus (E-Pick-ta-tus) is famous for his comment that “Only the educated are free.” Horace Mann understood this, and believed that only a public educational system could ensure that everyone was educated. In his mind, an active citizenry, exercising its political rights, required a public educational system.

Mann also believed that all people, regardless of economic background, deserved to be part of the educational franchise. In fact, he viewed education as the key to creating a level playing field. He said, “Education is the great equalizer of the conditions of men — the balance wheel of the social machinery.”

Of all the people who we should be thinking about as we try to balance our budgets in these difficult times, I would hope we would never lose sight of the dreams and aspirations of the families who want to send their children to our campuses, many of them first-generation students.

Everyone is feeling the effects of the current economic slowdown, and there are few families who are not experiencing greater difficulty in finding the money to continue to send their sons and daughters to our campuses. How do we ensure that no student gets left out in the cold as we continue to seek ways to keep our operations going? That question must be fundamental to our budget deliberations.

From Mr. Mann’s legacy, we can see the two bookends of our national dynamic. For the individual, education serves as a catalyst — giving each person the potential to gain economic franchise, social mobility, and political freedom.

For our democratic society, education ensures a workforce with the tools to conduct commerce while instilling in each citizen the sense of responsibility to the whole, whether it be to serve as a part of government, or simply to recognize that it is our duty to exercise our political rights.

When you think about it, our entire American history has been about this dualism, between the rights and freedoms of the individual and the stability and security of our society. Balancing these poles is the ongoing task of government and other institutions, including higher education, and today’s discussion mirrors that balancing act.

On the one hand, we are all concerned about the economic security of faculty — the individual members of faculty unions throughout the United States. When you realize that 33 of 50 states have unionized faculty and that bargaining units represent almost half of all college faculty, we realize how many people have a stake in this discussion.

Each faculty member is focused on their families, their jobs, their futures. As a member of the faculty at Ramapo College in New Jersey and later the City University of New York for more than 20 years, I fully understand their concerns. I, too, had to pay my mortgage. Yet on the other hand, we also must be concerned about the long-term viability of our colleges and universities, for none of us need worry about conditions of employment if our employers cease to exist. If the University goes under, we all lose.
Our discussions today and moving forward must continue to focus on long-term sustainability, not short-term solutions. The current conditions are severe, no doubt. But they cannot be solved in such a way as to cripple our institutions in the future.

I also would urge us to think even more broadly and again I reference Mr. Mann’s visionary ideas from almost 200 years ago. If we are to give each of our students economic and social opportunities, while ensuring the future of our society as a whole, we need to get beyond our own needs.

As we talk today about protecting jobs, protecting our standards, and protecting our organizations, I ask that all of us keep our students in the center of our discussion. Each of those students has a face, a family, a future. We have a responsibility to each of those students as individuals--together, they represent the next generation of Americans.

How we balance our budgets in the next few years will help determine how balanced and stable our society is for future generations.

In Connecticut, we have spent the past year and a half grappling with the state budget. Dealing with deficits in the billions of dollars in the current and next biennial budgets has resulted in unprecedented actions and decisions. The collaboration and common sacrifices that have been made by state agencies and unions in Connecticut to narrow our budget deficit have been significant. Some decisions were made at the macro level, either by the Connecticut System trustees or the governor herself — hiring freezes, travel freezes, a moratorium on construction other than that funded by federal stimulus money, and operating budget reductions.

We cut 10 percent from the four Universities’ management staff this year, and salary freezes, furlough days, and health insurance adjustments were made across the board through extensive, collaborative discussions. Everyone is sharing in the same pain and the same level of pain. I think this reflects some principles that bear articulation. As our budgets continue to contract, these guiding principles may come in handy.

First, we must continue to keep our workforce together. Not only is this essential for morale on our campuses, but it ensures organizational competence and stability. Contrary to some reports, our institutions are not awash in money and staff. The hiring freeze we have dealt with in Connecticut for almost two years has put many departments and offices on our four campuses in dangerous territory, shorthanded to the point where services to students are suffering. We cannot afford to lose anyone else — everyone counts. Every faculty line is like gold.

Second, we cannot choose strategies that pit people against each other. Without getting into details, I think we know what strategies tend to separate us into groups without a common goal. In such scenarios, tensions flare. Hopefully, we have learned some lessons from this. When we decide up-front to stick together, innovative ideas flourish and shared sacrifices become manageable.

Third, when things are this bad, no solution is without pain. Is it not better for all of us to feel a relatively minor financial loss, or are we willing to sacrifice a few colleagues so that the rest of us are untouched? Which of these positions benefits our students? Which ensures our futures as institutions?

Fourth, it’s my belief that when we put students first and make the long-term strength of our institutions a priority, each of us is more secure in the long-run. Certainly we need some flexibility in the process.

We need to protect our full-time faculty ranks. The value of full-time faculty in maintaining the graduation rates of students has been well documented — student success has
been shown to be highly correlated to the contact students have with full-time faculty. Curriculum development, advising, institutional reputation, and intellectual freedom are also tied to maintaining and protecting the ranks of full-time faculty.

**Fifth, it also isn't a bad idea to sit back and remember what we have.** We have our jobs. Most people have tenure and we have an academically strong University. Compared to many industries, and certainly most other societies, we have excellent salaries and benefits. We have pleasant work environments, and we love teaching and we care deeply about our students. This unites us in our efforts to stay positive.

**Sixth, now is the time to truly think beyond the box.** EASTERN WORKS=$MART is a recognition program at my institution where we are encouraging staff and faculty to think of ways to lower costs and save money. We are coming up with energy-saving strategies and efficiencies that we simply would not have thought of if the current recession hadn’t forced us to sharpen our senses. We are finding many new ways to “make do with less” while preserving the quality of our instructional services and maintaining the integrity of our workforce. Everyone in higher education needs to be thinking creatively on two fronts — finding new revenue streams and curbing expenses.

**Seventh, we need to continue to practice transparency, openness, and honesty.** These are simple truths handed down to us through the generations. Our conduct speaks as loudly as our decisions, and I think we have done a good job of this in Connecticut so far, thanks to colleagues like David Walsh.

Certainly those of us in management positions need to be transparent and open in these times. Our credibility is at stake, and everyone is watching. Granted, some university presidents may decide to use difficult times as a rationale for reorganizing their institutions and otherwise invoking major changes. Or we can choose to work closely within our campus communities to address issues together.

At my own institution, we have created an Ad Hoc Budget Committee that allows us to involve all campus constituencies in the budget process. The result has been that all the various budget scenarios and numbers are being shared transparently and broadly across the campus. Despite the budget crunch, we are still able to achieve some major changes on campus while doing so in a stable, collaborative manner. For instance, our new Strategic Plan includes a major shift in service learning as a component of the academic life of our students and faculty.

We have also totally revamped our advising and academic support services structure, all with openness and broad-based approval on campus. A year ago, the Committee sent out an email to the campus community asking people to stop spending. The result was huge — we were able to save 1.7 million dollars. We are doing the same thing this spring semester and hope for similar results. Again, transparency, openness, and honesty are the foundations of our credibility and any true progress we wish to achieve.

In summary, again recalling the principles of Horace Mann, I see our mutual interests best served when we stay grounded on the following points:

- How can we ensure student access and opportunity as public institutions? That is the heart of our mission; let us not forget that the people at the bottom of the ladder are the first to drop off.
- How can we continue our roles as the champions of democratic discourse and the engines of economic vitality?
- How do we maintain the quality of our student’s educational experience — the instruction the faculty delivers each day?
• How do we protect our faculty lines without sacrificing the needs of our students or the viability of our institutions?

• How can we tell our story so that taxpayers, legislators, and others understand the fundamental importance of public higher education in this country? I am not so sure we are doing an effective job!

These are trying times, unique in our lifetimes, well beyond our previous experiences. But we are demonstrating in Connecticut that we can find a way to get through when we are willing to put common values and our students first. There are signs that our national economy is turning around.

We are inspired by the knowledge that the work that faculty does — educating the citizens of this great democracy and the workforce of tomorrow’s Connecticut economy — is vital to the future of this country. I look forward to today’s panel discussion and your questions. Thank you.