

April 17, 2024

To the Chair and Members of the Board of Trustees:

Good morning. Thank you for permitting public comment. My name is Clare Costley King'oo. I am the Head of the English Department in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) and a proud member of the AAUP at UConn. Faculty, staff, and graduate employees from my department have accompanied me to this meeting.

I am here this morning to convey an important message: we're struggling.

I first joined UConn as an Assistant Professor in the Fall of 2005. At that time, there was excitement in the air. Student enrollments were on the rise and we were able to make new hires to keep pace with the increasing undergraduate numbers. Unfortunately, over the past decade, we have encountered a very different scenario. Although the undergraduate population has continued to surge at UConn, academic departments like mine have faced ever more draconian budget cuts. The result of this economic pressure has been a dramatic increase in instructional and administrative workload for the labor force—faculty, staff, and graduate students. And now we face the daunting task of enacting further cuts (of up to 19.1% in CLAS) while at the same time implementing a University-wide strategic plan that emphasizes growth in both teaching capacity and research productivity. As we head into this massive rescission, I am deeply concerned about the health and wellbeing of UConn's workforce.

Indeed, I have already noticed a worrying decline in the health of English Department personnel. We employ just under seventy full-time faculty members who teach across all five of UConn's undergraduate campuses. In the past two years alone, eight of these faculty members have needed to take lengthy medical leaves—three for cancer surgery and treatment, two for mental health crises, one for emergency heart surgery, one for a wrist injury, and one for a traumatic brain injury (the latter after the individual was hit by a car while crossing Route 195 on the Storrs campus). Additionally, in the past couple of weeks, one further full-time colleague has told me of a cancer diagnosis, another has spoken of the onset of an auto-immune disease, and a third has become so ill that he has been admitted to hospital: he plans to teach from his hospital bed until the end of the semester as medical staff try to figure out what is wrong (this kind of dedication to students is not unusual among the English faculty).

It strikes me as a major problem when over 15% of my department's full-time faculty members encounter significant health issues within a two-year period. When I look to the future and see another round of mandated budget cuts coming our way, I am anxious about the consequences for the people who give their all to ensure that UConn remains successful. The proposed cuts will only make already heavy workloads even more ponderous. I fear that the wellbeing of the labor force will continue to decline.

The Board of Trustees is, as I understand it, tasked with protecting the resources of the institution as well as determining general University policy. With these responsibilities in mind, I suggest that you may want to keep track of how burnout, stress, and increased workloads are jeopardizing the health and wellbeing of UConn's employees. Would you consider requiring the administration to assess, on a regular basis, how faculty, staff, and graduate students are doing?

Thank you for listening,

Clare Costley King'oo
Associate Professor and Head, English Department