

CSCU Board of Regents

AGENDA - SPECIAL MEETING

8:30 a.m., Wednesday, April 24, 2024

Conducted Via Webex and Live Streamed at

<https://youtube.com/live/xlsBCTFIJEk>

1. Call to Order, Roll Call & Declaration of Quorum
2. Adoption of Agenda
3. Action Item
 - Charter Oak State College Equitable Access Program Fee
Presentation – Dr. David Ferreira, Provost, Charter Oak State College
4. Executive Session Anticipated
5. Adjourn

Please note: There is no invitation for public comment at Special Meetings of the Board of Regents.

CSCU Board of Regents

CT BOARD OF REGENTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

RESOLUTION

Concerning

CHARTER OAK STATE COLLEGE EQUITABLE ACCESS PROGRAM FEE

April 24, 2024

- WHEREAS, The BOR in accordance with Connecticut General Statutes § 10a-143(e), shall fix fees at Charter Oak State College (“Charter Oak”) and shall fix fees for such other purposes as the BOR deems necessary; and
- WHEREAS, The BOR recognizes the importance of access and affordability in higher education and the need for programs that reduce financial burdens on all students; and
- WHEREAS, Charter Oak participated in a systemwide Request for Proposal (RFP) process initiated in the spring semester of 2023, aimed at exploring cost-effective solutions for course materials; and
- WHEREAS, This endeavor resulted in the selection of a vendor and establishment of an equitable access program, designed to provide students at Charter Oak with required textbooks and course materials at a fixed per credit fee, thereby enhancing student success, enrollment, and retention, with provisions for students to opt-out each semester if they choose; now, therefore, be it
- RESOLVED, That the BOR approves the addition of an Equitable Access Program Fee (“Fee”), not to exceed \$18.75 per credit, to be included in the FY2025 tuition and fee schedule at Charter Oak for students participating in the equitable access program, provided that students have the ability to opt out of the program and not be charged the Fee; and be it further
- RESOLVED, That the BOR charges Charter Oak leadership to proactively advise students about the opt-out option and ensure the availability of information to support informed decision-making by students each semester; and be it further

BOR RESOLUTION

CHARTER OAK STATE COLLEGE - EQUITABLE ACCESS PROGRAM FEE

Page 2

RESOLVED, That Charter Oak shall submit a report to the BOR by the end of both the Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 semesters. This report must include detailed statistics on the opt-out rates as well as an analysis of the overall performance and reception of the Equitable Access Program; and be it further

RESOLVED, That any adjustments to the Fee shall require BOR approval.

A True Copy:

Pamela A. Heleen, Secretary
Board of Regents for Higher Education

ITEM

Approval of an Equitable Access Program Fee to be included in Charter Oak State College's Tuition and Fee Schedule.

BACKGROUND

In alignment with ongoing efforts to enhance higher education affordability, particularly for students from low to moderate income families, the concept of inclusive access and equitable access programs was introduced. These programs are designed to reduce the financial burden on students by incorporating the cost of course materials into tuition and fees, thereby allowing these costs to be covered through federal grants and loans. This initiative, which gained traction during the Obama-Biden administration, has been adopted by over 1,900 colleges and universities across the United States, providing a unified and cost-effective approach to accessing required course materials.

As previously reported to the Board of Regents ("BOR"), in the spring of 2023, Connecticut State Colleges and Universities ("CSCU") initiated a Request for Proposal process to explore cost-effective solutions for course materials across five of its institutions. The process culminated in the selection of Barnes & Noble's equitable access program, First Day Complete (the "Program"), which proposed a fixed rate of \$18.75 per credit for all required textbooks and course materials, including shipping costs where applicable. The Program, by ensuring immediate access to materials, aims to enhance student success and allows integration with financial aid options.

At the March 21, 2024, the BOR voted down the proposal for adding an equitable access program fee to the tuition and fee schedules of the participating CSCU institutions but passed a motion to reconsider the matter at a later date.

Following the BOR's decision, the leadership of the four state universities decided to forgo the implementation of the equitable access program for the upcoming fall semester, citing concerns about the timeline for a smooth transition process. In contrast, Charter Oak State College ("Charter Oak") expressed a continued interest in pursuing BOR approval for an equitable access program fee to be added to their tuition and fee schedule. Given Charter Oak's unique structure and the accelerated nature of its courses, the institution is well-positioned to implement the program within the available timeframe.

Charter Oak has highlighted several key advantages of implementing such a program:

- **Enhanced Student Readiness and Success:** Immediate access to required course materials on the first day of classes can significantly improve student preparedness and academic outcomes. Immediate access is especially important in courses offered in an accelerated nature. At Charter Oak, over ninety percent (90%) of the courses are in 8-week or less format. Currently, students that require a financial aid voucher can take until week three of the course to receive the necessary funds to purchase the course materials. When students cannot obtain course materials until week three of an accelerated course, it makes it incredibly difficult to successfully pass the course. Research has shown that equitable access at four-year institutions significantly boosts course completion rates for students aged 25 and older. Eighty-six percent (86%) of Charter Oak students in this age group could benefit from the Program.

- Competitive Standing: Many of Charter Oak's competitors already offer similar inclusive/equitable access programs. Without such an offering, Charter Oak risks falling behind, potentially affecting its appeal to prospective students. For example, Post University Online covers course materials at a rate of \$90.00 per course. University of Maryland Global campus advertises that students can complete most undergraduate degrees without purchasing textbooks. As an institution where the market is the adult working professional population, an equitable access program can assist Charter Oak advertising this advantage. Adult working professional college students have busy lives and prefer the convenient nature of an equitable access program while still providing students that wish to research the cost of their course materials to see if they can obtain a better price an opt-out option. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of Charter Oak students work full-time while also enrolled in classes (average of 8 credits per semester).
- Cost Savings. Charter Oak analysis of current course materials cost as compared to the rate provided under the Program would result in an over twenty percent (20%) savings for our students. In addition to the savings on the materials themselves, students would also now have shipping included in the rate. Currently, students can typically expect to spend around \$8-20 for shipping costs on physical textbooks (and upwards of \$200 in priority shipping scenarios). Due to the online nature of Charter Oak, its courses tend to require online software via access codes in addition to the electronic or physical textbook. That is the main reason why only five percent (5%) of Charter Oak courses use Open Educational Resources. Also, the need for online software via access codes results in non-STEM course materials that bring the total cost of course materials well above the negotiated per credit fee. In short, Charter Oak students in all majors would see significant savings under the Program.

Charter Oak State College Socialization Efforts

- Faculty: Engagement with Charter Oak's faculty governance, encompassing all academic departments and the academic council (faculty senate), yielded positive feedback regarding the proposed equitable access program. Faculty members shared stories of students struggling to afford textbooks and endorsed the Program as a means to alleviate these challenges. They recognized the direct correlation between access to required materials from day one and improved student success rates, especially in courses with high textbook and software costs.
- Students: To ensure socialization to the student population, discussions were held with members of the Student Government Association at Charter Oak ("SGA"). Members of the SGA, having a pivotal role in representing student interests and welfare, provided insights based on their experience and historical initiatives to support students facing financial challenges in acquiring textbooks.

The SGA has been working to address textbook affordability issues by providing funding to students with emergency textbook costs who cannot otherwise afford their required course materials. Those members expressed strong support for the Program, recognizing its potential to systematically address the barriers to textbook access on a larger scale and allow for the SGA to utilize its funds for other student support purposes.

Key points of support and recommendations from Charter Oak's SGA members include:

- Cost Savings: Students highlighted the significant financial relief the Equitable Access Program would bring, particularly by eliminating shipping costs associated with physical textbooks, which can range between \$8 to \$20 per class.
- Immediate Access to Materials: Reflecting on their emergency funding program, the SGA underscored the critical importance of ensuring students have access to required course materials from the first day of classes, a cornerstone of the Program.
- Flexibility and Choice: Students appreciated the Program's flexible structure, allowing students to opt-out or choose to purchase textbooks post-rental, catering to diverse student needs and preferences.
- Need for Clear Communication: Emphasizing the need for transparency, the students recommended robust communication and advising strategies to ensure students are well-informed about their participation options in the program.
- Expansion Potential: Students also suggested that the Program's success at Charter Oak could serve as a model for expansion across other CSU institutions, potentially benefiting a broader student demographic.

The discussions with the members of SGA not only demonstrated strong support for the Program but also highlighted their proactive role in fostering an educational environment that prioritizes accessibility and success for all students at Charter Oak. Their insights and recommendations are invaluable to the Program's implementation strategy, ensuring it aligns with student needs and enhances the overall educational experience at Charter Oak and leadership is committed to incorporating these student-led insights into the planning and rollout of the Program.

Contractual Agreement with Barnes & Noble

Charter Oak is currently finalizing a contract with Barnes & Noble to implement the Program. The terms of this relationship are designed to ensure long-term stability and effectiveness of the Program, with key provisions including:

- Contract Term: The term of the contract set to begin as soon as possible, extending for a period of five (5) years.
- Renewal Options: The contract includes five (5) options to renew the contract term for a period of one (1) year each.
- Pricing Stability: The price per credit under the Program (\$18.75) will remain stable for no less than two (2) years. This commitment to pricing stability is crucial for financial planning and affordability for students. A comprehensive review of course material adoptions and the Program's performance at Charter Oak may occur following the first full year of Program implementation. Any proposed modifications to the per credit fee will require approval from the BOR, ensuring oversight and accountability.

In the event Charter Oak no longer desires to provide the Program to its students, the contract includes a termination for convenience provision. This provision allows Charter Oak to terminate the contract by providing Barnes & Noble with one hundred eighty (180) days' prior written notice.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Board of Regents approves the addition of an Equitable Access Program Fee (“Fee”), in an amount not to exceed \$18.75 per credit, to the FY2025 tuition and fee schedule of Charter Oak State College, provided that students have the ability to opt out of the program and not be charged the Fee. Upon approval of the Fee, Charter Oak shall submit a report to the BOR by the end of both the Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 semesters. This report will include detailed statistics on the opt-out rates as well as an analysis of the overall performance and reception of the Program.