

Daily

Opinion

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Editorial

ANALYZING UCONN'S REGIONAL CAMPUS DEVELOPMENT PLAN, PART 1

On Feb. 25, the University of Connecticut's Board of Trustees began new considerations of development plans for the each of the four UConn branch campuses, according to The Daily Campus. As part of the 10-year Strategic Plan, originally laid down in the spring of 2024, the University is interested in "setting the [branch] campuses on a path to be recognized as destinations in their own right," according to UConn Today. This path, if accepted by the board, would entail large-scale growth and specialization for each campus. The Editorial Board examines these plans as an important look into the university's current "psychology." More than just financial accounting or construction schedules, the development of the branch campuses is equally a project of defining the way UConn serves its community. With a question of such gravity, it is crucial that students must be aware of this and find their own place in the process.

The 106-page report originally brought to the board begins by laying out certain key goals and pressures which are pushing this process forward. The former includes student success, ranking improvement and research excellence. The latter refers to broad demographic constraints on recruitment, new competition for students and resource strain coming from ongoing budget cuts within the university. Within Connecticut, the population of high-school students is declining, and other options for low-cost higher education are becoming more popular. Although UConn consistently enrolls record-breaking class sizes to Storrs each year, this report carries a distinct sense of anxiety about the continued ability of branch campuses to recruit and maintain economic stability.

The report continues by outlining the proposed "identities" of each campus, based on the regional niche they're suited for. Broadly, Hartford is for government and insurance; Waterbury is for healthcare; Avery Point is for ocean sciences and maritime industries; Stamford is for finance and artificial intelligence. Instead of serving as two-year pipelines to Storrs, these campuses will be embedded in industry and directly move students into those specialties.

On its head, it is difficult to confidently analyze or critique the broad vision presented here. There are questions concerning the validity of the vision itself, but also whether UConn will be able to execute it well. While we look toward the ideal version presented, it is important to recognize the unstable economic situation the university currently finds itself in.

To start with analyzing the project as theory, in certain parts it seems promising. For example, the Editorial Board has praised the focus on giving back to Indigenous communities that is present within the Avery Point development plan. Similarly, the goal of increasing partnerships between UConn and local community or CSCU system colleges is important to ensure that this university continues to stay accessible to a diverse range of students within the state.

Yet, other facts seem to contradict these parts. Continuing to focus on Avery Point for example, the university markets around indigenous-related programs and ocean sciences but doesn't mention how it pushes workers and researchers from Avery Point into harmful industries. Not until page 39 is there mention of the centrality of the military industrial complex to its worker development programs.



UConn's branch campus located in Waterbury Conn. The campus instructs around 1,000 students per semester. PHOTO COURTESY OF @UCONNWATERBURY ON INSTAGRAM

So, what is going to be the real focus of Avery Point? Sustainability research and community development, or providing labor for General Dynamic and Electric Boat? We have yet to see who this development will serve in reality, but given UConn's track record of industry connections, there exists room for skepticism. This leaves room to question the plans for other branch campuses. For example, given Stamford's focus on AI, an incredibly extractive industry nationwide, how will

this development serve to benefit its broader community?

The other major area of concern with the plan in its ideal form are university values. Throughout the report, there is significant focus on the instrumentalization of a UConn degree. As previously referenced, the development of each campus is defined specifically by what industries it intends to feed students into. While it is important to provide students with the resources that they need to succeed after graduation, an approach that solely focuses on the employment outcomes leaves much to be desired. Historically, universities are meant to be institutes that educate the entire person, cultivating social, moral and intellectual growth in addition to field-specific expertise. UConn has a mission statement that outlines certain values it hopes to instill in its students, as they go on to become community members. This is its responsibility as a land-grant university.

As universities develop to fit changing economic conditions, it is understandable why some would want more guaranteed skills to be able to secure employment after graduation. Economically, the viability of a college degree is more unstable than ever, with rising tuition prices and

tighter job markets nationwide.

However, when universities only focus on the career outcomes of their students, there is something crucial lost in the academic character of the community. Workplace readiness cannot replace critical thinking, intellectual curiosity or empathy. Since the branch campuses are currently unable to serve as a home for students to fully obtain an education, pushing these places to focus on specialization will mean that there is not a healthy academic environment in place to serve as a base for all students. Especially when these students are potentially being funneled into working for ethically dubious corporations, such as military contractors or AI companies, this raises valid questions about whether UConn is fulfilling its social and moral mission as a place of learning.

The branch campuses deserve to be built into their own independently valid options for prospective students to attend. This would present a multitude of benefits for the university community and help UConn better serve all students who live across Connecticut. However, the development path for each of these campuses should be reconsidered and align with the basic stated values of the university.



UConn's branch campus located in Hartford Conn. The campus instructs around 2,000 students per semester. PHOTO COURTESY OF @UCONNHARTFORD ON INSTAGRAM