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Board of trustees met with frustration at public comment

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Multiple groups composed of students, faculty and a state representative raised wide-ranging concerns during public comment at Wednesday's University of Connecticut Board of Trustees meeting.

Issues which motivated various groups to brave the snow Wednesday morning included UConn's stance on U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the need for a disability cultural center, the relocation of Windham Tech and the golf practice facility proposed for UConn men's golf team.

The two largest groups each included about 15 student advocates who organized calls for UConn to take a stronger stance against ICE and establish a disability cultural center that the advocates said was unanimously supported by a University Student Government (USG) resolution on Feb. 11.

Problems disabled students experience at UConn that could be addressed by a disability cultural center was presented by two students on behalf of a group assembled in front of the trustees. Mia Giancola, a sixth-semester social work and sociology student, and Gabriella DiSalvo, an eighth-semester student with an individualized major of disability studies in media and food culture, led the comment.

"We will focus on disability pride, authentic representation, community, mentorship and advocacy," Giancola said about the center. "Even though this is just a proposal, students have emailed me every day to say how grateful they are, that they feel seen."

Giancola said 89% of students supported the center in a needs assessment survey with 904 responses.

DiSalvo shared a story about when she fell during the winter storm and couldn't find accessible transportation to urgent care that accommodated her wheelchair after her leg started swelling.

"I instantly started to panic as I knew it would be almost impossible for me to get to urgent care since UConn [Accessible Van Service] doesn't run on snow days and the sidewalks were not shoveled enough yet for me to roll there myself," DiSalvo said, adding that her mom ended up being able to find an accessible transportation service to urgent care. "If there was a disability cultural center ... like the one we're proposing, all of this stress and panic would have been avoided."

After DiSalvo's presentation, many of the trustees applauded.

The next group to present was led by sixth-semester political science and Spanish student Luca Kabir Khanna. The group directly addressed the trustees about a petition with over 2,000 signatures calling for them to clarify UConn's policies to protect students against ICE.

"All of you, whether you're in attendance of this meeting or not, in your billions of dollars that you're worth, are failing in almost every capacity of your position," Khanna said, adding how the trustees can change that by adopting 10 demands to ensure the safety of students from ICE.

Two of those 10 demands included not releasing any information on the UConn community unless there's a judicially imposed warrant and to remove the UConn Police Department as a required party in any UConn responses to ICE.

The next group of presenters was led by Rodney Alexander Jr., a Windham councilmember and vice president of the Windham/Willimantic National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who spoke about his opposition to the relocation of Windham Tech and his concerns over Windham Tech being concerned for Mansfield.

"Removing Windham Tech from Willimantic, Connecticut, adds another eyesore to our city," Alexander said, mentioning how Hartford Healthcare had already closed facilities in the town. "Of the 500 students who are there — a good majority of them come from Willimantic — they can actually walk to the school. If it's approved to be in Mansfield, now we're looking at transportation, and this is another headache."

Next, Alexander brought up State Rep. Susan Johnson, who has represented Windham in the Connecticut General Assembly since 2009, to comment on the need to keep Windham Tech in the town.

"We have a very low-income population; in fact, we are the lowest income region in the state of Connecticut," Johnson said. "Taking [Windham Tech] away ... would be very, very hard on the low-income population where parents work two or three jobs."

The last topic covered during public comment involved residents of Mansfield raising concerns about how they could be impacted by the proposal for a golf practice facility on 986 Storrs Road.

Mansfield resident Laura Tordenti said she was a 1983 UConn graduate from the Neag School of Education and asked the trustees to pause any advancement of the golf facility until a full assessment of the environmental impact is conducted and donor influence is addressed.

"I've worked on college campuses my entire career, but good planning requires public trust and right now that trust is strained," Tordenti said, adding that the environmental review process doesn't appear transparent to the public. "Neighbors deserve clear information about stormwater management, tree removal, destruction of wildlife, lighting, noise and long-term land use implications before decisions move forward."

The public comment period lasted about an hour and caused the meeting to run behind schedule as the board can limit public comment to 30 minutes in the University By-Laws, according to the meeting agenda. After public comment, the board unanimously approved 27 consent agendas, which included budgets for projects like paving Parking Lot L and a replacement generator for Gampel Pavilion, in a single vote.

While the trustees didn't directly address any of the topics discussed in the public comment, UConn President Radenka Maric brought up enrollment as a different concern students have during her President's report.

"Students ask, 'Is increasing the number of students the right way to go?' and I want to answer that question," Maric said. "We are a land grant university, and we are responsible for giving opportunity of access to the brightest and best of this state."

After the President's report, the strategic assessment of regional campuses was presented by Interim Provost Pamir Alpay, who highlighted the need to identify the different strengths of the regional campuses and surrounding college competitors.

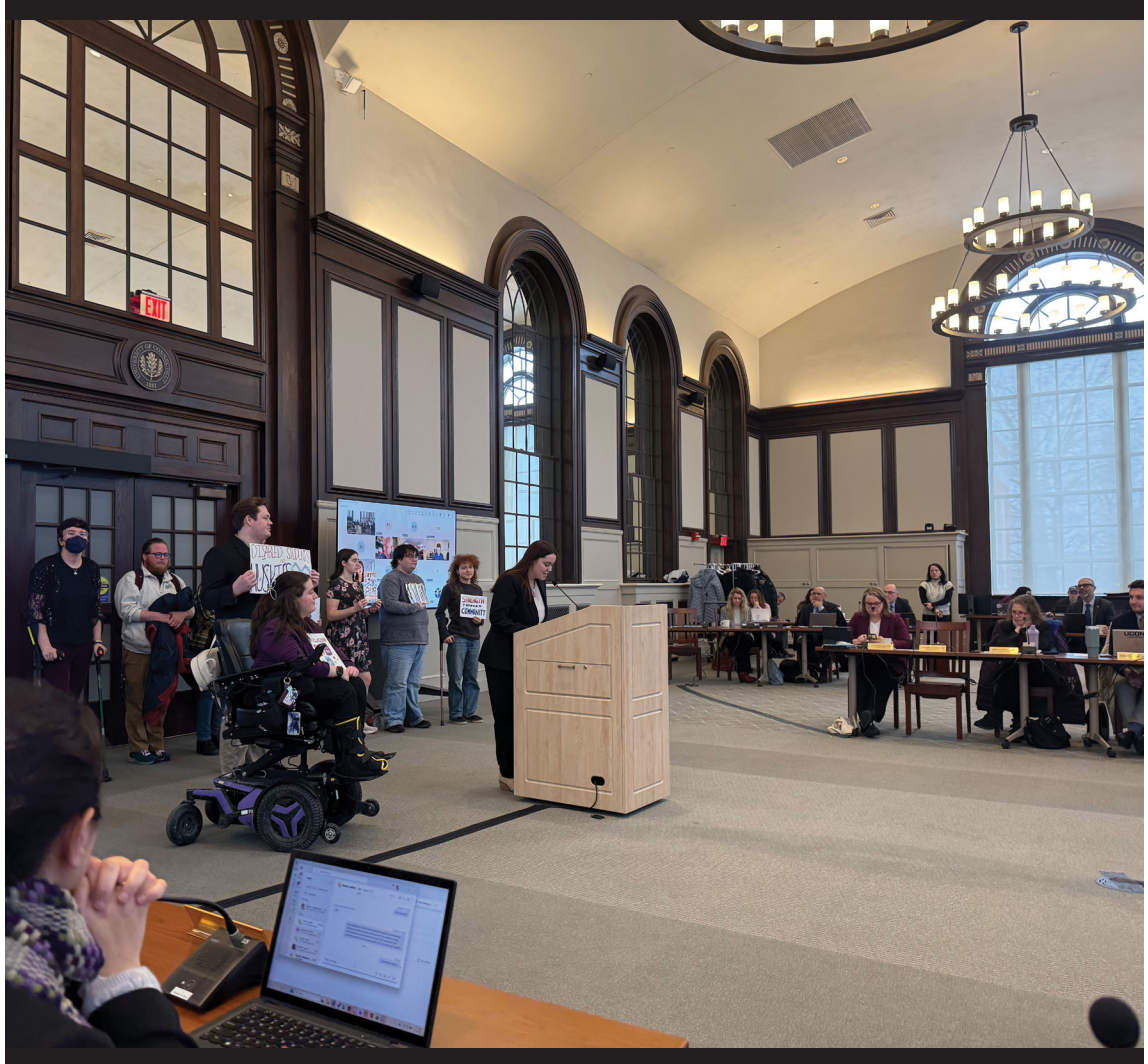
Before adjourning and going into Executive Session, the trustees heard two last reports. The first was the University Senate report given by the Senate Executive Committee Chair Robert Day, who spoke about the importance of co-governance and communication between the trustees and University Senate.

CEO of UConn Health Andrew Agwunobi presented the final report for UConn Health regarding the upcoming integration of Waterbury Health after UConn purchased the hospital.



Students holding signs during the board of trustees meeting on Wednesday, Feb. 25. During the meeting, a group addressed the trustees about a petition calling for them to clarify UConn's policies to protect students against U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN GUINAN, STAFF WRITER FOR THE DAILY CAMPUS



A presenter speaks during the University of Connecticut's Board of Trustees meeting on Wednesday, Feb. 25. Several issues were addressed during the meeting, including UConn's stance on U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), a disability cultural center, the relocation of Windham Tech and a new golf practice facility.

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