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University recognized as Fulbright producer

By Brianna Wallen
News Editor

Building on the momentum of its prestigious Carnegie R2 classification, the university has achieved another notable honor: being recognized as one of the top producers of Fulbright U.S. Scholars for the 2024–25 academic year.

Awarded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, this recognition places the institution among an exclusive group of 46 institutions nationwide.

"It is really our mission to provide a transformative education experience for a diverse community," Interim President Dwayne Smith said.

As the second-highest producer of Fulbright Scholars in Connecticut, the university continues to strengthen its role as a trailblazer in promoting global academic exchange and research.

Smith said that this achievement reflects the institution's initiative of supporting its students and their diverse identities.

"We have scholars that come from all types of backgrounds, but we focus on how to provide that experience that makes a difference in their lives," Smith said.

Smith that the university's drive and particular mission are key to its continued recognition and success.

The Fulbright Program is recognized as one of the most esteemed international exchange initiatives globally. It extends to more than 160 countries, facilitating international collaboration and advancing academic excellence across educational institutions.

The university has a strong history of producing Fulbright awardees, with this year marking another chapter to that legacy.

According to the university's website, Joyce Taylor, an assistant professor in the Department of Social Work and Jonathan Weinbaum, a biology professor, were recognized as Fulbright specialists who will travel abroad to share their expertise.

The university was also honored with four Fulbright placements. Dr. Kelly Mabry, a communication disorders professor, Dr. Radu Bogdan Zamfir, Director of the Center for Educational and Assistive Technology and Dr. Amy Smoyer, an Associate Professor of Social Work, are currently working in Croatia, Romania and Spain.

Smith, who is a Fulbright Scholar himself, as he was honored in 2013, said it is crucial to showcase these opportunities.

"I thought it was essential that we promote that among our scholars," Smith said. "So, it's not just our faculty that are going to have this tremendous opportunity, but it's going to be our scholars as well."

While the last Fulbright student the university had was in 2019, Smith said that they have one semi-finalist scholar.

Along with the legacy of Fulbright Scholars, Smith said the university has a long-standing commitment of providing research opportunities to diverse learners. These achievements can help to enhance the education of current students and appeal to prospective students.

"These recognitions make us an incision that's valuable in higher education in Connecticut and beyond, but it's also attractive to individuals who want to have an institution that's rooted in teaching and learning but also has research as its focus," Smith said.

Smith said he hopes that these students, or what he refers to them as, scholars, continue to take advantage of these research opportunities to make a difference in the world.

"The research aspect is important because there are all these different problems that confront our society and the scientists are there to try to help resolve it, and I consider our scholars as scientists as well," Smith said.

By embracing these recognitions, Smith said that the university is not only celebrating its achievements but also reinforcing its commitment to excellence in education.

"It is part of who we are, and for us to embrace that, that means our scholars are embracing that," Smith said. "So, the R2 achievement, studying abroad and Fulbright, is indicative of what we promote."

Smith said that these achievements are a testament that institutions can excel both academically and socially.

"We are a school that's diverse, we believe in social justice, we believe in equity and we believe in inclusion, but we also are this academic powerhouse," Smith said.



PHOTO | BRIANNA WALLEN

Interim President Dwayne Smith stands in his office in Englemen Hall on Feb. 26.

Dunkin' cuts student workers' hours

By Victoria Cruz
Contributor

Since last semester, student employees at the on-campus Dunkin' location have faced significant reductions in their work hours. This issue raises concern among students about the scheduling practices of Sodexo, the managing company responsible for executing the food services program here on campus.

Student employees returned from winter break to find their hours had been drastically reduced with no prior notice. Healthcare studies major Kenese Spence, a sophomore, was one of these students.

"The employees came back the first day, walked in and we were told our hours were cut," Spence said. "I had 18 hours last semester and now I have seven hours."

She also raised concerns about understaffing. Spence said that on average only two students are working during business hours.

Addtionally, only one student is responsible for the closing and opening shifts.

Graphic design major Nichole Stuart, a sophomore, said her hours were cut from 20 to three hours without any notice.

"My supervisor was upset because I didn't get notice; the union workers are having issues too," Stuart said. "We tell upper management about issues and how I have to work by myself sometimes."

Healthcare studies major Khabyra Alston Kennie, a sophomore, and former Dunkin' employee, said the same happened to her.

"I quit because towards the end of my time they cut my hours, I was working 14 hours every week, and then they cut my hours from 14 to four," Kennie said. "They didn't tell me or anyone, they just posted a new schedule and I found out through word of mouth. Everyone's hours got cut."



PHOTO | VICTORIA CRUZ

Students stand in Dunkin's line waiting to be served on Feb 27.

Students are reporting long wait times of 30–45 minutes that stem from understaffing. Spence mentioned that student employees have raised concerns to Sodexo.

"Every time we bring it up, Sodexo says it's being worked on, but where is the solution?" Spence said. "Students complain a lot about the line being long."

Sodexo handles the hiring and scheduling of Dunkin'.

According to its contract with the university, Sodexo requires approximately 20% of its workforce to be student employees.

Robert DeMezzo, Senior Director of Conferences, Events and Student Affairs Auxiliaries, acknowledged that student concerns were being raised at the beginning of the semester and were brought up with Sodexo's upper management.

"I heard it was short notice so I asked Sodexo, is it true students were coming back to find out they don't have hours? I'll be honest I cannot confirm what students experience but I do know that hours were given to students after that conversation, and they said they were not done with their scheduling," DeMezzo said. "Students were saying things that Sodexo was not saying, but ultimately Sodexo is the schedule keeper."

Sodexo must operate within the financial model set by the university

This includes balancing staffing levels based on available funding that comes from student meal plans.

The office offered to select student employees the opportunity to work in different departments for those who voiced their concerns.

This was following Sodexo's lack of action after questioning from student workers and university officials.

As student workers continue to navigate these changes, concerns remain about scheduling transparency, employee communication and the broader impact on student employment opportunities on campus under Sodexo.

"Dear colleague" letter raises concern

By Jay'Mi Vazquez
Managing Editor

The university addressed concerns following a recent letter issued by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, which may have significant implications for the institution's diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

The letter, issued on Feb. 14, outlined a broader application of the U.S. Supreme Court's June 2023 decision in "Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard," ruling that affirmative action in college admissions is unconstitutional.

"The content of the letter is understandably concerning, as it signals potential changes in how federal authorities will approach race-based policies in higher education and campus life," Interim President Dwayne Smith said.

Smith acknowledged the anxiety the letter has caused within the university community via email.

The letter indicates that federal institutions, including universities, will be prohibited from using race in various decisions, including hiring, promotions, financial aid, housing and even graduation ceremonies.

This expansion of the court's ruling could affect not only diversity programs but also federal funding for institutions, creating uncertainty about how universities across the country will adapt.

However, Smith emphasized that federal civil rights laws, such as Title IX, Title VII and Title VI, remain intact and enforceable, providing important protections for non-discrimination.

He also pointed out that Connecticut state law offers additional safeguards.

"While we must navigate these federal shifts, it's important to note that the statutory framework governing non-discrimination has not been repealed," he said.

Smith reaffirmed the university's commitment to maintaining its long-standing dedication to access, equity and social justice.

The universities enrollment demographics reflect this commitment, with 53% of undergraduates identifying as students of color, 49% as first-generation and 43% as Pell Grant eligible.

"We will continue to uphold our mission to provide opportunities to scholars, regardless of their background. Our pursuit of social justice and service for the public good remains at the heart of what we do," Smith added.

As the situation evolves, the university, alongside other institutions in the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system, will continue to monitor the legal landscape and collaborate with legal counsel and state authorities.

"We will work together to ensure compliance with federal regulations while preserving the impact of our social justice-driven mission," Smith said.

The President's Leadership Team said that they are committed to ongoing communication with the campus community, with an available internal webpage dedicated to the latest updates and provides guidance regarding the federal directives.