

Testimony of Professor Edward Marth

University of Connecticut

**A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education
March 21, 2006**

(Prefaced by comments that I knew Senator Claiborne Pell, and that he would always carry a 3x5 card in his pocket to tell any listener how many students had benefited from the Pell Grants. I said that if policy makers from President Bush on down did the same today their 3x5 cards would all have a large "F" for failure on them for letting students and the country down.)

Members of the Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to say a few words for the record.

My name is Edward Marth, and I am here representing the 1400 faculty and academic professionals at the University of Connecticut where I am the Executive Director of the American Association of University Professors Chapter. We have had an active chapter of the American Association of University Professors at UCONN since the 1930's and have been the bargaining agent since the mid 1970's.

A news report recently held that the national debt is now about \$30,000 for every man, woman, and child in the United States, and it grows by the minute as we gather here.

It is reported that we have a resilient economy, but it grows more fragile as the debt grows, since the debt is supported less by Americans than by the Chinese and others who compete with this country economically. We are dependent on oil and cheap goods from abroad. From internet services from central Asia, oil from the Middle East, tools and cars from Asia, we are a country that cannot afford to compete with the cheapest labor daily crossing the border or assembling technological goods in distant lands.

At the same time employment costs are relentlessly driven down and forty plus million people live without health care. The economic trajectory is not good for the economic bottom half of America's population, and worrisome to those of us in the middle.

The only dependable investment that society can make to insure that our future is as good as was our past, is in education. It is as true now as it was when President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act in the throes of the Civil War. Leaders then knew that the struggling country would have to have people trained in the agricultural and mechanical arts, the thrust of that milestone legislation. The storied GI Bill remade America in a transition from a war economy to the powerhouse years of the 1950s and 1960's.

Today, as the country lurches toward a debt of such magnitude that few can imagine such red ink, the government budget proposes cutting forty-two programs in the Education Department. College loan and grant programs are being cut back or eliminated, or made more expensive, a proposed reduction of nearly \$6 billion. We would spend that to eliminate one suspected terrorist cell, but instead sow economic terror on the young. The maximum Pell grant will remain at \$4,050 for the fifth year in a row, but the overall amount would be reduced by 2.3%. Loans would increase slightly, perhaps to coincide with the change in laws making it harder to declare bankruptcy for individuals, but at the same time

corporate America thumbs its nose at government levied fines and shifts pension and other obligations to the government.

This is not a picture to build optimism that this country will have the brainpower to compete in the new technological world economy, or the ability to even manage an economy rapidly slipping away from our shores.

Your commission and leaders from the editorial rooms and political forums must take note of today's version of Thomas Jefferson's "alarm bell in the night". What Jefferson wrote about an economic system that was inherently wrong in reliance on slavery but beyond his sense of correction, we have today a system rusting and rotting beneath us as growing numbers of people are denied opportunity and burdened and enslaved with debt for what is our single best hope for the future; education of the next generation, and those to come.

Debt for college is a good investment, but it is money not available for housing and health care for the newly graduated...or newly "dropped out".

We need to keep the doors open with such need based aid as necessary. Reliance on loans is an obstacle for the needy as they are debt averse and not used to borrowing for the intangible future. Democracy cannot endure when doors to opportunity are close to closed for economic reasons but perpetually open for the wealthy inheritance class.