January 24, 2019

To my fellow Board members,

I regret that I am unable to be at the board meeting today to vote on what I consider to be one of our most important responsibilities. If I were there, I would have cast an unequivocal “yes” vote on the Action Item that is on our agenda to lower tuition and to hold it flat.

With due respect, I ask that you consider the following written testimony that I submit in support of this item:

Across the nation the Great Recession brought Great Cuts to public universities. We were no exception, and public funding to the University of Hawaii was cut drastically and rapidly. Our university responded, as did so many others, by instituting large escalations in tuition. This unfortunate national trend has led to an explosion of student debt in higher education that now exceeds $1.5 trillion. Student loan debt is now the second highest consumer debt category in the nation – behind only mortgage debt!

In 2012, the University of Hawaii was running in the red and reeling from cuts to funding. At my first board meeting, we were asked to approve an aggressive 5 year tuition schedule with annual, compounding tuition hikes. It was clear that our institution was under stress. However, it was also clear that it would be easier to continuously raise tuition, than it would be to manage expenses and stabilize our finances. Our President at that time made a strong argument for the Board to approve this schedule. The student regent and I cast “no” votes. This was my introduction to the challenging financial dynamics that universities and boards across the nation are facing.

Financially stabilizing a large institution and changing long standing practices is difficult, hard work. We spent years instituting changes to move the institution in a different direction. This was slow work - it is not press-worthy, is not popular within organizations, and is largely unappreciated by the public. That is why, after more than a decade of year upon year tuition increases, when our board voted in 2017 to hold tuition flat - not many took notice.

The road to get here was challenging, but our Board was able to work with President Lassner and his team to implement measures that today may seem routine. During that time period, our Board adopted new policies to:

- require an annual review and approval of a uniform operating budget for all campuses;

- implement a quarterly financial review of approved budgets to actual financials, so that we could discuss and flag trends and issues well in advance;

- establish an operating reserve - since the majority of revenue now comes from tuition, not public funds, we needed an operating reserve to respond to the inevitable ups and downs from our revenue sources;

- require the review and approval of a 6-year capital improvement plan that prioritized capital expenditures for facilities for all campuses to encourage prioritization, promote consistency in long term facility planning, and encourage efficient bond issue strategies.
-establish a sweeping sustainability policy that among other things, set targets to reduce energy consumption, as energy is one of the largest controllable expenses at campuses.

-implement an Integrated Academic & Facilities policy, which although is still in its infancy – set the policy direction to discourage and prevent duplication and inefficiency.

In 2012, we were in desperate times, running in the red. Today, we have an operating cash reserve and tuition has stabilized. In 2017, Moody’s affirmed the university’s Aa2 rating and moved its outlook from negative to stable. Fitch reaffirmed its AA rating and stable outlook for the university. As a result, at the end of 2017, the University, through Vice President Young’s leadership, successfully completed a revenue bond refinancing transaction that saved the university and the State more than $17 million over the next 20 years.

The battle to control tuition, lower student debt and maintain affordable higher education is a national issue. Maintaining and providing quality, affordable public higher education is critical to the future of our community. We cannot take this for granted as we have only managed to maintain accessibility for our students by our willingness to make difficult financial decisions, with repercussions that continue to be challenging today.

We cannot count on private institutions to do this for our nation for the majority of our people – I believe that public institutions must own this as their mission. I firmly believe that education is at the heart of combating income inequality, and in growing a healthy and diverse economy. We cannot afford to fail in this endeavor – few things are more important to the long term future of our nation.

Thank you for the providing me the opportunity for my testimony and position to be shared.

Sincerely,

Regent Jan Sullivan
Aloha,

The UH Hilo Student Association (UHHSA) would like to submit testimony in support of Bonnie Irwin's appointment as UH Hilo Chancellor. Please see attached document.

Mahalo,

Michael C. Taylor  
Executive Senator/ Senator-At-Large  
The University of Hawai’i at Hilo Student Association (UHHSA)

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January 28, 2019

Dear Members of the Board of Regents,

I write to you on behalf of the University of Hawaii at Hilo Student Association (UH HSA) in my role as UH HSA’s President.

On behalf of UH HSA, we would like to express our support in the recommendation of Bonnie Irwin as the next UH Hilo Chancellor. UH HSA endorses this recommendation by President David Lassner not only for Irwin’s determination to serve the students of UH Hilo, but also for the knowledge and administrative experience she has in supporting universities similar to UH Hilo.

We do hope the Board approves of Irwin’s appointment as UH Hilo Chancellor. Since having a chance to talk with the finalists, the UH HSA Senate has been excited to, once again, have someone sit in the permanent position as UH Hilo Chancellor.

Mahalo,

Victoria Taomia
President, UH Hilo Student Association (UH HSA)