

Justina Arena, Junior, Earth Science: Meteorology and Earth Science: Climate Studies,
California University of Pennsylvania

**Testimony of Justina Arena
Junior at California University of Pennsylvania
Before the Senate Democratic Policy Committee
Policy Hearing on Public Higher Education
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Chairwoman Muth, Chairwoman Williams, and members of the committee,

My name is Justina Arena. I am a junior at California University of Pennsylvania. I am double majoring in meteorology and climate studies. I'm also a campus tutor and belong to several organizations. I am a first-generation nontraditional adult learner.

My journey to Cal U was like any back road in Pennsylvania: long, winding, and bumpy. I graduated from high school in 2003, forced to take a gap year, and by summer of 2005 I was a college dropout with \$9,000 of student loan debt. It took twelve years of low paying jobs, homelessness, and juggling bills before this debt was paid off. Having a fresh start was the catalysis to returning to school.

I never considered going anywhere else besides Cal U. I live about seven minutes away, the campus is beautiful, and the class sizes are small. I finalized this decision to attend fall 2019. I did not have a plan; I just knew that I needed a change in my life. I had hit the ceiling at my job, and I had no desire to make it a long-term commitment. I honestly cannot tell you why I chose meteorology as a major. Weather was always a fascination of mine as a child, but I never considered it a career path. I was ready to do anything that was radically different.

I attended every possible pre-enrollment event on campus. I always felt welcomed and a sense of belonging with every event. I made it my purpose to bring along my family as my return to school would affect everyone in my home.

My freshman fall semester went smoothly. My freshman spring semester, however, was a disaster. I was going through some personal issues when the covid-19 pandemic started to get serious. Our spring break was expanded an extra week before everything went online. It was a rocky 6 weeks with almost all my classes strictly asynchronous. I barely made it through. I had hoped we would be returning to campus the following semester.

The first full online semester, I had three classes at Cal U, and one in Clarion. I took College Physics I at Clarion, which Clarion had little time to prepare. This course and lab were asynchronous, and it was plagued with problems at first. This was no fault of any party. However, I do not learn well with asynchronous classes, and I stop watching the prerecorded lectures by week nine.

Spring semester was slightly better. Cal U offered a hybrid method where students could attend in person classes as the professor allowed it. I took College Physics II at Clarion once again. This course was synchronous, and the lab was still asynchronous. I found this course went well.

Online learning is hard enough for me, but I benefited from the live lecture. I would have enjoyed this course more in person though. There was nothing I can say that was terrible, but trying to visualize three-dimensional physics problems on a Zoom whiteboard proved very difficult. Our labs consisted of online simulations and at-home experiments that were not always possible. There will be a slight learning gap that I will have to catch up in future classes.

Quite frankly, I hate online learning — ironic, considering I'm taking three classes over summer. It clashes with my learning style, and I do not have the capability to stay focused. I am a mother to a rambunctious nine-year-old who is enrolled in cyber school for the school year. I have far too many distractions in my home. I will break it down further.

Asynchronous courses are great for nontraditional students due to their flexibility. Courses that work well are introductory classes that do not require a lecture and are not math intensive. Writing intensive courses could also be included. However, this requires communication from both the student and professor, which is not always successful. It also takes a motivated student to take initiative. This is not me. I will procrastinate until the very last minute. I am not responsible enough for asynchronous courses.

So, what about synchronous courses? For the most part, I find synchronous mimics in person learning decently. A fair number of courses can excel in this environment, and it also depends on the professor. However, there are no real advantages. Almost all students turn their cameras off; I know I did for almost all my spring classes. This caused me to be highly distracted with my phone or the internet.

Zoom greatly stifles interactions between students and professors. No one wants to be the first to unmute themselves to volunteer information. It feels like an intrusion. I often have something minor that can be resolved in the five-to-ten-minute transition between classes. By the time I schedule for office hours, I deem it unimportant. I have expressed this to a few professors who completely understand.

We are coming out of this pandemic, hopefully back to in person learning, in the fall. I am fully vaccinated and ready. I refuse to do another semester online. I'm not the only one. Many of my peers have expressed the same. We need real human interactions. I need to see smiles, not black Zoom screens.

This brings us to the topic at hand, the integration. I'll be honest, I know very little about this. The student body received very basic information. The full report was sent the week before finals. I have not read the full in-depth report, nor would I want to. I can tell you; we need easily digestible information, not just a couple of emails. I took some time to look at past emails. There are supposedly 287 people from Cal U who were involved in the integration process. I know of ONE. We have no clue who is representing us. I am uninformed. I did not realize that this was ongoing process since fall 2020 until I searched through the emails.

The initial information about integration concerned me. The meteorology program is quite small, and I had planned on picking up climate studies as a second major. I was worried that with

integration, majors with a low student body count would be eliminated. I declared my second major not fully committed, in case I would not have the opportunity in the future.

I do not have any worries about my majors going hybrid or online as they are only offered at Cal. If I were in a major that was offered as a mixture or completely online, however, I would have to either switch majors or drop out. Hybrid learning is taxing on everyone involved. Professors are required to make it fair across the board otherwise it leads to an imbalance of teaching methods. Most have adapted for the pandemic but making this permanent would lead to more students taking courses strictly online. This puts added pressure for in person students, now requiring them to be more flexible.

My top priority is cost. College is unnecessarily expensive in the United States. Although Cal U and other state schools are affordable compared to other schools in Pennsylvania, many of us will have to take out student loans. Going back to school cuts significantly into my ability to maintain my finances comfortably, and I took out maximum loans to ensure that I didn't fall behind. It's not a financial decision to take likely at my age, and it's downright frightening for young adults. There is a probability that I will pay off my mortgage before my student loans. I do not think integration would reduce tuition and other costs alone, and it completely ignores the fact that Pennsylvania needs to invest more in higher education.

My final thought on the integration is that there isn't enough communication. I do not know if and how this does affect my future at Cal. I do not know what to tell upcoming students and their families that I will be meeting with during the summer. I do not know who is supposed to benefit from integration. I do not know where to voice my concerns nor do I know if they will be taken into consideration. I do not know who the stakeholders are. I do not know how the integration will make college affordable.

I'm left with more questions than answers.

Thank you.