Faculty Advisory Committee Report

To the Board of Regents for Higher Education

October 16, 2014

Presented by Stephen Adair, Chair of the FAC and Professor of Sociology, CCSU

We have arrived at a critical moment in the new merged system.

After the rocky beginning due to the turnover in leadership, President Gray has now been in office for a year and a half. Over that time, he has brought stability to the system, assembled a new leadership team and administrative staff, secured additional state support that allowed this Board to limit tuition increases to 2 percent, launched a comprehensive planning process, and just completed a speaking and listening tour across the 17 institutions in the system. As Transform CSCU 2020 moves from a list of initiatives to becoming concretized in roadmaps, action plans, system policies, and fiscal expenditures, the choices made by this Board, President Gray, the system leadership, and faculty in the coming months will have lasting consequence.

The FAC took advantage of the town halls to gather a sense of the concerns and issues of our colleagues. An FAC member or a designated representation attended each town hall and took notes that were shared, compiled and reviewed by the committee. This report today aims to capture and represent that review.

On the initial charge to the FAC given by President Kennedy and Vice President Feroe, we were asked to bring faculty concerns to the Board and to be a window for the Board into the perspective of faculty. The fulfillment of this responsibility requires candor, respect, and clarity.

1. Re-establish the distinct missions of the parts of the system.

When the new Board of Regents was proposed, perhaps the largest concern articulated in the state legislature was that the merged system might result in the conflation of our respective missions. To prevent this, the legislation required that distinct mission statements be crafted, and established two vice presidential positions to advocate for the community colleges and the state universities respectively.

This board did pass distinct mission statements, but these are now just gathering dust. The separate statements were not used in the strategic planning process in 2012, and they have neither guided nor been integrated within the initiatives in Transform. The two vice presidential positions remain, but their positions are not designated with essential functions in the organizational structure of the system office.
Having one plan, one set of initiatives, one set of metrics, and one value proposition for the system seems to bring clarity and simplicity to a very complex system, but the potential benefit of this clarity comes at a cost.

Last month, Provost Gargano reviewed the common metrics proposed in Transform. In his presentation, he indicated that some metrics would apply to the state universities and others to the community colleges or Charter Oak. Other common metrics, he stated, would be benchmarked differently by the type of institution. As a practical matter, then, the single set of metrics exists only as an abstract gloss that creates a mistaken impression that each institution is held to the same measures of accountability.

Transform includes one value proposition for the students, prospective students, parents, and the state, but this too, is more of an abstraction than an actual statement of the value the system offers. Students do not expect nor do they receive similar things from the community colleges, the state universities, and Charter Oak. The strength of the system lies in the diversity of the educational experiences we offer students and the distinct contributions each type of institution brings to Connecticut citizens. Homogenizing the value of the system into a single value proposition conceals the strength in that diversity.

If we suppose for a moment that UConn had also been merged into this system, then the problems of having one plan, one set of initiatives, one set of metrics, and one value proposition would be both more obvious and more acute.

In the town halls, many of the questions and concerns being articulated by faculty were a consequence of conflating our distinct missions into a single plan. Faculty at the state universities were concerned that most of the initiatives were aimed at the community colleges, and that the plan failed to address both the chronic problems and the aspirations that faculty have for the universities. Faculty at the community colleges often expressed concerns that their missions were being altered to serve as feeder schools for the state universities.

2. Academic Vision and Aspiration in Transform

Taken together, the 36 initiatives in Transform CSCU 2020 constitute a complex and ambitious platform for change, but it is difficult to discern an underlying academic and aspirational vision in the plan.

We believe that building faculty engagement and support for Transform will depend on establishing a clear and aspirational vision on how we can improve student learning and advance student success.

Throughout the town hall tours, President Gray has been generous and indicated that he is open to collaborating with faculty.

As part of your agenda, I have included as a supplemental document, “An Academic Imperative for Transform CSCU 2020.” Responding to an invitation from Provost Gargano, a leadership group from CSU was assembled to craft an academic vision statement to guide change for the state universities. The group consisted of the faculty senate presidents, the chairs of the curriculum committees, the AAUP
leadership and Chapter Presidents, and the CSU members of the Faculty Advisory Committee. The
document provides a list of academic priorities that we see as essential to moving the system forward.

The FAC reviewed and supported bringing this document forward to the Board. The committee,
however, chose not to endorse the document formally with a vote because there were no companion
documents from the Community Colleges or Charter Oak at this time, and because it seemed
inappropriate for community college faculty to vote on a document produced by the CSU group.
Nevertheless, we invite the Board to adopt this academic imperative as a guide for change at the state
universities.

We also encourage the faculty at the Community Colleges and Charter Oak to advance a similar vision
statement.

Whether or not the Board is willing to adopt the academic imperative, we also urge that the Board and
the administration maintain the pursuit of academic rigor, excellence, and quality as essential features
of any aspirational vision. Retention and graduate rates can easily be improved by lowering academic
standards. Although accountability is important, the signature values for Transform should be changed
from Affordability, Access, and Accountability to Affordability, Access, and Excellence.

3. System Integration

Rather than being organized by an academic vision, the core principle behind the 36 initiatives appears
to be system integration and the process of linking 17 institutions into one system.

Many functions across the institutions might become more effective and efficient by becoming more
integrated. For example, community colleges may be able to offer more opportunities for international
education through affiliations with international education programs at the state universities. Greater
information sharing within offices of sponsored research might increase opportunities for external
grants and encourage inter-campus collaborations.

System integration of functions, however, might also simply add additional levels of bureaucratic
oversight, administration, and cost without any corresponding added service or value.

System integration of functions across campuses may also have the unintended consequence of making
system administration stodgy, bureaucratic, and resistant to change. That is, if centralized procedures
are institutionalized across campuses, then possibilities for further change would grow increasingly
difficult because all the institutions would be dependent on the same structured process.

For each of the 36 initiatives in Transform, the integration of some function at the system level should
be treated as a question rather than as an assumption, and deliberation on the question should be
guided by careful needs assessment data and cost-benefit considerations.

Arguably the deepest antagonism revealed in the town halls between the interests of faculty and the
vision included in Transform concerned the possibility of integrating courses and curricula across
campuses. The idea that students enrolled at one institution would be able to take courses at any
institution, the offering of a single course across multiple campuses through “genius” classrooms, and the proposal for a common catalog presume inter-campus agreements on course content, common sequencing of prerequisites and parallel program design across campuses.

The strength of the current transfer and articulation policy is that it preserves local control of curricula while clarifying student choices and reducing the likelihood that students will accumulate unnecessary credits when students move from the community colleges to the universities.

The overwhelming consensus in research on improving retention and graduation rates in higher education emphasizes the importance of building connections between students and the life of the campus. These connections might include building relationships between students or between faculty and students, as well as integrating students into clubs, sports, work-study opportunities, and rituals celebrating institutional identity.

Policies or incentives that encourage students to “swirl” between institutions contradict research findings regarding best practices on retention in higher education. Much is risked and little is gained by encouraging students to identify with ConnSCU over their home institution.

4. Shared Governance

Faculty across the system expect that on all matters concerning academic standards and curricula design that principles of shared governance will be honored.

As the initiatives follow the road maps and become action plans, policies, and organizational structures, important academic and curricula questions will arise. Whether officially sanctioned or not, I am certain that faculty governance bodies across the system will be voting on a variety of resolutions addressing such matters. I also anticipate that challenging questions will arise between the authority of system directives, Board policy, and the local votes on campuses.

Although not without its own tensions and problems, I believe the collaboration between the Board and faculty in designing, implementing, and reviewing TAP can serve as a useful model in addressing the governance matters.

The initial TAP policy was drafted by the system administration. The FAC solicited faculty feedback and brought ten specific revisions to this Board; eight of which were accepted into the policy. A faculty committee was subsequently supported by the Board to create a common GenEd framework for transfer. Tensions and differences arose regarding the necessity of campus votes on that framework, but we were able to work out a compromise that allowed the votes to continue with 15 of 17 campuses voting in favor. In the resolution adopting the TAP framework, the Board acknowledged those votes without compromising its decision-making authority. By working through this, we were able to avoid the type of enduring and bitter conflict between the Board and faculty that is still ongoing at CUNY over a less ambitious transfer policy.
Moving forward with Transform, we should seek to become a model for the nation on how principles of shared governance can be honored in the unfolding of a statewide higher education plan. A year from now I look forward to reading in the *Chronicle* a story that documents that model.

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I hope this report has made clear what became evident from reviewing the notes from the town halls: the passion that both teaching and administrative faculty have for their craft and their dedication to serving students the citizens of the state. I am both honored and humbled to be here to represent their voices.