Faculty Advisory Committee Remarks to the Board of Regents for Higher Education

December 3, 2015

On The Strategic Vision

Chair Donofrio, President Ojakian and members of the Board of Regents, we thank you for this opportunity to present.

We once again are here at a difficult moment for our system. Our colleagues and students in red and the noise from the patio are indicative of the challenges we collectively face and of the importance of the choices before you in charting a course for the future of public higher education in Connecticut.

All of us, the Board, the system administration, the faculty, and all support staff ought to be working toward an explicit, common purpose that is widely supported and guides decision-making.

That purpose is contained in our vision statement: “A continually increasing share of Connecticut’s population will have a high quality post-secondary education that enables them to achieve their life and career goals and makes Connecticut a place of engaged, globally competitive communities.”

To the extent that we realize this vision, we open economic opportunities, expand social mobility, enliven cultural expression, and improve the quality of life in Connecticut.

--

Two generations ago, many people realized economic security for themselves and their families through unionized work producing material goods. As we know, this once broad avenue of opportunity has been reduced to a narrow alley. Businesses and industries that once trained their own workers, now expect that their future workforce will receive training prior to employment. For the vast majority of the state’s citizens, achieving a higher education degree or certificate is now the only route to economic security, and for much of that majority, affordable and accessible public education is the only practical option.

Nationally, the growing reliance on education as the only route to economic security is both cause and consequence of growing income inequality that has arguably become the biggest economic, political and social challenge of our time. In Connecticut, the problem is especially acute. While every state has seen income inequality grow over the last four decades, Connecticut, by far, has experienced the sharpest increases. We are the wealthiest state in the nation, yet we also have three of its poorest cities. Income inequality directly contributes to the significant educational achievement gap in this state.

The BOR system cannot solve the problem of income inequality on its own, but it cannot be meaningfully addressed without this system realizing its vision. If we fall short, we may continue to provide opportunities for the students who come to our doors – which is important -- but we will not have a meaningful impact on the overall quality of life in the state. Is there not a cruel irony in the fact that productivity and overall wealth continue to increase in Connecticut, while a growing portion of the population finds the ladder for mobility no longer supports the weight it should bear?

Over the last few years, this Board has watched with concern as student enrollments have declined across our institutions, and especially at the community colleges. The erosion has typically been
attributed to the declining number of high school graduates. This attribution seems to invite this Board to reassess our fiscal condition and address declines that seem inevitable. But is not this sober bow to our demographic condition also a retreat from the promise of the system’s vision?

The FAC recommends and encourages the Board to pursue policies and proposals to address and overcome the demographic challenge. We make this recommendation not only because we need to reanimate our common purpose under new leadership, but also because we believe in the moral imperative contained in our vision statement (which is unique to this system of public higher education).

We believe this system is well-positioned to expand enrollments for the following reasons:

- The most recent data from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) indicates that 44.3% percent of Connecticut’s high school graduates who pursue a higher education degree leave the state. This is the fourth highest rate in the country.
- NCHEMS data also rank Connecticut last in the country in terms of the import/export ratio of college-going students.ii
- A 2014 Connecticut General Assembly Report found that “private occupational schools accounted for about three quarters of the approximately 25,000 certificate program enrollments and 19,000 awards in academic year 2013.” The report also found that the vast majority of these students are under thirty, and that “private occupational schools’ student bodies were more racially and ethnically diverse than those of the for-credit community college programs.”iii
- The General Assembly Report also found that costs per credit were on average about three times as much in private occupational schools as in the community colleges. The total cost for certificate programs in Dental Assisting, Medical Assistant, Paralegal, and Medical Coding, for example, were many thousands of dollars more in the private occupational schools than in the community colleges.iv

Just as importantly, the decline in enrollments in recent years must be attributed, at least in part, to the rapid turnover in leadership at the system office that has hampered our ability to counter the trend with effective and decisive action plans. Since the merger four years ago, personnel changes have occurred in every senior administrative position. We now serve under our fourth President and our sixth chief academic officer, and these are both interim appointments.

Three years ago, in response to the demographic change, President Austin hired Maguire Associates for $1.4 million to develop a marketing plan to shore up enrollments. Before their work was completed, President Gray pursued a different plan that led to ignoring the Maguire report. President Gray also sought the assistance of outside consultants to assemble a plan that never materialized.

These facts suggest that if the system can come together around a common purpose to realize the system’s vision and its corresponding five goals, we can reverse enrollment declines.

--

The FAC offers the following suggestions:

1. **Deepen our commitment to the success of under-served students**
Expanding access to higher education will require the system to recruit students from across the state’s education achievement spectrum. This needs to be more than simply a marketing plan (although we need that too). We must provide guided pathways to student success.

Our system should consider integrating aspects of programs developed at Georgia State University (GSU). From 2003 to 2014, GSU increased its graduation rate from 32 percent to 54 percent, while its share of Pell-eligible students increased from 31 percent to 58 percent. This remarkable achievement was based on a series of integrated strategies to improve achievement while reaching out to underserved student populations.

The system response to PA 12-40, the developmental educational bill, led to a wide array of initiatives and strategies across the system. Because we are now developing the data and the capacity to track student achievement across this array, we will soon be able to assess the relative merits of these diverse strategies to aid us in developing focused and effective interventions to build the skills and confidence necessary for student success.

The FAC sees much promise in the developmental programs at Middlesex Community College, as well as the academic and curriculum bridges between higher-ed institutions and area high schools in places like New Haven and Danbury.

We also could seek political support to supplement the Governor’s scholarship program to target students in priority school districts who might otherwise see little hope or promise in educational attainment.

The FAC also fully endorses the recent initiative announced by President Ojakian to provide educational opportunities to people in correctional facilities.

2. Expand student services in targeted ways to improve student retention

Too often, students grow frustrated trying to navigate academic requirements, library and technological resources, and student financial aid. Targeted support services can be the critical difference in helping students overcome these obstacles.

Dollar for dollar, perhaps the most effective way to improve student recruitment and retention would be to provide subsidized child care and child drop-in centers on campus. Many students are unable to pursue higher education or complete their degrees because of child-care responsibilities. In addition, families with young children and unmarried mothers may constitute the single most important population group in need of higher education opportunities. Subsidized child care would require considerable public support and investment. Perhaps the system could, at the least, initiate a cost-benefit study as a first step.

TANF recipients bound by work requirements that do not include schooling often find the pursuit of higher education impossible. Is it possible to redefine or re-categorize the requirements to open more opportunities for our poorest citizens?

Although modest in scope, the Go Back to Get Ahead Program seems to have achieved some success in bringing students back to complete their degrees. Perhaps we could follow this up with a small grant program to catch students before they go. All too often students nearing the completion of their degrees encounter short term financial problems that result in them leaving college, such as being
barred from enrolling in classes because of small unpaid bills. Could we create a small supplemental support fund to help students of good academic standing overcome temporary financial obstacles that block them from completion?

3. **Build certificate and degree programs to address workforce needs**

The community colleges, state universities, and Charter Oak have long understood their responsibility to meet workforce needs. Many excellent programs across our system do just that.

The General Assembly Report on higher-education certificate programs, however, makes it abundantly clear that a large market remains for which the community colleges and COSC can offer a better value for Connecticut citizens.

Today's agenda includes a new certificate program at Three Rivers for precision sheet metal manufacturing and a new linked AS and BS degree at Gateway and Southern for public utilities management. These two programs have been thoughtfully crafted through collaboration with business and industry to meet critical workforce needs and to provide opportunities for students that tie academic attainment with employment.

Most importantly, as we continue to expand and pursue new programs in healthcare, gerontology, finance, biotech, infotech, construction management, engineering, advance manufacturing, and other fields, we need to simultaneously insist on social, political and economic support from the businesses and industries we serve. If students are now spending and incurring debt to receive the education and training they once received directly from their employer, then, we should - at the very least - request that business and industry acknowledge and support the public investment that makes this possible.

CBIA, more than anyone, should be our biggest cheerleader, and should be called on to support continuing public investment in higher education.

4. **Maintain the commitment to a liberal arts education**

Every degree student is required to complete a general education program to build academic skills and to provide a broad-based understanding of academic disciplines and realms of knowledge. The commitment to a liberal arts education is a hallmark in American higher education goes back to the turn of the last century when great waves of European immigrants came to settle in our cities. Among others, John Dewey reasoned that a broad-based education was necessary to inspire people to reach beyond ethnic parochialism to create a rational, democratic public and an educated citizenry. Echoes of Dewey remain in our vision statement, and his aims are as vital now as they were a century ago.

As the BCG survey of leaders of businesses, industries, and non-profits makes clear, employers seek employees with writing and speaking skills, numeracy, critical-thinking habits, and problem-solving abilities, which is what a liberal arts education provides.

A recent AAC&U report demonstrated that students who graduate with professional degrees are more likely to be employed and earn higher salaries in the years immediately following graduation, but in their peak earning years, people with liberal arts degrees on average earned more than those with professional degrees.
Emphasizing the false dichotomy between liberal arts education and workforce development is both cause and consequence of an impoverished utilitarianism that obstructs our vision. At the heart of the study of the sciences, the arts, human history, math, literature, and philosophy is the joy that comes with understanding the conditions of existence.

5. Build for academic excellence

As we expand our marketing efforts, develop programs to advance under-served students, target support services to improve retention, create new academic programs to meet critical workforce needs, and provide pathways to academic achievement and employment opportunities, we must, at the same time, pursue excellence. Quality matters.

The 44 percent of college-bound high school graduates who decide to attend an out-of-state institution constitute our largest potential market. Their decision is certainly not because CSCU institutions are more expensive than their out-of-state option, nor is it because these students are seeking an innovative low performer elsewhere. Instead, these students and their parents are making decisions based on their perceptions of academic quality, where we fall short.

At the state universities, building an academic reputation requires recruiting and retaining a highly skilled and diverse faculty. It requires the facilities and the institutional support for pursuing creative activity, extending community outreach, and securing external grants. It also requires the publication and dissemination of intellectual products, as well as the successful marketing of these achievements.

For the community colleges, excellence is achieved by the diversity of the educational services it provides to students and its communities. When students gain new vocational skills, learn and refine a craft, transfer into a four program before completing an associate degree, or gather supplemental course credits for their BA programs, the community colleges provide a necessary service not captured in a graduation rate.

In both the state universities and the community colleges, full-time faculty are a necessary element. Full-time faculty integrate individual courses into coherent departmental requirements, they provide better advice and guidance to students about their progress, and they stay abreast of advances in their discipline, which are all conducive to improved student success.

--

The system leadership and this Board face important choices. Each comes with certain costs and benefits.

Recently, management emphasized the need for greater "flexibility," an element not currently in the system’s strategic plan.

There may well be broad support for flexibility if it is understood to mean a broadly trained faculty that makes our academic programs more robust and expands interdisciplinary initiatives to advance our educational mission. If, however, flexibility is viewed as a management tool that will weaken tenure, reduce academic freedom, and minimize the role of faculty in defining the curriculum or in the hiring and review of colleagues, then you should anticipate a contentious and divisive struggle. We understand this latter notion of flexibility is of much greater value as a management tool in a context of declining enrollments. But we are offering an alternative. By uniting with a common purpose, the Board
of Regents, the system administration, the faculty and support staff can realize the promise of our shared strategic vision.

I think I speak for all of my colleagues here in red, when I say that while the system office has been foundering these last four years, faculty and support staff have been working hard and effectively to meet the needs of our students, to move students to graduation, and to fulfill the missions of our institutions. I am confident I speak for all teaching and administrative faculty when I report that we perceive that we are now being asked to pay for an ineptitude not of our own making.

---


iv See pages 32-33.


vi See especially the work of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University. In Redesigning America’s Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success (Harvard University Press, 2015), CCRC provides guide on student support services that are worth considering for implementation at CSCU.