

The FAC met last Friday, Jan. 24. The main agenda item was consideration of the BOR response to 11 questions posed to them by the FAC at its December meeting. These questions were concise and probing, prepared under the guidance of our outgoing FAC representative, Steve Adair. The questions highlighted unresolved issues in the "Students First" project. In what follows, I will highlight the inadequate or outright wrong responses to the key questions.

1. Is the SF proposal one of "substantive change" or candidacy for a new institution? Note: given the stated purpose of SF to consolidate 12 community colleges into one, and to standardize/uniformize some 400+ programs, it would appear to the unbiased observer that this is candidacy for a new institution. The BOR in its response claims the contrary: that the proposal is one of substantive change only. This is related to the question of how student access to federal financial aid will be maintained in the "one big college", as a new institution would have a probationary or waiting period for student eligibility. It appears that the only way the BOR can circumvent this serious obstacle to their plan is to merge all but one of the colleges into the remaining one, and use its accreditation to continue federal aid eligibility (use its OPE-ID number; Office of PostSecondary Identification). The joke at the FAC was that merging all of the CCs into the NorthWest CC, one of the smallest in the country (and an award winner one of the best CC in CT) would instantly make it one of the largest.
2. Will the single college be administered directly by the system office, or by the one college President? The answer to this was anticipated: the latter, an additional level of bureaucracy now making for four levels where previously there were only two: the one college president (to be named), reporting to the BOR and its president (Mark Ojakian); the three regional presidents (now named but not mentioned), who presumably report to the one college president; and the former Institutional presidents, now downgraded to CEOs who presumably report to the regional presidents. What was new in the response was that the one college will have its separate headquarters from the BOR: "Once established, staff currently housed at the CSCU system office physically move to the new single College office", an explicit recognition of the creation of a separately housed bureaucracy, in addition to two new levels of presidents. However, in case you might forget who is really in charge, the response states that "The CSCU President will be the primary source of communication and information between the BOR and institutions, as is the case today" (4: 3)
3. What role will faculty in each discipline play to ensure the quality of academic programs. Here the reply gives two opposite answers in one paragraph: On the one hand, "... faculty will need to maintain their central role in the development, delivery and assessment of curriculum and student outcomes." Well and good, though "central role" needs to be defined: consultative only, or decisional? But in the next sentence we read: "Furthermore, academic leadership under the College Provost will be responsible for the quality of academic programs; accreditation and program review; course delivery, scheduling and single college catalog; higher education transitions including dual enrollment and transfer, institutional research and assessment; and [just to make it explicit] teaching and learning". To which is added, further diminishing the role of faculty: "All of these functions will be under the leadership of the College President" (8: 4)

So much for NECHE standard 3.15: "The institution places primary responsibility for the content, quality, and effectiveness of the curriculum with its faculty. Faculty have a substantive voice in matters of educational programs, faculty personnel, and other aspects of institutional policy that relate to their areas of responsibility and expertise."

4. A further question involved programs currently accredited at only a single college: will the accreditation transfer? For example, there is a current college that has an ABET accredited program in engineering? Will that accreditation be extended to the one big college? There are program accreditations in respiratory therapy which have been grand-parented in, but are no longer available at the two year college level for new applicants. Will that be grand-parented to the one big college? The reply indicates that a student could begin the program at their home campus and then transfer to the 'campus with the full program', but does not provide a guarantee that the accrediting agency will allow this or even transfer the accreditation from the currently accredited institution to the future one big college.

5. In its response to the question mentioned above of whether the college president or the system office and BOR president would administer functions at the one big college, the BOR response makes explicit the centralization of functions: "Administrative functions related to Human Resources, Information Technology, Facilities and some aspects of Fiscal Affairs such as accounting will be centralized at the system office and services provided to the campuses through service level agreements" (3:2). Staff involved will work for the SO, and be deployed to the campuses under these agreements, and presumably report to both the system office and the campus CEO, making for an obvious complication in accountability and evaluation. But it is stated that the central college office is the dominant and decisive body: "... the single college central office will lead all strategic, academic and financial efforts through the office of the College President... the College CFO , who reports directly to the College President, will make the budgetary decisions impacting the twelve campuses." So much for local autonomy.
6. But lest we think we at the university level have been left out, the report adds: "In addition to community college initiatives, additional administrative functions such as purchasing and payroll will be aligned across all 17 institutions (12 CCs, Charter Oak, 4 CSUs); indicating that "many other functions are already aligned for all 17 institutions in the information technology area" – mentioning network design and operations, firewall and security management, and internet services. What is next for us?
7. I'll conclude with a comment I made at the last meeting of the BOR itself, where the NECHE re-accreditation of CCSU was included in the "consent agenda". I first quoted NECHE concerns at length:

"The Commission shares the concerns expressed to the visiting team by members of the campus community related to the Board of Regents' (BOR) shared services and "Students First" initiatives. Particularly troubling is that a comprehensive plan detailing the consolidation of university services and documenting the potential impact of "Students First" on the campus planning process was not available at the time of the visit. And they conclude: Through the Fall 2023 interim report, we look forward to receiving an update on the University's success in clarifying expectations and demonstrating outcomes related to the Board of Regents' shared services and "Students First initiatives. We are informed here by our standard on Organization and Governance: In multi-campus systems organized under a single governing board, the division of responsibility and authority between the system office and the institution is clear. Where system and campus boards share governance responsibilities or dimensions of authority, system policies and procedures are clearly defined and equitably administered (3.6)"

As this was part of the "consent agenda" it was approved without discussion. However, as I was present at the meeting, I took advantage of the public question period at the beginning of the meeting, to quote the above and say "I note that I and my CCSU colleagues understand their role as members of a university part of CSCU to respect and abide by Board policies such as computer security policies, sexual misconduct policies, respect and support for Dreamers, LGBTQ and other vulnerable groups, implementation of transfer articulation agreements and cooperation with other CSCU institutions on the basis of mutually beneficial bilateral, multilateral and regional agreements. My question is the following: What assurances can the BOR provide that it in turn will continue to respect the institutional integrity and autonomy of CCSU as an institution of public higher education, in particular faculty control of curriculum as provided in our collective agreement and university Senate policies, and local administrative control of finances and the services provided by our support staff to assist in the accomplishment of the university's mission and strategic goals?". There was, as was to be unfortunately expected, no reply to my question. That will be up to us as a university community to require.

My overall conclusion is that (1) consolidation at the level of the CCs leads inevitably to centralization of academic and all other functions, in violation of essential faculty control of curriculum and necessary local autonomy of institutions; (2) consolidation at the level of the CCs leads to added levels of bureaucracy and thereby increases rather than decreases costs; (3) consolidation at the level of the CCs results in uniformization of programs, whose accreditations may be in jeopardy; and (4) consolidation is not limited to the CCs, but is being extended (through "alignment") to support functions at the university level as well. Will academic functions (eg online courses) be next? In order to oppose centralization and bureaucratization, we need to (1) oppose consolidation, the underlying wrong strategy, and (2) begin thinking of alternatives to it that will assure (i) some sharing of services on a bilateral, multilateral, or regional basis, but only based on bottom-up agreements and not top-down decrees, with (ii) full respect for the autonomy and integrity of the constituent institutions (whether CCs or CSUs) of what (CSCU) is at best described as a federation of systems, not a system in its own right.