

Moving On: Completing and Closing Students First
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1) Students First Administrative Reorganization	1
2) Administrative Issues to be Resolved	2
3) General Problems Resulting from Students First.....	2
4) The Principle of Shared Governance.....	3
5) Three Major Projects and Mixed Prospects	4
6) Proposals for Major Projects	4
7) Arguments for Continuing Students First are Flawed.....	5
8) Extending Students First to the Universities Compounds the Error	5
9) Concluding Students First: Implications for the System Offices and Board	6
10) Concluding Comments	6
11) What We Can Do Next	7

Two recent events prompt me state explicitly what I – and I should add personally – have been thinking for some time: (1) At a Finance and Infrastructure Committee meeting BOR member David Jimenez asked what the faculty objections to SF are; I provided my point of view and we had an interesting and I think positive discussion as a result; (2) a recent CSCU brochure Putting Students First, prepared by outside consultant Christopher Baldwin, in consultation with two System Office senior staff stated (on p. 16) that critics of SF have not proposed any alternatives. As one of those designated as a critic without an alternative, here is mine, which I submit for comment, criticism, and if appropriate approval:

All plans have to have a beginning, a middle and an end. Students First (SF) began in 2017, and has now, in my view, after nearly four years, exceeded its useful lifetime. A key feature of SF is consolidation, and I agree that consolidation is needed – just not the kind envisaged by the plan. I’ve stated on a number of occasions my view that we need to review and revise SF, identify its strengths and weaknesses, learn from its accomplishments and failures; to which I now add: and move to its completion and closure.

1) Students First Administrative Reorganization

Firstly, let me deal first with its realizations to date that are likely to remain and need to be further consolidated if they are to be effective in reducing costs and increasing equity, which are not immediate and spontaneous results of these changes:

- 1) Transforming campus Presidents into CEOs: The main advantage of this is not the minimal salary savings, which are small in comparison to overall SF costs, but rather facilitating sector wide community college leadership in developing institutional cooperation for redistribution of budgets in the interests of equity, and sharing of services for cost savings.
- 2) Naming three regional Presidents: Connecticut is known as the state of 169 towns and municipalities, and averse to regionalization. The establishment of regional leadership at the community college level could be a model for rest of the state – if it is done fairly and wisely, as an intermediary level between the central administration (where budget is allocated) and the local, campus level (where courses are designed and taught).

- 3) Establishing an interim Community College system or sectorial leadership: Section 185 (10-1) of the state statutes establishes three sectors in part (2) of section 10a: the technical-community college system (comprising 12 institutions), the state college (Charter Oak), and the state university system (the four CSUs; Part (A) of public higher education is UConn and its branches). The recent naming of an interim President, Provost, CFO, Vice-Presidents and support staff provide the basis for a System office for the community college system separate from that for the CSUs, and indeed, soon to be physically housed apart in New Britain, in a former CCSU building downtown that will also house Charter Oak State College.

2) Administrative Issues to be Resolved

I should note that all three above realizations have been made within the context of the existing accreditations of the 12 community colleges, so that the argument that consolidation into one college is required in order to significantly adjust administrative officers and structures is invalid. Moreover, I note the following outstanding problems for this significant set of administrative modifications; indicating that what needs to be consolidated are the three proposed levels of administration of the community college system (interim executive, regional presidents, and system office), not the colleges themselves: The burden of proof is on the leadership of CSCU and the community college system to demonstrate that these changes will save money, increase enrollment, retention and graduation, and help resolve equity issues, rather than simply rearranging functions and adding levels of bureaucracy (four levels where previously there were only two) and associated staff (in two system offices, where previously there was only one), to the likely detriment of students and faculty alike if not properly structured:

1. The role and authority of college CEOs needs to be more appropriately defined. In particular, that role must go beyond trivial items such as parking spaces and smoking areas to include such matters as approving local policies needed for the proper delivery of courses and management of personnel at each college campus. This implies maintaining the individual accreditation of each community college, in line with the very notion of a “community” college.
2. The role and responsibilities of the regional Presidents need to be defined, to focus on such matters as permit them to add value to what can be otherwise achieved at the local level --such as regional fund raising, resource sharing based on bilateral and multilateral agreements between and among constituent colleges, workforce development initiatives as outlined in the Governor’s Workforce Strategic Plan and providing assistance to regional economic development.
3. The interim Community College system leadership needs to assure that its associated support staff at the proposed New Britain college system office is strictly limited to essential functions and does not increase beyond a predetermined number, to prevent administrative bloat. The relationship between the CSCU President and the community college system President needs to be defined, as are the relationships between the latter and the regional Presidents. To avoid confusion, it might be advisable to retitle the regional Presidents as Vice-Presidents.

3) General Problems Resulting from Students First

There are the following general problems with Students First that I identify:

- 1) Over-centralization: The plan has resulted in a significant over-centralization, not just of budget, but of control, including control over curriculum. Though we may disagree on the interpretation of Shared

Services, it is now clear that the central level of the system directly uses or controls \$69 million, a total greater than the budget of any community college. At the same time that more funds and positions are flowing to the central level, an associated way of thinking has unconsciously developed according to which faculty are not seen as the solution to problems (such as increasing retention and graduation rates, solving the achievement gap), but are seen as the source of the problem. This sets in motion a conflict situation between staff at the summit and faculty at the base. It reverses the positive model of the System Office assisting its member institutions and thereby their faculty and staff, to the negative model of the System Office consolidating and controlling recalcitrant faculty and staff. This won't work in a public higher education setting, where the flow of curriculum and pedagogy should be bottom up, not top down.

- 2) De-localization: The plan envisages what I term a "de-localization", by persisting in calling for the elimination of the accreditation of the 12 community colleges and their merger into one, despite clear opposition by faculty and local constituencies, concerns expressed by NECHE, and possible obstacles at the level of federal student aid if all colleges are merged into one federal aid number. In any case, consolidation contravenes the inherently local base of support of the community colleges.
- 3) Loss of faculty control of curriculum and pedagogy: The plan has resulted in diminishing to a dangerous degree faculty control over both these areas of faculty expertise. Teaching occurs in the classroom not on Woodland St, and faculty are the curriculum experts. The numerous awkwardly named and overly-fluid transitional committees have not respected faculty expertise or institutional governance, and have alienated faculty by top-down tactics unresponsive to and even disrespectful of faculty concerns.

4)The Principle of Shared Governance

The principle of shared governance needs to be delineated and respected. A public college or university cannot be run top-down as in the US Army or an Amazon warehouse, however efficient that mode of direction may be for those institutions. Shared governance means that faculty (and support staff and students where appropriate) have a role to play, from predominance in some areas to consultation in others, in order to assure the success of their institutions. It is a mistake to reduce shared governance to mere consultation of faculty to the detriment of their predominant role in areas essential to them and their students. In areas of administrative predominance consultation with faculty remains essential. The following are intended as examples and is not exhaustive:

- 1) Faculty have predominance (or control) -- subject to final approval by administration -- over curriculum (course and program content), pedagogy (including mode and manner of course delivery) as well as research projects, creative activity and academic freedom that are conditions for good curriculum and pedagogy,
- 2) Faculty and administration have equal responsibility for strategic planning --jointly determining priority objectives and milestones for their institutions, along with policy concerning student admissions, retention and graduation.
- 3) Administration has predominance (or control) for managing budgets at the system and institutional levels-- subject to consultation with faculty as to items relevant to them. Senior administration is also responsible for relations with the legislature and executive of the state in order to procure budgets sufficient for institutional needs and to promote policies favorable to public higher education in the state (eg PACT for debt-free college education).

5) Three Major Projects and Mixed Prospects

There are three major-going projects, one of which precedes SF and has been hampered by SF's unilateral focus on alignment and consolidation, one of which is just being proposed and needs time to determine its value, and one which already shows significant problems and should be immediately discontinued.

1. The first is the Transfer Articulation Program (TAP), intended to ensure "seamless" transition of Community College graduates to majors and general education programs at the CSU and other universities. This project, undertaken before Students First, has been relegated to the sidelines to the point that its coordinating council is inactive, only several hundred students have completed it and is in need of significant updating as to content. It is clear that faculty (through the FAC) will not participate in this program so long as it is seen as a "model" for top-down campus consolidation and curriculum alignment. Yet it is obviously beneficial to students at both the colleges and the universities.
2. The second is the Guided Pathways project, which provides for additional advisors using "holistic case management" and which is being implemented in a trial basis at three community colleges. This needs to be evaluated in the next several years as it is rolled out, including more data on the effectiveness of newly hired professional advisors, the likelihood of students following up their initial meetings, and the degree to which they complete their academic plans.
3. The third is the Curriculum Alignment, supposedly so that there is one system-wide curriculum. So far, just one or a few of the many hundreds of programs has been fully aligned, and the deadline for all is both unrealistic and unnecessary. The current plan calls for hasty "endorsement" (within a few months) of curricular plans written without sufficient consideration of the complexities involved. Curricular alignment for its own sake will not result in the desired end of greater equity, and may well hamper local adjustments to meet specific student and area needs.

6) Proposals for Major Projects

My own conclusions, which are individual to me but based nonetheless on listening to faculty at meetings for the last four years, the last year as Chair and now as Vice-Chair of the Faculty Advisory Committee are:

1. Revitalize the TAP program as a project independent of SF, using the FAC as the basis for a faculty run council to update and expand the program in concert with relevant System Office staff. Given current faculty dissatisfaction and refusal to cooperate with 'one college' transition structures, revitalizing TAP should be a joint project of the Faculty Advisory Committee and the System Office.
2. Specify clear metrics to evaluate the success or apply correctives to the Guided Pathways project, to be made independent of SF and coordinated with the preceding TAP project. In particular, it is rash to use up to \$35 million of HEERF-3 funds to leap over the pilot phase of Guided Pathways, and hire up to 200 advisors without supporting data as to their effectiveness.
3. End the transitional consolidation and alignment committees, but develop, in the post-SF period, a mechanism for coordinating faculty in disciplines across the campuses (for example, by regular conferences now made possible through online meeting technology), with due respect for existing departments and department chairs elected by and responsible to faculty.

7) Arguments for Continuing Students First are Flawed

8)

The argument for continuing SF is flawed for a number of reasons:

1. There are no real cost savings, only increased budget to the central level at the expense of funding for the campuses where teaching occurs. The apparent savings from attrition does not consider the delays in service resulting from increasing the workloads for remaining staff -- a negative effect intensified by transferring support staff from local to centralized control, which will further delay action needed at the local level.. The cost saving from the downgrading of administrative positions (reducing college presidents to campus CEOs) is less than the added costs of an interim executive (president, provost, CFO, regional presidents) – of a structure which has a name (Connecticut State Community College) but no accreditation, classes, or for that matter, students.
2. Equity, and in particular closing the achievement gap is not advanced by aligning curriculum into a “one size” fits all, irrespective of local differences in student clientele (by socio-economic and racial-ethnic status) and area needs (both business and social). While standardized curriculum may apply to grade schools where a common base line in a relatively small number of disciplines is required (and often lacking), it cannot apply to college level programs where faculty with graduate level degrees are the only ones able to translate developments in multiple fields into course content. Moreover, content may vary from program to program within a single field depending on the context: such as industry requirements for specialized employment, or university links for transfer articulation to specialized programs.
3. Top-down management and micro-management by the System Office and Board of Regents stifles faculty creativity and initiative, and for more than three years has locked both sides in a futile and fruitless conflict. Decisions by the Board to micro-manage course content (eg: the College and Student Success course, Math and English pre-requisites vs. co-requisites) cannot replace decision making by the faculty directly involved, and cannot be successful unless based on their expertise and approval.

8) Extending Students First to the Universities Compounds the Error

Students First is not limited to the community colleges, as it includes a proposal, now being partially implemented, to consolidate “back office” functions of the universities, including Human Resources, Information Technology, Institutional Research, Purchasing and more, under the banner of “Shared Services”. This too should be stopped, and for the following reasons:

- 1) The distinction between “student facing” and non-student facing” is misleading, as is the term “back office” borrowed from business. At the universities, most non-teaching staff are administrative faculty, serving either the needs of institutional divisions (academic affairs, administrative affairs, student affairs), or interacting directly with faculty and their activities (information technology, institutional research, research grants).
- 2) Centralizing control over staff and funds for these activities removes administrative faculty from the campus or from campus direction, adding a bureaucratic layer of approval, and making it more difficult to meet institutional needs in a timely manner. This type of arrangement would have been especially deleterious during the current pandemic, where the slogan ‘help is local’ applies to information technology in particular.

- 3) Universities have unique programs with specialized needs that cannot be covered by “one size fits all” procedures. The system needs to respect the legislatively mandated ‘distinct missions’ of the universities and should not apply a plan, ill-designed even for the community colleges, to them. Any sharing of services must be based on bilateral or multilateral agreement between and among the universities, not imposed by a top-down directive.

9) Concluding Students First: Implications for the System Offices and Board

Students First, initiated in 2017 has now continued for four years, resulting in only one realization: administrative reorganization, and alongside that a major problem: faculty alienation and opposition. Students First should be concluded and closed, to be completed by appropriately structuring the levels of administration it has created, along with a reorganization of the System Offices and even the Board that this implies. Students First has resulted in the creation of a specifically community college executive (President, Provost, CFO, Vice Presidents) and System Office (to be established in New Britain) for what should be more appropriately named as the Connecticut Community College System (in parallel with the Connecticut State University System). Along with the existing Woodland St System Office in Hartford, this will make for two System Offices, each with a President, executive and supporting staff:

1. The Woodland St. System office should be limited to assisting the universities (the Connecticut State University System – CSU and its 4 constituent institutions) and the New Britain System Office to assisting the community colleges (12 community colleges; Charter Oak could be included here). The Board should make a decision to limit the size of each of the two System Offices, and delineate more clearly their responsibilities to assist, but not control their constituent institutions.
2. This implies redefining the relationship between the President of the community-technical college system, and that of the CSCU, -- who should become President of the CSU System -- to one of equals cooperating for the good of public higher education in the state, in cooperation with other public higher education leaders: regional presidents, campus CEOs, university presidents, and faculty Senate leaders.
3. Further, the Board should consider restructuring itself to fully take into account the distinct missions of the college and university sectors (as required by section 185a-1c of state statutes), by dividing into distinct college and university sections, including a coordinating mechanism between them, or even into two Boards with a coordinating mechanism made up of college and university institutional and senate (faculty governance) presidents.

10) Concluding Comments

In conclusion, I propose:

1. Declare Students First to be completed by the structuring of the community college system leadership and its System Office (New Britain), leaving intact the accreditation of the member community colleges. Sharing of resources, while welcome when needed, should be done based on bilateral and multilateral agreement, not central directive.
2. We need to return to a discussion of principles that unite us – protecting and promoting public higher education as a social good, and the development of policies and plans to meet that end. It is not a matter of saving money by centralizing control, a policy doomed to failure as it misidentifies the strategic goal. And uniformizing curriculum will not magically overcome the achievement gap and promote equity; that has to be done by concerted efforts of faculty in the classroom supported by student services taking into account the needs of underrepresented and minority groups, both socio-economic and racial/ethnic.

3. We are approaching a decision as to the new CCSU president, as the search process (Board and advisory committees) have now interviewed the finalists. An added “bonus” to announcing the completion and closure of Students First is to allow the new President, in consultation with the Board, System(s) leadership, Faculty and Student Advisory Committees, and, no doubt, listening sessions with the various constituencies, to start afresh, unburdened by a long simmering conflict not advantageous to any of the parties.

11) What We Can Do Next

Much still remains to be done:

1. Support increased funding for public higher education by at least 10% per year, towards full state funding in the medium term for public higher education as a social good essential to the future of the state; fully fund PACT and extend it over time to the universities;
2. Have a conference of the Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC), the Student Advisory Committee (SAC), university and college leaders (past and present, campus and system) to discuss the overall situation of public higher education in the state, re-affirm our basic principles, revise our policies in the light of the strengths and weaknesses of past plans, and develop a new format for decision making.
3. Have members on the Board of Regents who have a significant background in public higher education and understand both faculty and student needs, and reform the Board to adequately take into account the distinct missions of the university and college systems, and the integrity of their constituent institutions, up to and including having two separate boards, one for each of the college and university systems, with a coordinating body for transfer articulation.

Note: The above is my current proposal, v.2. Please send comments, critiques and suggestions to Blitz@CCSU.edu. I am currently Vice-Chair and previously Chair of the Faculty Advisory Committee and as a result am an ex-officio (non-voting) member of the Board of Regents, and serve on its Finance and Infrastructure Committee. This is my 32nd year at CCSU, where I have served as department chair, program director and coordinator, and am currently a member of the Faculty Senate steering committee. In the past I have served as Chair of the University Planning and Budget Committee, and on system-wide committees for on-line learning.