



TEXAS HIGHER EDUCATION COORDINATING BOARD

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June 8, 2012

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TO: The Honorable Rick Perry, Governor
The Honorable David Dewhurst, Lt. Governor
The Honorable Joe Straus, Speaker
Ms. Ursula Parks, Acting Director, Legislative Budget Board

From: Fred W. Heldenfels IV, Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fred W. Heldenfels IV".

RE: Blueprint for Community College System Administration

As you know, Rider 53 of the 82nd General Appropriations Act (p. III-55) required the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to hire a national-level consultant to provide a blueprint to establish a state system administration for public community colleges. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) was selected through a competitive solicitation, and their report is enclosed.

While the report provides some useful perspectives regarding options for a new community college system administration, it fails to fully reflect how the THECB addresses community college issues and the active collaboration between the THECB and the community college sector. For example, on page 13, the report states that:

“ . . . important constituents have lost faith in the agency’s ability to play the role of state system administrative body for community colleges and simultaneously successfully fulfill its mission as the oversight agency for all postsecondary education in the state. At one time THECB demonstrated a facility for balancing these responsibilities. But the elimination of the Community College Division and the loss of key staff with resumes that let them speak authoritatively on community college issues – to both the colleges and state leaders – has considerably weakened the credibility of THECB in this realm.”

This misplaced assertion is probably in part due to the fact that none of the key legislators from the House and Senate Higher Education Committees were interviewed, most likely because of the short turn-around time for NCHEMS to complete the report. Furthermore, neither the Commissioner nor any Board members, including myself or Vice Chairman Harold Hahn, were interviewed. Although the Appendix lists the Commissioner as being interviewed, his conversation with NCHEMS occurred after the report was written.

As a matter of context, the Texas Legislature has never granted authority to the THECB to serve as a state administrator for community colleges. Our function is one of general oversight and enforcing rules and regulations in regard to specific duties identified in statute. Moreover, the assertion that the elimination of the Community College Division at the THECB has resulted in the loss of credibility and expertise on community college issues completely misunderstands the purpose of the Commissioner’s reorganization. At the time this was done, the Commissioner’s sole purpose was to integrate community colleges and universities more closely in

order to more effectively address educational pipeline issues such as improving developmental education, facilitating a seamless transfer system, increasing program completion, and improving undergraduate excellence across sectors. The THECB currently devotes 34.2 full-time equivalents (FTEs) to community college issues – almost exactly the same as the 35 FTEs that were under the Community College Division before its elimination. These staff members spend over 68,000 hours per year on community college issues. As the report notes, “Texas needs more, not less, cohesion across sectors in its higher education policy.”

The THECB has consistently worked to involve community college stakeholders in decisions that impact the sector. For example, as Chairman, I convened an informal work group composed of community college trustees and presidents to facilitate direct communication between them and Coordinating Board members and the Commissioner. This group met several times prior to the last legislative session to foster dialogue and identify areas of consensus relating to outcomes-based funding for this sector. Additionally, the Community and Technical College Formula Advisory Committee, composed of institutional representatives recommended by community college presidents, helped refine the outcomes-based formula funding proposal that was recently provided to the Legislature. The THECB staff also established a community college advisory group comprised of representatives from the community colleges as well as THECB staff from across divisions to meet quarterly to discuss a wide range of policy issues. Finally, Commissioner Paredes is the first commissioner of higher education to recommend full formula funding for community colleges (prior to the budget reductions), and regularly describes these institutions in his presentations to the Legislature as the “linchpin” of both public and higher education that provide the best bargains in postsecondary education across the country. These are just a few examples of direct access and influence the community college sector currently has in helping shape state policy.

The report’s proposal to create an interim body for the community college system administration to be later folded into the THECB seems an inefficient means to strengthen credibility with stakeholders. A more efficient solution would be to create such an entity within the THECB and ensure that its operations are subject to rigorous oversight by a senior-level executive and an advisory board appointed by the Governor, Lt. Governor, and Speaker.

As the Legislature considers the best state system administration for public community colleges, the THECB is ready to provide any requested data or analysis.

Enclosure

c: House Appropriations Committee Chair and Subcommittee on Article III
House Higher Education Committee
Senate Finance Committee
Senate Higher Education Committee
Coordinating Board Members
Boards of Trustees, Texas Public Community Colleges
Presidents and Chancellors, Texas Public Community Colleges
Community College Association of Texas Trustees
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