

March 23, 2009

(emailed and hard copy to follow)

Dr. John Cavanaugh
Chancellor
PASSHE
Dixon University Center
2985 North Second Street
Harrisburg, PA 17110

Dear Dr. Cavanaugh:

On March 9, you asked me to consider the program described in Robert Zemsky and Joni Finney's "Changing the Subject: Costs, Graduation Rates, and the Importance of Reengineering the Undergraduate Curriculum." The Executive Council of APSCUF has carefully considered the idea found in the document (attached). We understand that it identifies some real challenges facing higher education. However, since we fundamentally disagree with many of its assertions and presuppositions, we cannot consent to participate.

Since this is an important document, discussion, and decision, I wanted to share with you some, if not all, of our concerns about what is proposed in it.

First, you should know my initial response as an academic was curiosity. Having worked with general education reorganization in the eighties, I was intrigued with how to pull off what you outlined over lunch.

But, as I studied the actual proposal and recognized the seismic impact of what is proposed, without solid evidence, I was deeply concerned where the plan would lead us as a university system.

Here's a summary of the concerns raised in discussions among ourselves:

- *Many of the problems raised in the introduction of the "concept paper" are unfamiliar to us. Let me start with a quick list:*
 - *"Universities will raise all the money they can and spend all the money they raise" (p. 2). Isn't this called a "non-profit"?*
 - *"Few faculty enjoyed grading senior theses...or teaching the required course sequences that comprised many major and pre-major programs..." (p. 4). I can only laugh at the Ivy League mentality here: most of my colleagues would love nothing more than to do this. Instead, we are locked in a heavy burden of freshman or sophomore courses for general education.*
 - *"Whole new disciplines and concentrations were added..." (p.5). As you know, the state system has been very careful about additions in the last decade, so there are few such boutique items on our menu. A review of the most frequent programs on the low-*



enrolled list generates disciplines like philosophy, French, physics, and theatre. Hardly boutique subjects.

- *“The result was an almost endless series of undergraduate curricula in which ‘almost anything goes.’”* Again, with exceptions, this isn’t true of our institutions. The development since 2006 of the core 30 hours for community college articulation, which spread to more than 40 hours as it was developed, has shown that the 14 PASSHE institutions have a great deal of common curriculum and there’s not a lot of wild “anything goes” anywhere.
- Zemsky and Finney say of curricular pathways, *“There would be fewer under-enrolled courses...”* (p. 6-7). Nowhere in any gen ed scheduling across the state will you find a plethora of under-enrolled courses. Most gen ed’s are currently running at or near capacity. Ask any freshman who wants to change their schedule.
- *“...At Penn...we teach in a graduate program that employs a fixed curricular pathway (no electives at all) and a cohort model in which peer learning is a constant...”* (p. 8). The difference between a graduate program at Penn and our typical undergraduate is the difference between Zemsky and Finney’s cows and our calves (or maybe ours are so different as to be chickens). Most of our students are first generation matriculators; most of theirs will be highly qualified overachievers. Peer learning is a major stretch for our students and classrooms. It’s not apples and apples (to change food metaphors).
- *“The curriculum became a vast smorgasbord of tempting offerings”* (p. 5). Where is the evidence for our institutions having too much on the menu? Gen ed offerings are usually totally full on campuses. Given the current restrictions due to classroom numbers and expectations from management/administration for faculty load, the underlying idea of the Zemsky/Finney plan that we are offering too many variables seems far-fetched. It is probably true that many of our faculty rue the fact we don’t offer students more gen ed options.
- *“The way out of this box...is to re-engineer the curriculum to productively constrain both student and faculty choice”* (p. 7). “Re-engineer” and “constrain” seem to run counter to the currently established curricular approval structure. It is hard to see how Zemsky & Finney’s proposal can operate within the confines of our system, especially as the autonomous units would need to work in coordination among the five selected schools. It seems to undermine both the local process and Act 188’s university autonomy presumption.
- Although we recognize the value of Living and Learning Communities (as close to the “cohorts” of the “concept paper”), and we would encourage universities in the system to promote them more, we also recognize the constraint that cohorts can be. This raises too many questions to be overcome by this plan, not the least of which is what happens to that cohort (which is quite large) among our freshmen that is undecided? Given our current dearth of faculty, we cannot see how PASSHE can consider this plan in good faith, knowing that we do not have the faculty in place to do this. And especially given Zemsky & Finney’s advocacy for bargaining units (see, for

instance, p. 11), it seems hard to see how this can be accomplished without massive adjustments to either bargaining unit work or the bargaining units themselves.

- The cost savings promoted may be real, but they are achieved (to put it simply) by reduction. “...it is even possible that such a curriculum would allow students to graduate in three rather than four years...” and “the curriculum could also award credit for demonstrating competence in the subject without having the student sit through a particular course” (p. 7). Sure, it’s less expensive to provide a degree to someone if they have to take fewer credits to earn it – that math is unassailable. But to assume that just by working in cohorts will provide the “value added” to make up for fewer gen ed credits is fallacious. There’s a reason why the gen ed curriculum is the size it is and has been for at least half a century: it prepares students well.
- I am amazed at the trend shown in this proposal away from the kind of institutions we became in the latter half of the twentieth century as we moved from normal schools to comprehensive four-year institutions. For years the argument for four-year comprehensive education has been that our graduates change careers an average of three times (I think I’ve heard you say it yourself); many institutions trumpet “lifelong learning” as one of their missions; yet this idea undermines this notion by reducing the broader preparation in a trade-off for cost-savings and efficiency. Our mission isn’t efficiency; it is to educate the Commonwealth in a way that provides them a life-time of opportunity, not just a quick, affordable fix to their first job.

I could go on with the responses and counters to much of what Zemsky and Finney propose. Their basic premise we recognize as appealing – curricular changes could lead to cost savings. But we see in the low-enrolled program review that is currently on-going and the community college articulation agreements (both 2006 and 2009) two ways in which the curriculum is being changed to achieve that. These are both reasonable approaches, though we have process and input problems with them both.

To turn to the Zemsky and Finney concept would be, to use their metaphor, to attempt to manage our pasture like their pasture. We have two very different pastures and two very different animals in it. As such, we have to be careful not to buy in to their concept and end up not with their healthy cows but with our underfed hens.

We hope to collaborate with PASSHE on future educational innovations. However, this initiative, we believe, is not the right one.

Sincerely,



Steve Hicks
President

NB At lunch you told me the Cal State system was “on board.” I checked with them and the union is emphatically not.