A Trustee’s Response to “The Case for Community Colleges”

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As chair of the Board of Trustees at North Shore Community College, I read with great interest the report “The Case for Community Colleges: Aligning Higher Education and Workforce Needs in Massachusetts,” prepared for the Boston Foundation and published in November 2011. I am pleased by the report’s acknowledgment of the value and importance of community colleges in the Commonwealth, and I share the authors’ belief that our community colleges must continue to play a vital role in educating a skilled, well-prepared workforce, essential for economic development in Massachusetts. Workforce development is a crucial part of our mission, and I hope that the public scrutiny and dialogue encouraged by this report will help us carry out this mission more cohesively, more effectively, and more thoroughly. I also support many of the report’s recommendations—in particular, the call for better alignment and stronger partnerships between community colleges and employers in business and industry. At the same time, however, I am disturbed, and in some cases mystified, by certain features in the report—the exclusion of key stakeholders in the production of the report, contradictions between the analysis in the report and its recommendations, the startling omission of any recommendation that addresses the chronic underfunding of community colleges, and the claim that a more centralized system will improve our ability to fulfill our mission.

STAKEHOLDERS: The report purports to reflect the views of “Massachusetts stakeholders,” but I was baffled and dismayed to discover that, in the list of more than 50 stakeholders interviewed or consulted for the report, not a single trustee was included. Also missing from this list of stakeholders are any faculty at community colleges, any students, and any college employee whose primary job is workforce development. Several college presidents were interviewed, but they did not provide significant input in the report, nor do they endorse some of
the report’s main recommendations, such as the call for a more centralized system. While I appreciate the dedication and insights of those who contributed to the report, I believe that this omission of key stakeholders has resulted in a perspective that is unbalanced and limited. If the goal is to promote better alignment of community colleges and workforce needs, that goal would have been better served by some attempt at “alignment” in developing the report itself—that is, some actual dialogue among college presidents, trustees, employers, and other stakeholders. What I don’t find in the report are the voices, the knowledge, and the experience of those stakeholders—students, teachers, administrators, trustees—who are the heart of day-to-day life at our colleges.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The report makes a number of valid and valuable recommendations for community colleges—among them, “strong partnerships with employers and the economic development community,” an increased use of market and labor data to pinpoint workforce needs, stronger collaboration with high schools to improve student readiness for college-level work, and a coherent plan for accountability. Especially important, I think, is the need for employers and colleges to collaborate in order to analyze and address the “mismatch” between unfilled middle-skilled jobs and college workforce development. Which jobs, exactly, are going unfilled? What courses or programs should colleges provide in order to prepare workers for these jobs? If this report can lead to more precise answers to these questions, it will have served an important purpose.

Yet I would emphasize that, as the report notes, our colleges are already engaged in, with demonstrated success, many of the strategies the report recommends. For instance, in 2010 our community colleges provided customized workforce training for over 600 organizations, and between 2006 and 2010, we awarded more than 12,750 credit certificates in specialized technical and career programs, while serving nearly 427,000 students in non-credit job skills training courses. College administrators are in regular contact with local businesses to assess their workforce needs
and provide programs to serve those needs. And, though there is certainly much room for improvement, we also collaborate extensively with high schools throughout the Commonwealth through such initiatives as dual enrollment, articulation agreements with vocational technical high schools, and training to better prepare high school students to take the Accuplacer test. Trustees at our colleges are well aware of national and state initiatives to improve student completion and graduation rates, and we are diligent in fulfilling our duty to hold our colleges accountable for promoting student success. At North Shore, for example, we devote part of each trustee meeting specifically to student success. We’ll examine a factor important to student success—for instance, academic advising—pinpoint problems in our policies, and devise strategies to improve our performance.

MISSION: At several points the report suggests that the mission of Massachusetts community colleges is too complex or multi-faceted, and that we need to focus more exclusively on workforce development. This analysis, I think, misconstrues both our mandate from the Commonwealth and the nature of workforce development. Our community colleges were created to have a broad, multi-pronged mission, both to benefit the state’s economy and to maximize educational opportunities for our diverse citizens. Some students need technical training to give them the skills necessary for specific jobs—what is typically labeled “workforce development.” Some need a high-quality, yet relatively inexpensive way to acquire skills and college credits before they transfer to four-year institutions and eventually enter the workforce with a bachelor’s degree or beyond. In 2010, over 4500 of these community college transfers were enrolled at UMass or state universities, and they too are part of the process of workforce development. Other students—over 60% of community college enrollees—need at least some developmental education to prepare them for either specialized technical training or for an associate’s degree or beyond. Serving these students well is an enormous challenge—resource-intensive, with a long, rocky road toward
success—but if we believe in the principle of open access, it is our mission and duty to serve them so that they too can enter the workforce as skilled employees. Several stakeholders in the report suggest that we should focus less on remediation and instead enroll students in “credentialing” programs that will enhance their career prospects. The problem is that, without remediation, these students will not be prepared for such programs. The various facets of our mission are interdependent, each equally important and mutually reinforcing, not separate and competing units. And, in the long run, they all contribute to workforce development.

FUNDING: In the section “The Community College Challenge,” the report states: “And, while the need for a skilled workforce has grown exponentially in recent years—and enrollment in community colleges has increased—state support for these important institutions has experienced deep cuts. From 2004 to 2009, full time equivalent (FTE) enrollment in public higher education increased by 11.2 percent. During the same period, higher education appropriations for each FTE student have decreased by 13.3 percent.” Later, the report quotes a community college president on the question of funding for workforce development: “We totally embrace the idea of community colleges, workforce development, and economic development working together. We have been fighting for a seat at the table for 20 years. We do workforce development totally without resources.” To me, these are the most important statements in the document. Despite insufficient resources, community colleges have been remarkably effective in fulfilling our mission. Our main problem is not governance, or misalignment, or lack of accountability—it’s the chronic underfunding of our system by state government. In a nutshell: more students, less money, more calls to improve student success or workforce development. And, if anything, the situation is worse than the report indicates. Currently, according to the report, direct appropriations from the Legislature constitute 67% of community college funding, but if you look at audited financial statements, the figure is closer to 40% for most campuses—a fact that has forced trustees, with great
reluctance, to raise student fees. Yet, despite its own evidence that our budgets have been
devastated, the Foundation report does not call for increased state support—the one thing we most
urgently need. Instead, we get proposals to “stabilize” funding or “consolidate” line items or
develop metrics-based formulas as incentives to improve accountability and performance. Don’t get
me wrong. As a trustee representing the citizens of the Commonwealth, I firmly believe in
accountability, and, on principle at least, I have no objection to funding formulas, metrics-based or
otherwise. But it’s disingenuous to dwell on how to cut up a pie—or how to compete for pieces—
when the pie itself is steadily shrinking. Having served on our board’s finance committee for the
past seven years, I know that, in the absence of metrics or disincentives, we still husband our
resources scrupulously. We have to. And, the Tennessee formula notwithstanding, we don’t need
financial motivation to care about at-risk students. That’s our mission, and we embrace it. What we
need is funding—and dedicated advocates who will lobby for that funding—so that we can continue
to carry out that mission. The report suggests that our best chance for “adequate funding” is to
implement a funding formula and provide proof of reform, innovation, and increased efficiency.
One can always hope, I suppose, but in my four decades of involvement with North Shore
Community College, I have yet to see to see any correlation between state appropriations and the
performance of our colleges.

ADVOCACY: The report is confusing, if not self-contradictory, in its comments on
advocacy. On the one hand, it acknowledges that effective advocacy—in the case of
“groundbreaking K-12 education reform legislation”—or the lack of such advocacy has been a
decisive factor in determining whether educational reform is legislated. In reference to a
comprehensive higher education reform bill in 2006, the report states: “But the absence of organized
and sustained external pressure, most notably from employers and business leaders, resulted in the
clock expiring on the legislative session without the passage of a bill.” And the report endorses the
formation of strong centralized boards, such as Arkansas’ Higher Education Coordinating Board, on the grounds that such boards can provide “balanced advocacy for community college needs.” Yet the report seems to refute its own point when it states that “advocacy on behalf of public education” is not “the ideal role” of our own Board of Higher Education and should no longer be a BHE responsibility. A concurrent recommendation is the elimination of higher education trustees from BHE representation—another point that seems self-contradictory in light of its praise for the Arkansas board, which, in addition to representatives from business and industry, requires that half its members have experience as local board trustees. One wonders: if the Massachusetts BHE abandoned its role of advocacy, and excluded representation from college trustees, who would provide “balanced advocacy for community college needs” in our Commonwealth?

GOVERNANCE: The report calls for more centralized governance in Massachusetts, devoted primarily to workforce development, with one strong governing board (an “enhanced” BHE) for the community college system and with individual boards of trustees replaced by (or “maintained as”) advisory councils. I don’t believe that such centralization would be suitable for the Commonwealth—in part because of our multi-faceted mission, in part because more centralized governance would likely become more remote from the needs (including workforce needs) of our communities, more cumbersome in its bureaucracy, and ultimately more expensive in administrative costs. Most importantly, it would be disastrous to diminish the involvement of local board trustees. As a group, community college trustees (who are appointed by the Governor of the Commonwealth) are dedicated and diverse representatives of our communities, knowledgeable about local needs and problems, well-connected to local business leaders (if not leaders themselves), instrumental in raising funds for our institutions, and, above all, committed to serving as advocates for community college students. We would not get that level of sustained commitment from local advisory councils.
At the same time, I believe that we do have much to learn from those states cited in the report—Virginia, North Carolina, and others—that have strong track records in workforce development. We do need more public/private partnerships, such as Skillworks and CONNECT, both referenced in the report. We do need more responsive and more comprehensive customized training for businesses. Our colleges need to follow through with the workforce alignment initiatives already underway—the “promising models” cited in the report. And we need a more effective use of system-wide data collection—a primary goal of the Vision Project, which was initiated in part “to use data to align higher education with workforce needs.” Under the leadership of the BHE, and in partnership with businesses, I believe that our colleges can achieve the main goal defined in the report—the education of a skilled workforce through a focused, cohesive, and effective plan.

CONCLUSION: Despite my misgivings about the report, I think that “The Case for Community Colleges” does provide a valuable framework for further dialogue and action to improve workforce development in Massachusetts. Certainly I intend to share the report with my fellow trustees. In these challenging times, I am proud of what our colleges have accomplished, and continue to accomplish each day, but, as public servants, we have a duty to be self-critical in carrying out our mission, to accept challenges for self-improvement, and to understand how our efforts are perceived by other stakeholders. What are our strengths? What are our weaknesses? What are we capable of? In its introduction the report states that momentum is building in Massachusetts to strengthen community colleges and our efforts at workforce development. I truly hope that is the case. I’m encouraged by the thought that, on this issue, all the stakeholders share common goals: educational opportunities for our citizens, skilled workers for essential jobs, and the economic health of our Commonwealth. I look forward to fruitful collaborations, with these goals to guide us.