

**NEW MEXICO HIGHER EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
UPDATES FROM THE CABINET SECRETARY OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

May 26, 2009

Dear Colleagues:

In my first column since being named Cabinet Secretary of Higher Education by Governor Richardson, I thought it would be of interest to those of us working to help students succeed in higher education if I outlined what I believe are the specific areas of concentration for NMHED in the next two years. Following President Obama's lead, it is apparent that we have an urgent need to shift the tone of our focus from one that is negative and defeatist to one of solutions and, I believe, hope.

KNOWN STATISTICS - Almost everyone in New Mexico knows the conditions that have caused poor statewide graduation rates: we all know the obvious, major obstacles we face: inadequate preparation, socio-economic factors, too many institutions for our state population, student under-performance and apathy, lack of parent involvement, student inability to concentrate and focus on tasks, lack of incentives in higher education for teaching, and so forth. We need to look forward to success and not back to failures.

FUTURE SOLUTIONS - We believe NMHED should concentrate on solutions that can cause some fairly immediate and maybe even remarkable improvements in the quality of higher education in New Mexico. Higher retention rates, greater degree completion rates, increased student satisfaction, and cost efficiencies can be the result of connecting state **Educational Policy** to specific **Performance** goals for each type of institution.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY #1: GENERAL EDUCATION REFORM

It is important to realize that higher retention and graduation rates are not the **actual** goal; they are the results of substantial improvements in the experience of college, including faculty innovation, campus-wide intellectual excitement, student engagement in active learning and problem solving environments, and direct attention to the curricular structure of the educational experience. Do the students love learning, can they choose their own pathways, are they fascinated by the ideas they are exposed to? Or are they bored by a passive environment of listening in lecture classes to material that they believe they have learned in high school? Do they approach general education as a series of boxes advisors check off until they can really start to be in college? Is there any coherent rationale for our Core Curriculum?

For these reasons, we at NMHED believe the faculty statewide have to be charged with modernizing and streamlining the curriculum into, for example, four skill sets: critical and/or innovative thinking; computation or statistical data analysis; writing in the major discipline; and problem-based learning or research methodology. The four courses would be offered within the existing course offerings and not be proposed as separate isolated hurdles. This would substitute for the 35 hours of required content-based courses that may be preventing students from finding a major, obtaining a degree, and discovering a career. Students are graduating with more than 150 earned hours and sometimes up to 170 attempted hours. Additionally, almost the entire general education curriculum is borne in our universities by the colleges or divisions of arts and sciences. The rest of the faculty needs to be asked to participate. Here, NMHED should liberate the students to choose their destiny and unlock the creative power of the faculty in every college.

MISSION SPECIFIC AND PERFORMANCE FUNDING

On May 12, 2009, the I and G Steering Committee, which oversees the Formula Task Force, generally agreed that the current funding formula is input driven: it is based upon credit hour accumulation and entices colleges and universities to competitively recruit students who may not be appropriately

prepared for those colleges or universities. This creates a vicious cycle of funding institutions, in particular, research universities, with students who have proven decade after decade that they have roughly a four in 10 chance of graduating in six years. The only way to break this cycle of defeat is to begin with cost analysis of the various institutions and devise an appropriation formula that recognizes the different missions of community colleges, regional colleges and research universities and rewards schools for making the innovative changes that will produce students who are self-directed, skilled, educated and ready to begin a career or further their education. While New Mexico is 11th in the nation in sending high school graduates to college and 87% of the national average in third semester retention, we are 45th in college graduation rates.

NMHED believes that a formula that address the departure rate from the fourth semester to graduation, and one which almost immediately rewards schools on a semester by semester performance basis, can address the departure rate for sophomores, juniors and seniors. Enrollment driven formula and the Legislative Lottery Scholarship Program account for relative success in college going rates and some success in retention to the third semester. Performance funding could do something similar for the other semesters, and thus for graduation rates if innovation results in increased retention through the course of matriculation.

NMHED AND PED WORKING TOGETHER

Data sharing and common student numbering systems, through the data warehouse project, will help the state better track academic performance and cost analysis, as well as appropriate funding.

Clifford Adleman, formerly of the U.S. Department of Education, has clearly delineated the relationship between the number and intensity of college preparation courses and degree completion in college. Practically every moment of cooperation between NMHED and PED should be aimed at discovering contemporary and cost efficient ways of providing our public school students with the recommendations provided on page 27 of the Toolbox Revisited. The high school curriculum Adelman advances produces a 95% bachelor's degree completion rate. It may take decades, but this is the proven path to excellence.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY #2: NEW BENCHMARKS THROUGH PEER COMPARISONS

For at least two decades, administrators at our institutions have rightly claimed that the former Commission on Higher Education's peer institution lists are not reliable and accurate benchmarks for comparison. NMHED should work with Office of Institutional Research personnel across the state to update these peer lists to be more realistically comparable schools.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY #3: HIGHER LEARNING CENTER

There is 2000 legislation that authorizes the establishment of the Learning Centers Act in New Mexico. The College of Santa Fe, if it is to regain momentum, could serve as such a cooperative center to offer degrees to local residents interested in particular careers. NMHED supports this educational opportunity and looks forward to working with our institutions to design a center that responds to students' needs.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY #4: LOOKING AT OTHER MODELS AND TO THE FUTURE

As a result of the proposed, incremental changes to the funding formula, 10 years down the road the state has to think of alternative opportunities for students: Many states have a three tiered system of higher education: research universities, state colleges or universities, and community colleges. If the formula progressively rewards performance, admission standards to the research universities will rise, and we must have a third option between the community college and the research university; perhaps a state college. Most of our regional schools are located in areas where the population is relatively low, but in Albuquerque, the most populous metropolitan area of the state, we have two choices for college-going students: a community college or a research university. Las Cruces also presents these two options. Supposing, Regents, central administrators, and lawmakers considered eventually making the UNM Rio Rancho campus and NMSU's Doña Ana Branch Campus state

colleges, smaller, more intimate, more flexible and innovative, student-centered four-year options for students who desire a four-year degree, but do not feel prepared for or interested in larger, more challenging institutions. Again, the issue is choice, the formula changes could sustain the research universities, and a much greater percentage of students might come away from a state college with a degree, a sense of achievement, and a job. Many of our state policies inadvertently produce young people who never recover from the feeling of failure, only because we recruited them knowing the odds of graduating were stacked against them.

I hope you will join me in helping achieve these recommendations. Together, we can give our students improved self-esteem, change our state's perception of itself and make improvements that will make our state an example.

Sincerely,

Peter White, Ph.D.
Cabinet Secretary