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CHE: A Catalyst for Change in South Carolina Higher Education
South Carolina Commission on Higher Education
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Delivered By Glenn F. McConnell '69

Good morning.

I want to start by thanking all of you for your work on the commission. You serve a vital function in our public higher education system, and your efforts have a direct, positive impact on the people of South Carolina.

Today, I briefly want to talk about how CHE can be a catalyst for change in South Carolina higher education. CHE was created to be a coordinating body, to assist higher education and the state's public institutions in delivering services to our people. As such, there are some reforms that, if enacted, will help South Carolina's public colleges and universities more efficiently serve their students and the state.

South Carolina must continue to move toward a regulatory and funding model that unlocks the potential of our colleges and universities. Multiple layers of bureaucracy cost us money, don't necessarily guarantee accountability, and constrain our ability to react quickly to changes in the marketplace.

All over the country, state governments are reevaluating the way they regulate and fund public higher education.

South Carolina should join the list of states that are adopting and experimenting with reforms that would untie the hands of our public universities and allow us to better meet the educational, economic, and social needs of our state.

Our higher education system is out of balance. It is underfunded, yet fully regulated. But not always in the right places.

So, how do we make substantive changes that will better the educational experience colleges and universities provide to their students? We, as institutions and organizations, adapt to the needs of the students and the communities we serve.

For organizational purposes, I'm going to number my ideas for potential reforms. That being said, these are not numbered in order of importance.

First, this Commission should expand its current research functions. The system needs to identify and make recommendations to the governing boards and administrations in South Carolina about best practices and policies regarding retention, course offerings, cost efficiencies, unmet needs, and other important student and university issues based on data.

These objective recommendations should not be a one-size fits all approach. Instead, these recommendations should complement the uniqueness of each institution and the needs of each region to help universities excel in carrying out their public mission.

Second, this Commission should consider endorsing some changes to the LIFE Scholarship to the General Assembly. Scholarships change the entire trajectory of a student's life and, in turn, are a public good. Scholarships provide students the opportunity to become the next great entrepreneur or groundbreaking scientist. I firmly believe that investing in people is a positive investment in the future of this state and the world.

Therefore, why are we putting such a high amount of pressure on students to maintain a 3.0 cumulative GPA each year so they can retain their LIFE scholarships?

GPA is not often the best indicator of academic success. For admissions purposes, while a GPA is important, we look holistically at the student to determine whether they are qualified for admittance and to predict their academic success at the College.

LIFE Scholarships should be awarded the same way. I believe the GPA requirement should be lowered or perhaps be completely replaced with another measure of academic progress. This would encourage students to take the hard, challenging courses and not just look for the easy path to a 3.0 GPA.

Let's face it, not all students enter college and perform remarkably well their freshman year. The change in environment, acclimating to their surroundings, living away from their parents, time management, studying, mental and physical health, and social pressures all directly influence a student's academic performance. So, we should be doing our best to support our students and fostering a positive level of self-esteem.

We should be letting them know that, from time to time, we all struggle, but it's not about how you fall, but how you get back up, learn from the experience, and grow and develop as a student and a person. We should encourage them to take the tougher and more challenging courses rather than worry about maintaining the perfect scholarship GPA.

Further in a student's junior and senior year, they are taking courses for their major and they are usually upper level. As such, they are harder and more stressful. We should be encouraging students to take a challenge with the more complex material and take the courses that will prepare them for careers in our global society, not the courses that are an "easy A." Though, we don't admit that there are any "easy As" at the College of Charleston.

Taking the easy way out never serves a person well in life, and we want to reinforce that message to our students. We want them to be ready to work and future leaders in their careers, communities, and the world.

Further, this will help encourage students to go take courses in the STEM fields. If students know that a 3.0 GPA is not required for them to maintain their scholarship, they could decide to pursue a degree in the STEM or earn a minor therein. And we all know that universities around the country need to produce more graduates with varied course background and are, along with employers, putting an increased focus on the STEM fields. So, we should encourage our students to take more challenging courses without the pressure of losing their scholarships.

Third, when it comes to approving or terminating academic programs on an institution's CORE campus, final authority should be left to each institution's governing board, but CHE should definitely make recommendations.

Because the governing boards are the oversight bodies and are involved in the macro and micro management of their respective institutions, they know the campus climate, the campus attractions, and the institutions' budgets and understand the allocation of resources and the needs of the student body better than this Commission.

But together, we create the sort of public review that is needed and our boards are more accountable. That being said, CHE should STILL consult with each institution about the need and student demand for the program and make proposals.

And this Commission should ensure that the location of the exact program or a similar one like it at another university in the same locale is taken into final consideration in an effort to limit duplication and competition across the state. The Commission needs to bring the big picture to the light. And put each institution in a position of having to objectively justify its decision.

My fourth recommendation closely follows my third. I actually believe it's one of the biggest roles this Commission can perform. CHE should have a say in the duplication of effort in our state. Before a university's governing board can approve the operation of a new or existing program OUTSIDE of a 50 mile radius of an institution's core campus, the governing board would need CHE approval. This power would prevent competition and duplication and would ensure cost efficiency.

I see no reason why state universities should be competing with each other for students and finances. We have plenty of competition from universities in neighboring states and across the country. We need to efficiently use our resource to give options - not multiple public providers for the same service in the same area.

I have tried to work out a collaboration agreement with a large university for the Charleston area where there is little overlap.

Sadly, the one area of overlap is master's degrees in computer science where the College of Charleston and The Citadel have an existing joint program in the area currently. Because some big university faculty apparently want to teach in Charleston, the big university reluctantly gives in to duplicate in our area what the local institutions do at their campus. So, the whole collaboration agreement grinds to a halt. If CHE could prevent the duplication, collaboration would go forward. Our universities and colleges need to concentrate on accessibility and affordability, not on someone's ambition to expand or teach in another town.

I've said before, and I'll say it again: The future of higher education is in collaboration, not competition and duplication. I think this recommendation will reinforce that message to school administrations and Board of Trustees across South Carolina. It will ensure growth is governed by what is best for student needs, not a university's wants.

Fifth, CHE needs the tools to address the for-profit institutions operating in South Carolina. They should be closely scrutinized before they are approved. According to Cornell University professor Suzanne Mettler, "For-profit colleges comprise the most rapidly-growing sector of higher education, now enrolling 13 percent of U.S. college students. Today, the sector utilizes one in four federal student aid dollars and accounts for nearly half of all student loan defaults."

Many for-profit schools enroll low-income and minority students; however, most of these students (94%) cannot afford the cost of an education and end up taking out predatory loans to afford the steep tuition. And IF they are among the 22% that graduate, and that's a big IF, they cannot secure a job that pays them well enough to repay their student loan debts, which is at a median level of \$33,000.

I would like to see CHE identify a way to oversee these institutions as it does the public ones or encourage Congress to impose tighter oversight on them. This recommendation is not an assault on the free market. I firmly believe in the free market, I have all my life. No, this is about ensuring schools do not do more harm than good to the citizens of this state. Our citizens deserve high-quality educational options, and those institutions not providing such should have more oversight.

Not including cosmetology and massage schools, approximately 21 for-profit and non-profit private universities and institutes have invaded Charleston: Strayer, Virginia College, Webster University, St. Leo University, ITT Technical Institute, Southern Wesleyan University, ECPI College of Technology, and more.

So, we've got 21 for-profit universities; plus Clemson; USC; CofC; MUSC; The Citadel; Trident Tech; and Charleston Southern ... that's 28 universities and institutions with footprints in metro Charleston.

We've got to closely review and scrutinize any great migration of for-profit institutions into South Carolina. As I said earlier, the future of higher education is in collaboration, not competition and duplication.

Speaking of collaboration, my sixth recommendation is that CHE should encourage more transfer and articulation agreements.

I understand this Commission has previously approved an articulation agreement that details 86 courses that transfer among South Carolina institutions, and I applaud all of you for this move.

Having a set number of courses that transfer is a good starting point to ensuring ease of transferability for our state's students.

That being said, it is my understanding, while these 86 courses transfer that does not mean they will count as credit for a student's core education requirements. Instead they might transfer as elective credits. I find this troubling because a student may transfer with 60 credits, but only so many will go toward their general education program or major, and, thus, they are still behind their peers who didn't transfer.

I would like to see this body create a statewide transfer and articulation policy that ensures the right credits transfer for electives and core requirements.

A statewide public university uniform numbering system in general education courses at a minimum would help make the system seamless and easy for parents and students to understand. This would be making the system student-focused.

This could particularly be helpful to the College of Charleston as we expand our Connect2 program statewide. This program will provide a new pathway to help students navigate their entry into the College of Charleston. Students who are admitted into the program will be able to transfer from any technical college in South Carolina to the College of Charleston to complete their four-year degree.

The collaborative agreement provides a longstanding, quality undergraduate experience for Lowcountry students and those seeking to come to Charleston from across the state.

Making it simple and clear for students and their families on the most affordable pathways to a 4-year degree in four years should be the priority of this Commission and all South Carolina institutions. Let's help our students and their families save money so they don't have to take more courses than needed because some classes didn't transfer properly or as they thought they would or because they didn't understand which numbered courses from one school to another was the equivalent.

This leads me to my seventh recommendation, rewarding institutions for collaborating with each other. There should be a certain pot of money controlled by CHE to be apportioned out to schools who sign collaboration agreements that will keep down costs for students and help them receive a proper college education.

The monies could be given out in the first year of a joint agreement for collaboration as seed money to help the program get off the ground. Or, schools that maintain and grow these collaborative operations get rewarded annually.

My eighth recommendation is that this Commission should be empowered to create more categories for state institutions. As you know, currently, we have four public groups: research, comprehensive four-year, two-year regional campuses, and technical colleges.

These four public groups do not accurately describe the many institutions in the state, the many very different institutional missions, and the uniqueness of each university and college. Nor do these groupings take into consideration the direction in which some of these institutions want or need to head.

For example, the College through, its component, the University of Charleston, South Carolina, will eventually become a very targeted research institution where we can develop doctoral programs for which there is a demand by students and a demand for graduates in the local, state, and regional communities. On the other hand, we will never be or want to be a full-fledged research university.

We only desire to be able to award terminal degrees where location and need dictate. And since the university is located at the College, not the College at the university, our liberal arts and sciences and business undergraduate foundation does not get swallowed up into a full research institution. It maintains its own separate identity, focus, and history that we've been cultivating since our founding. The relationship just described between the College and University of Charleston, South Carolina is the only arrangement of its kind that I know of in the United States.

However, under the current grouping framework, there is no exact place for the College's true format and desired role. As such, I strongly encourage this Commission looking into more categories such as targeted research institution, regional master's degree granting institution, and more.

This prohibits mission creep and allows schools to fill needs in their areas.

Ninth, first generation students and the challenges they face are worthy of our attention. Higher education diversity is enhanced when we can create pathways for them to succeed.

Having a staff advisor, student advisors, a specific office for advice, and the financial tools to help them when there is an unplanned cost really assists them. We have been successful with a federal TRIO program we have called ROAR, but it has been terminated for us by a negative funding decision in Washington. At the same time, federal and state funds for public higher education have remained stagnant or shrunk. We need help to continue helping others.

I secured the private funds to keep our program going for 1-and-a-half more years, but we need public help for the grants and assistance.

When people wish to pull themselves up, earn an education, and succeed in life, we should provide the lifeboats to get them to the success line. This Commission should speak up for this type of initiative in South Carolina. Funding of programs that help first generation students would give us the tools to change the trajectory of a young person's life. It will be a stretch for us to go it alone. The state needs to be our partner.

My final recommendation is not so much a recommendation, but a solicitation for help.

The College and the other public institutions in the state need your help to secure more funding for higher education and to secure a bond bill.

You might have seen two op-eds from me that were published around the state in which I called for the General Assembly to invest more in higher education.

I made the case that it's the state's responsibility to invest in its public institutions, especially in regards to helping maintain the public buildings we use for classrooms, labs, and offices.

If the College and other institutions are to fulfill our public mission to educate the people of this state and those who come here from around the country and world, the state must invest in public institutions and our efforts to properly train people for jobs, especially those jobs in South Carolina that non-residents are coming here to fill.

We need a bond bill. It's now been over a full decade since the last one. So please push for one. These messages of investing in higher education at higher funding levels and the need for a bond bill are ones I will keep discussing and reinforcing with our elected officials and with external groups such as Rotary Clubs. I also have been making the point that the general fund was set up for core functions, such as constitutional administration, health, education, law enforcement, and more - not for roads. To divert these funds today will be robbing tomorrow.

These points certainly will be part of my message when I appear before the Senate Finance Committee later this month.

It is extremely important that all of us in this room be champions and advocates for higher education to our respective state representatives and senators. While we do not need you to be our official lobbyists for any specific institution, we do need you to be higher education champions here in Columbia, out in the community, at your places of worship, at work, and at your volunteer organizations and service clubs.

We need you to reiterate the importance of our citizens being properly educated and the economic value that universities and colleges contribute to our respective communities and our state as a whole. It's time for the state to start investing in higher education again, and I believe this Commission needs to support this message as loudly as possible.

In closing, I would like to reiterate how important I believe it is that we continue to push for reforms that ensure CHE is a catalyst for change in South Carolina Higher Education.

We must also continue to work together for the greater good of our public higher education system and our state's economic prosperity.

In terms of our state's economic development, the idea is pretty simple. Imagine a three-legged stool: One leg is the recruitment of industry (bringing jobs to the state), the second leg is our transportation system (getting workers to those jobs) and the third leg is education (helping workers earn and hold onto those jobs).

Unfortunately, we are adequately investing in only one of the three legs: the recruitment of industry. And while our state leaders have done a remarkable and praiseworthy job using incentives to attract top-level businesses, our state will never significantly better the quality of life for all its citizens without increased investment in the other two legs.

By working together, we can ensure that our higher education system becomes more competitive with other states, and, thus, our citizens are properly educated for the jobs that are available.

Our universities are the solution, not the problem. They are the linchpin for economic development, high-tech innovation, scientific research, job creation, an improved K-12 system, and a high quality of life. We can't afford to let higher education slip backward. We need it to move forward and collaborate.

Adults with a college degree live longer, happier, and healthier lives; are better parents; and give back more to their communities. Every college degree earned by a South Carolinian is a long-term investment in the success and future of our state. You can be the catalyst for change to a student-focused system.

With that, I conclude my remarks. I thank you for your attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.