A NEW VISION NEEDED: January 14, 2010

EXPLORING THE CASE FOR A NEW STATE COLLEGE FOR LAKE & SUMTER COUNTIES

OUR COMMUNITY’S COLLEGE OF CHOICE

FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

Dr. Charles R. Mojock

PRESIDENT, LAKE-SUMTER COMMUNITY COLLEGE

As I view the current conditions and look ahead to the future direction of the state of Florida, I believe the time has come to accept the reality that under the conditions that Lake-Sumter Community College now finds itself, it is imperative that the institution give full and serious consideration to undertaking the same change for which most, if not all, remaining community colleges are now planning. Given the action of the Florida Legislature, first to authorize four year degrees, and then to change the name of the system from the Florida Community College System to Florida College System, the conventional wisdom would say that our community college as a community college is becoming obsolete in Florida; that for Lake-Sumter Community College there is only the option to pursue becoming a four-year state college and by that change join the now-existing Florida College System or lose relevance and our competitive position to neighboring colleges. Whether the conventional wisdom is correct or not, the fact is that the Florida Community College System, which was created in the administration of Governor Leroy Collins and designed by Dr. James Wattenbarger, is no more. The new Florida College System is now in place, and we at LSCC must determine our place within it.

But in considering any change, one fact above all else must be made and remain crystal clear. It is this -- a new state college for Lake and Sumter counties must be what Lake-Sumter Community College is and has always been. It must continue to be an institution devoted to our community, to its citizen-students, and to meeting their educational needs. I will not allow it to be otherwise. We cannot and will not allow our excellent community college to become a mediocre state college. And, if no longer a community college in name, we nonetheless will remain the community’s college—for today and tomorrow. You should expect no less from us, and we will continue to deliver no less to you.

BACKGROUND

Initially, the original Florida Community College System was and remained for many decades ahead of its time and envied by educators around the Nation. Founded in the wake of the landmark Brown decision by the 1954 US Supreme Court, Florida’s community colleges were an original plan to provide expanded educational opportunities to all Floridians, regardless of race. While in other states, governors and state legislatures steadfastly resisted desegregating their systems, Collins and Wattenbarger, although not openly espousing integration politically, did nonetheless successfully plan
for it. They opened new community colleges and added existing African-American schools which they transformed into community colleges as well. Then, they slowly but deliberately meshed the two to create the Florida system. Their plan not only produced a cadre of qualified minority administrators and faculty, it also produced a system designed to meet the educational and vocational goals of all citizens. The creation of the original Florida community college system, therefore, was no small or insignificant achievement.

During the several decades of rapid growth that followed, community college enrollments, despite inequity in funding, kept responsible pace. There was developed a common mantra among community colleges that their doors were always open, that student success was always possible with support and encouragement, and changing needs could always be met by adapting and evolving the training and the technical-vocational curricula as rapidly as necessary. In short, community colleges advertised themselves as being able "to be all things to all people." Whether a student needed remedial work, mechanical training, a GED, or a university transfer track to become a doctor, Florida's community colleges provided the opportunity.

But with the equally rapid rise of the regional universities occurring at the same time, Florida community colleges also frequently found themselves complaining of "second-class citizenship." The Florida Legislature principally was the source for concern. Disparate state funding for like courses that favored the universities, a lack of legislative interest in the professional accomplishments of teaching faculty, and the expanding burden of remedial education in the wake of higher university admissions standards were signs that the community colleges were deemed less critical to Florida's future.

Florida community colleges, including our own, responded well to these challenges. To compensate for revenue inequity, the community colleges developed systems of adjunct instruction. No community college in Florida could have survived without hiring, supporting, and using well prepared, qualified and professional adjunct faculty. Nor can we do without adjuncts in this day and time. Florida community colleges also adopted the nation's most expansive staff and program development (SPD) grants program to support and encourage innovation and excellence in the classroom. SPD dollars were set at two per cent of the previous year's operating budget with few state restrictions on its use. SPD served the community colleges' faculty and staff well for many years. Funding curriculum changes, special projects, educational coursework, and professional conferences helped Florida community colleges create and sustain a system of excellence, one recognized as such by peers in other states, and one that is the legacy that community colleges have delivered to the citizenry of this State. That legacy includes us at LSCC. We have been and continue to proudly be one of the highest performance learning achievement community colleges in the state system.

I have provided this retrospective view of what LSCC has been for a purpose: as we move forward, I want to make sure that LSCC does not become a mediocre state college that supplanted an excellent community college. To assist you with gaining a comprehensive understanding of how we intend to avoid that, I begin first with a review of what we have accomplished over the past few years and what we had hoped to accomplish that was thwarted by the current economic crisis. All the efforts
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— those that have been successful and those that were not — are hallmarks of our sustaining commitments to meeting our community’s educational needs.

Finally, I will outline some options and possibilities of how we can expect to approach the creation of a new state college while remaining true to our mission, without sacrificing the quality or excellence in what we do.

THE MAGNET PROJECT

When we began the Magnet Project in conjunction with the Lake County District School Board and South Lake Hospital, a number of important goals for LSCC were set in place. First, the project would highlight our South Lake campus’ commitment to economic development and employment opportunities in the health and wellness sectors. Second, the project would expand our vision of the South Lake Campus as LSCC’s “partnership campus.” Third, the project would provide LSCC with a new health-science building on the Clermont campus, a much needed educational addition.

As we had already developed strong and successful sharing of programs and physical space with the University of Central Florida and with the Lake County library system, we were working toward another important partnership with the construction of a high school academy in health sciences. Before the current fiscal crisis overtook our plans by drying up state matching funds, we had signed a Memorandum of Agreement, had signed off on a detailed Interlocal Agreement, had selected an architect for planning and design, had provided a 10 acre land site on our South Lake campus and had received $3 million from the Lake County School Board and $1 million from the South Lake Hospital to be used to drawdown the matching money from the State.

To compensate for the delay in capital outlay funding for the proposed health-science building, LSCC immediately constructed a new portable science lab building so that students at South Lake would not find their educational goals and needs impaired. On a short term basis, the problem of science instructional space has been resolved. On a longer term, there must be a new science building for the South Lake campus.

“WHILE WE ARE WAITING”

At the last joint board meeting in June 2008 of LSCC Trustees, members of the School Board, and Trustees of South Lake Hospital concerning the Magnet Project, it was agreed to explore options and alternatives to secure the necessary funding to continue moving the project forward. At that time, none of the project principals could have realized the magnitude of the economic downturn that was fast approaching. LSCC looked at foundation fundraising, a community capital campaign, and even the possibility of a loan against the future funding of the science building. We also began a process of looking at alternatives to the Magnet Project for meeting the shortage in skilled health and health-related workers.
With the help of our consultant and under the capable direction of college academic administration, LSCC began development of an entirely new but less costly curriculum approach to the health workforce shortage issue. Project staff from LSCC then began a search for reasonable options. We made exploratory trips to Santa Fe College in Gainesville in an effort to develop a futuristic model partnership based on and including Shands Hospital, the principal medical facility in a fourteen county alliance of high schools, community colleges, and clinical sites. What originally attracted us was their use of local certification standards for employment; what has sustained our interest is their ability to expand the program to north Florida rural counties. We envisioned that model working for Sumter County as well as Lake County. Instruction is delivered over the Internet but on-campus laboratory time is required. Students enrolled in the north Florida program drive to Gainesville an average two times per week for lab work.

We developed the following plan. Basically it calls for a structured career path for already employed medical personnel as well as newcomers with a high school degree. The work is ongoing. Task schedules and time frames also are attached. (See Attachment) But again, the burdens of the current fiscal crisis militate against successful implementation at this time. Facing budget cuts, furloughs, and even the possibility in the future of reduction in force, adding new staff for new degrees and certificates has to be very carefully considered. Choices will have to be made that reflect priorities that we have established to remain fiscally prudent, educationally sound, and sensitive to community and student needs. One of those priorities is to be further improving our existing programs before we introduce new ones. A second priority is that any new opportunities that do attract external funding have to be considered first.

**LSCC HEALTH PROGRAMS**

LSCC is moving forward in health education, reflecting these two major priorities. I initiated discussions with each of the area hospital administrators as to how to increase nursing enrollments. Those discussions will continue. LSCC is also now in the final stages of a most important element of sound nursing education. By June, 2010, we will have achieved national accreditation from the National League of Nursing for our nursing program. NLN accreditation is the universally recognized standard of excellence, and all of us at LSCC will be proud to achieve it.

In June, 2009, LSCC was awarded another substantial grant that opens new doors in health service support for Lake and Sumter counties. It is an example of the strategic value of priority 2 above, implementing new programs when funding does become available. It is a new program - Electronic Health Record Support Technician. LSCC received notification of a contract award from Workforce Central Florida for $100,000 to provide a short-term pilot training program in a new and emerging occupation within the healthcare industry. This pilot program is designed to train entry-level workers in the preparation and use of electronic health records. Project completion date is December, 2010. Over 200 applications were received for this high demand, 12-week training program. Applicants were screened and interviewed for the 24 seats available in the program, which began January 14, 2010.
In October 2009, LSCC collaborated with Workforce Central Florida, Seminole State College, and University of Central Florida on a Workforce Florida “Paperless Initiative” grant project, which was designed to create a new comprehensive Health Information Technology career ladder curriculum. This curriculum will prepare a workforce which can meet the demands of employers as they make the transition to Electronic Health Records. LSCC is receiving $97,200 to develop and implement an 18-credit hour community college technical certificate program to train up to 20 participants in Health Information Technology starting January 2010.

DISCUSSIONS WITH LAKE TECHNICAL CENTER

I initiated discussions with Lake Technical Center that were badly misinterpreted. For what appears to have been political motivation, my proposal for a joint meeting of the two boards was rejected by the Board of Lake Tech. It is not my intent here to rehash the controversy or to defend my actions: it is, however, important to place the proposal I offered in a proper context. It, too, leads to the need to transform Lake-Sumter Community College.

My original proposal was timed to the renewal of the Lake Tech charter by the Lake County School District. Lake Tech is one of two such independently chartered centers in Florida operated under School Boards. Fourteen of the Florida community colleges have responsibility for “Tech Center” programs (and remain under the authorization of those which already have changed to state colleges). The rest are operated by school boards.

I freely admit that because of my long experience at an institution that had responsibility for Tech Center Programs, I have always been a firm supporter of the comprehensive community college mission and purpose. I also freely admit that I believe that the citizens of Lake County would be well served by a joint discussion between the boards of LSCC and Lake Tech that focus on cooperation, not competition, and cost savings to each that could be achieved through that cooperation. That was my intention in proposing a discussion concerning the renewal of the Lake Tech Center that is chartered by the Lake County School Board, and it remains my intention if future discussions concerning cooperative education activities do occur.

What I did not anticipate at the time, and had no prior knowledge of, was that the director of Lake Tech, in conjunction with the only other charter vo-tech center in Florida situated in St. John’s County, had requested legislative approval to award Associate degrees. The entire community college system opposed such a measure, and it did not pass. However, the concept of vo-tech centers awarding degrees is now open. And while we had some hope for a renewed opportunity to re-engage in discussions with Lake Tech, initiated by Representative Marlene O’Toole, no response from Lake Tech was forthcoming.
Since then we have learned that the two Charter Tech Centers have lined up sponsors for a bill that would give them the authority to award not only Associate of Applied Science Degrees but transferable Associate in Science Degrees as well. In this time of severe budget constraints, the lack of demonstrated need for an additional taxpayer supported degree provider in Lake County calls into question the value of such legislation. At some point in the future, as the state college system continues to evolve and grow, some institutions’ intense focus on four year degrees may open the door to the vo-tech centers in Florida to assume the traditional role of community colleges in awarding vocational-technical degrees. My assumption is that if the vo-tech centers comply with the same SACS accrediting standards required of community colleges, and if they follow a comparable formal approval process by the State Board of Education (which emphasizes justification of need for the program), at some point, tech centers could be granted legislative permission to award the degrees they seek. However, such a situation does not currently exist in Lake County.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

Lake-Sumter Community College is surrounded by sister institutions that have already or will shortly become state colleges. Central Florida, Polk, and Seminole are making that transition. Valencia has indicated its interest in picking up two bachelor’s programs being eliminated by the University of Central Florida. One of the principal advantages that accrued to those community colleges that became state colleges in the early stages is that their change preceded the current funding shortfalls. Start up funding was provided for the new programs. Lake-Sumter Community College does not have that luxury. That means that we must be very careful with how we distribute our resources even as we plan for our future and the possibility of a major new identity as a state college. Again, it is my firm commitment as president that LSCC, which has been and remains an institution devoted to teaching and learning excellence, does not sacrifice excellence in moving to this newest phase. We will remain the community’s college—just as we have always been.

There are obvious issues that will need to be addressed as we proceed. The minimum state requirement for becoming a state college is that a single baccalaureate degree be offered, and one that is tied to the needs of local economic development. Around the state, a number of schools have responded with four-year degrees now offered for teachers, public safety administration, nursing, and the health sciences. St. Petersburg College also has created a degree in Technology and Management that has programs in banking, international business, technology management, and organizational leadership. As each of these former community colleges has grown into state colleges, their previous mission to provide Associate degree and certificate programs must remain primary at the same time.

One option LSCC has to address is our own economic development data and statistics. An examination of these facts reveals the limitations we face. It is clear from the data that our two-county area lacks a single dominant economic power or a single industry that employs a critical mass of local residents and also needs employees at a higher level degree. Health Care is perhaps an industry with potential to fulfill this role. I certainly do not intend to jeopardize LSCC by offering degree programs that
cannot achieve and sustain a successful level of enrollment and placement. That clearly would not meet our community’s needs.

President Hitt of the University of Central Florida has announced the university’s plan to eliminate a number of low enrollment degree programs. He has met with the presidents of the community colleges of the Central Florida Consortium to assess our interest in continuing these programs. LSCC is reviewing that list of programs, and we may recommend pursuing one or more of those in Management Information Systems (MIS) or Engineering Technology. We are also reviewing a core four-year degree in Statistics, which perhaps is needed at large by all local businesses and enterprises. A statistics degree also could form a strong basis for providing a further degree in math and science education, which help train local students to become our district’s future teachers.

But perhaps more important and of greater strategic value is the new cooperation model LSCC is developing with its Central Florida sister institutions and the University of Central Florida. I am much encouraged by our shared sense of commitment and responsibility to our Central Florida citizens and students. I am of the belief that positive options will be realized from the Consortium’s intent to engage in common planning for the future. There are options already on the table concerning UCF’s list of degrees being phased out, and we intend to insure that all of us benefit. At the current moment, I have expressed LSCC’s interest in assuming a MIS degree program. Reaching a new level of computer technology education is sound economic development for us in Lake and Sumter counties.

There is another option, one that is new to Florida but in place elsewhere. It is one that the Central Florida Consortium has not yet considered. Simply stated, it is to raise and at the same time change the current articulation program with the University of Central Florida, “Direct Connect,” to the four year level with all of the consortium colleges as potential partners.

The program today guarantees LSCC graduates with A.A. or A.S. degrees an easy transition to UCF and any of its 11 regional campuses, including our own on the South Lake Campus. I believe it is possible to improve upon “Direct Connect.” The Consortium and UCF itself may do that in the future, perhaps beginning in a more limited way. To its credit, UCF has been always a superior partner in working with its community college feeder institutions, and our Consortium is clearly committed to cooperation, so I have some faith that discussions can be held to consider the following main ideas:

1) That we as a group can continue to plan for regional needs and avoid development of duplicative regional programs.
2) That we can take advantage of the faculty expertise of UCF by offering a larger number of degrees in cooperation with the university;
3) As a concept, we can establish joint four-year degrees on various campuses awarded by UCF or one of the new state colleges.
4) Any student in the consortium colleges in the region can “Direct Connect” to the state college that houses their preferred degree and receive a four year degree without leaving the district or the region.

This idea could be implemented incrementally. We could begin by offering junior year courses at LSCC and grow from there, and it could increase the array of offerings we give to our community. It is an idea I will pose at the appropriate time to my fellow consortium colleagues. And it can be an idea, once developed, that is clearly in keeping with our future as our community’s college of choice.

A great deal of planning and discussion of all these ideas will occur among all the consortium institutions. Fortunately we have time to do that over the next year or two. But we do not have time or resources to make a mistake. Becoming a state college is a concept that depends on a new sharing methodology now underway – for funding, scheduling, and the total gamut of issues relating to instruction. Cooperation in the consortium is the only way to guarantee that if there is to be a new state college for Lake & Sumter counties, it does not fall into mediocrity as a four year institution, offering limited, repetitive, or competitive degrees. Were that to happen, the mission to remain our community’s college would be sacrificed. And that, again, is an intolerable outcome that I will not allow to happen.

Finally, like all other community colleges in Florida historically, LSCC has done its best “to be all things to all people,” in keeping with the traditional mission first laid out more than half a century ago. I simply do not believe that we can continue in that mode as we move forward. I am most ready to continue discussions on both ends of our spectrum – with the school districts and Lake Tech on one end and with the Central Florida Consortium on the other. Together, we all should be able to insure the best education remains available to our own students – now and in the future. The outlook for state support of new programs at the 2 year or 4 year level remains bleak. There is no plan at the state level to bridge the funding gap that will occur after 2010-11 when federal stabilization funds are depleted. Therefore, prudent fiscal management dictates that the College preserve its resources to ensure maintenance of its current core mission of providing excellent associate degree and certificate programs. If LSCC is to successfully transform into the kind of state college we all want and deserve, it will take time, planning and resources.

Lake-Sumter State College will be the community’s college of choice, today and tomorrow. That is my promise to our students, our Board and our community.