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RCC questions report on possible merger

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Bridgit Brown

A report released last week by The Boston Foundation recommends that the state consider merging Roxbury Community College (RCC) and Bunker Hill Community College into one consolidated institution called Boston Community and Technical College.

The suggestions are a part of a larger pitch for an actionable economic development strategy that is now lacking within the Commonwealth's community college system, according to the report "The Case for Community Colleges."

"I hope the colleges see this is not a blame game, not an assault, but just the reverse — we're saying these institutions are crucial to the economic future of the state," said Paul Grogan, chief executive officer of The Boston Foundation.

But RCC President Terrence A. Gomes disagrees with many of the findings and recommendations made in the report. While he admits that he was one of seven community college presidents interviewed, along with an additional 48 other community stakeholders and consultants, during the research stage of the report, he also said that he and the other presidents did not see the completed report until the day that it was released.

"The presidents would have been better served if they had the opportunity to discuss in greater depth some of the areas covered in the report in a much more meaningful way," said Gomes. "There are some things that are contained in the report that are not accurate, as a matter of fact."

The report states that "the current funding for community colleges consists of 67 percent from direct appropriations from the Legislature, 19 percent from tuition and fees, 9 percent from federal financial aid, and 5 percent from grants and contracts."

"That is inaccurate," said Gomes, "most of the direct appropriations fall well below 40 percent, as indicated on our most recent audited financial statements. They're going by a figure that is quite outdated."

Acknowledging that there are areas within the community college system that could be improved, Gomes argued that the system is doing a good job.

"We don't mind having the attention that this has brought us," Gomes explained. "But we want it to be a fair assessment and we want the opportunity to state our case and get help addressing some of the things that we have actually been attempting to address on our own."

RCC was founded in 1973 to serve the educational needs of Roxbury and surrounding communities. Its African American student body is at least 54 percent.

In 2007, RCC was designated "An Achieving the Dream" college by Achieving The Dream, Inc., a national nonprofit dedicated to helping more community college students, particularly low-income students and students of color, stay in school and earn a college certificate or degree.

In addition, RCC's biotechnology program received two gold level endorsements this year from the Massachusetts Life Sciences Education Consortium, making the school a frontrunner in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education in the state.

Bunker Hill Community College is just as unique. Founded in 1973 in Charlestown, it was also designated "An Achieving the Dream" college in 2007 and, like RCC, it recently became an "Achieving the Dream Leader College."

Bunker Hill has more than 13,000 students and is considered one of the most diverse institutions of higher education in Massachusetts, with six in 10 students being persons of color and more than half of its students being women.

The report contends that in order for the Commonwealth to meet the demands of the not-so-distant future, it must invest in training middle-skilled workers who will eventually help to drive the success of the economy in the coming years.

As it stands, middle-skill jobs represent 40 percent or the largest share of jobs now in the state. But workers lack the skills to do these jobs, which require more than a high school diploma but not exactly a four-year degree.

These jobs include construction work, nursing, paramedics, IT support, biotech work and other occupations that a community college education can prepare one for. By 2016, The National Skills Coalition calculated that 38 percent of the job openings in the Commonwealth will consist of middle-skill jobs.

The report describes the function of community colleges across the nation, stating that they generally follow two forms of governance: a centralized form, which governs colleges based on various criteria and measures; and a decentralized system of independently run colleges with only basic state reporting requirements.

Massachusetts uses the latter, whereby each community college has its own independent Board of Trustees, which is responsible for "the administrative management of personnel, staff services, and general business of the institution under its authority."

But this is part of the problem, according to the report.

"The Massachusetts system lumps community colleges together with all of its public higher education institutions, and in doing so, there is no singular focus on community college oversight, advocacy and funding," the report stated.

Citing examples in Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Arkansas, Washington and Ohio, which all use a centralized approach to community college governance, the report said that in each of these states "the centralized governance ... strengthens their capacity to serve as work force dynamos and allows for a single, clear voice to their state legislatures with respect to budget requests and resource needs."

President Gomes disagreed. He said that centralizing the community college system would put the distribution of dollars in the hands of one particular entity that would determine how the colleges allocated their funds and, equally important, what is allocated.

"We'd like to think that we know best what our needs are with our boards and what works best for us," Gomes said. "We need to be more involved and there needs to be more details with our presence and input based upon a formula that makes sense to us in terms of how that's done."

Gomes also said the report does not give the community college systems credit for the successful work that it has been doing.

"I think what's important to point out is that, for me, the real strength of the community college really lies in its individuality and uniqueness," Gomes explained. "We are here in our communities to meet the needs of our respective communities. This community fought long and hard to keep [RCC] as a stabilizing force in this community."