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The Cherry Commission: Missing in Action or Acting for a Brighter Future?

by Stephen J. Worst, Affiliate Professor

Upon signing Executive Order No. 2004-32, Governor Jennifer Granholm charged Lt. Governor John D. Cherry, Jr. with the task of chairing the Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth. In instituting the commission, Governor Granholm offered this statement in March, 2004:

If we want a high-performance economy, we must work now to improve the strength, depth, and adaptability of our colleges and universities. The mission of this commission could not be more critical to our state.

To compete globally, Michigan must see to it that its citizens are the best educated in the world's marketplace and that they are ready for a lifetime of learning. Thus, the governor requested the Cherry Commission to "develop a set of powerful ideas that would transform Michigan's education system and help the state make the transition into today's economy by instilling in all residents the aspiration for education beyond high school, developing their ability to achieve postsecondary success, and providing them with access to a wide variety of learning institutions." (Commission's Final Report)

In preparing the bipartisan commission for its work, the governor set forth three goals toward which public policy recommendations would be directed:

- Doubling the percentage of residents who attain postsecondary degrees or other credentials that link them to success in Michigan's new economy.
- Improving the alignment of Michigan's institutions of higher education with emerging employment opportunities in the state's economy.
- Building a dynamic workforce of employees who have the talents and skills needed for success in the Twenty-First Century.

A Revolutionary Shift

The challenge facing Michigan's educational institutions calls for a revolutionary shift in the frames through which these institutions view their advancement into the future. For the state's 15 public four-year universities, 28 public community colleges, and 44 private postsecondary institutions, the policy recommendations of the Cherry Commission represent a sure departure from the traditional functions of higher education.

Implementing the proposal to make higher education universal—"[expecting] that all students will achieve a postsecondary degree
or credential coupled with a guarantee from the state of financial support..." is not business as usual. The question of postsecondary education for all students is debatable. Is a college education a right or is it the result of academic performance? The Commission also recommended the expansion of dual enrollment opportunities for high school students and the recognition of job-based learning experiences in helping the 1.5 million adults with limited postsecondary education to complete their degrees.

A collaboration among higher education institutions to make all course credits fluid among schools and to remove bureaucratic obstacles that impede students from successfully attaining their degrees is requested. Although reasonable in its request, these suggestions ask higher education institutions to regard themselves in drastically changed ways and as equals across the state in the quality of academic preparation.

Neither is it usual to expect all two and four year colleges and universities to create a culture of entrepreneurship. This Commission's recommendation envisions the formation of a Center of Excellence for Entrepreneurship and Innovation "as a network to cultivate entrepreneurial education and activities among Michigan community colleges, universities, and business and community partners". The connection between postsecondary education and to the community is part of the Grand Valley State University mission and adopted in the core value of the College of Education, social responsibility. This connection is expanded in the commission's recommendation to "expand the role of higher education institutions in community development."

All colleges and universities in Michigan are to "aggressively partner" with their local communities and their "Cool City" commissions to "develop and implement strategies and programs that leverage their unique role...[participating] in local planning and development policy shaping; partnering in mixed-use developments; enhancing art, culture and entertainment ...and using the physical and land assets of these institutions creatively as locales for private sector development, incubation of firms, and housing." Research-intensive universities are called upon to build connections with businesses, transferring the results of research more effectively into jobs, new companies, and new products and community colleges and universities are asked to form "networks to accelerate applied research and business formation that leverage existing Smart Zones and business accelerators."

This collaboration takes on the role of entrepreneurship and may be implicit in emphasizing the importance of professional education programs such as those in the College of Education compared to liberal education programs. This initiative is

supposed to enhance the College of Education and programs that link postsecondary education to the economic needs of the state, but does this connection limit the role of education?

**Missing in Action?**

Over ten months have passed since the Cherry Commission's Final Report was presented to the governor. With the exception of some isolated attempts to address the implementation of the commission's recommendations, the final report has received little attention. One might wonder what is happening. What is the current status of the commission's bold recommendations? Where is the process of translating policy formation into policy implementation? Who is charged with the massive task of enacting the new state-level policy that is being proposed?

The passion both for and against that surrounded the Cherry Commission is not evident. The goals that were articulated for the commission and the recommendations of the commission are not on the lips of the legislators as they create new public policy. The quiet slipping away of the commission's innovative policy report—a work that ought to be part of the public conversation in Michigan—might signal for some a failed "re-visioning."

The truth is that much is going on in preparing the commission's recommendations, either in part or as a whole, to move toward implementation. Even though the commission members have gone home, the governor has retained John Austin, the senior public policy advisor for the Cherry Commission, to guide this process. In late September while addressing a small group of higher education leaders, Austin talked of engaging the various constituencies in determining which recommendations are the high priorities in accomplishing the goals that were initially set. The discussion and possible legislation of a common curriculum leading to postsecondary education across all high schools in Michigan is currently being considered.

Since the real stakeholders in the implementation of the commission's public policy proposals are the residents of Michigan, the cautious positioning of the governor's team in preparing the way forward seems appropriate. The future will only determine if this preparation is for a brighter future for Michigan's students and economy or another recommendation from Lansing which is missing in action.

**References**


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**Community**

**GVSU Regional Students Aid Hurricane Victims**

by Jacquelyn Abeyta
GVSU Northern Michigan Regional Center

**Hurricane Katrina relief efforts at Grand Valley State University's off-campus location in Traverse City were a huge success. Students asked how they could help only moments after hearing of the devastation. GVSU staff member Jacquelyn Abeyta contacted the local chapter of the American Red Cross and set up a relief effort drive. "So many times people want to do something, but aren't sure what to do," stated Vicki Kamps, Professor, College of Education. Students literally filled the Continuing Education office full of non-perishable items. These items were made into care packages and sent to those affected by hurricane Katrina. Students donated numerous blankets, towels, children's books and personal care items. GVSU students rose to the occasion when help was needed. Their compassion and generosity will help many families that were affected by this natural disaster. Many students thanked us for giving them an outlet to help, but without the huge support from our student population, this hurricane relief effort would not have had such a wonderful turnout.**