

Weekly notes

September 2, 2013

Hope you are having a great Labor Day weekend! I am en route from Swainsboro to Athens today and here's what's on my mind as I make the trip.

I am thinking today about the proposals recently made by President Obama for higher education reform. Simply put, there is great opportunity for East Georgia State College posed by these potential changes. The risk of failing to respond is correspondingly high.

Before thinking out loud about the President's proposals, perhaps the best first step is to look at the College Scorecard --- and to consider how EGSC looks at first glance when a student, parent or policy maker views our ratings. These ratings are closely related to President Obama's proposals.

See <http://collegecost.ed.gov/scorecard>

The first factor reflected by that Scorecard is the cost of college. EGSC ranks well in this category. The Scorecard reflects the **net cost of attendance** for each institution (the price students pay after deducting grants and scholarships). Not surprisingly, we are very affordable. The cost shown on the Scorecard is **\$6170 per year**.

The second factor reflected by the Scorecard is **graduation rate**. This is the percentage of students graduating within 150% of the expected time. Here, the picture is not a pretty one. In this category, our score is not good at all --- **5.6%**.

There are many reasons for this low rate. The two biggest reasons are: (1) Until this semester, our students in Statesboro have not been eligible to earn an associates degree; and (2) The college's focus for many years has been on preparing students for transfer --- not on graduation with an associates degree. As a result, we have many former students with 50 or more credits earned --- but, who have not earned a degree. Even though there are reasons such as these for our low graduation rate, it must improve. In fact, it must improve dramatically.

The Scorecard also reflects the **percentage of students who have transferred** to another institution. That percentage is **29.8%**. Although better, this is certainly not the rate of academic success for which we strive.

The next factor on the Scorecard is our **student loan default rate**. The rate shown is the new **3 year default rate**. This rate is the percentage of former EGSC students/borrowers who entered repayment within a certain year and then defaulted within 3 years. Our rate is **27.5%**. Again, this is an area in which we must improve dramatically.

As you know, the President's recent proposals have provoked a great deal of debate and have caused many to look carefully at the Scorecards of institutions across the country. For example, USA Today ran an article about schools with a **student loan default rate exceeding the graduation rate**. Unfortunately, we made the list. Obviously, we cannot allow this to continue. See *College Default Rates Higher Than Grad Rates*, USA Today, July 2, 2013. See, also, *In Debt and In the Dark: It's Time for Better Information on Student Loan Defaults*, www.educationsector.org

Having looked at our Scorecard, what has the President of the United States proposed which makes the above numbers so compelling? See, *President Obama Proposes to Link Student Aid to New Ratings of Colleges*, Inside Higher Ed, August 22, 2013; *Obama Plan to Tie Student Aid to College Ratings Draws Mixed Reviews*, Chronicle of Higher Education, August 22, 2013. He has proposed a **new rating system which would create a direct link between federal student financial aid (and that aid totals \$150 billion per year in the US) and college ratings**. As proposed, colleges with similar missions would be compared and those with better retention rates, graduation rates, rates of earning and employment of graduates and similar factors would receive favorable treatment in the award of low interest student financial aid. Also, colleges enrolling large numbers of Pell Grant eligible students would be rewarded.

These new federal proposals are just that – proposals. However, as proposed, the new rating system would be available to the public in 2015. The incentive system would require legislative approval and would be put in place in 2018 if approved by Congress.

These new federal proposals, if adopted, would come into play at about the same time as the **new Georgia performance based funding system** for institutions of higher education. That system, as we have discussed on a number of occasions previously, will reward retention and graduation rather than enrollment and credit hour production.

The message sent by the federal and state policy makers to institutions of higher education could not be made more clear. Policy makers are saying that we need to keep the cost of higher education affordable, assure that our students understand the consequences of borrowing to pay for their college education, retain them once they are enrolled, graduate them at higher rates, provide them degree options assuring that they are employable, and work with our students to assure that they repay their college loans. Frankly, those expectations are causing me to lose a great deal of sleep --- but, similarly, they are eminently reasonable expectation.

The devil, as always, is in the details. At the same time as we continue to work tirelessly to provide and excellent educational experience for our students, we must work to assure that the measures ultimately adopted to judge our performance are meaningful and fair. That, of course, is a tall task. The simplest example of this is the graduation rate on the College Scorecard. Clearly, for access institutions like EGSC, the **overall academic success rate (graduation plus successful transfer)** is the more appropriate measure.

Also, we must guard against placing high ratings above real academic success. As we all know, ratings are susceptible to manipulation in ways having nothing to do with real academic improvement. If an institution wants higher retention rates, it is possible to admit only the best-prepared students with a high likelihood of academic success. If an institution wants higher graduation rates, it is similarly possible to lower academic attainment expectations. EGSC is simply not going to go in either of those directions. Our mission calls on us to provide a point of access to higher education for students in our region, including those who are capable of college level work but who are not economically or academically ready for highly selective college admission. Our mission also calls on us to be great teachers. Our mission, not the ratings on the Scorecard, will drive our actions. Nonetheless, I do believe that a natural byproduct of that focus will be improved ratings.

President Obama's proposals include other elements mirroring changes which EGSC is already in the process of evaluating. His proposals encourage institutions of higher education to evaluate the appropriate use of prior learning assessment. We will be devoting a good deal of time in FY 2014 to studying how to appropriately grant credit for prior learning. This is particularly important for two groups which constitute a significant part of our constituency --- military personnel and adults who have completed some college but have not earned a degree. These two groups deserve our attention.

The President's proposals also encourage technology enhanced student services. In FY 2014, we will be devoting substantial time to evaluating how to improve our student services. Across the county, many institutions are learning that the maze of paperwork required to get admitted to college, obtain financial aid and determine curricular requirements often causes a level of frustration resulting the failure to complete college. We need to find creative ways to utilize technology to define a clearer pathway to graduation. We have highly qualified, hard working professionals in this area. However, the needs of our students have changed dramatically, the ways in which our students communicate have changed dramatically, and the tools available to meet student needs have changed dramatically. The question is not "what are we doing wrong?" The question is "how can we serve our students better?" We must find new and create ways to assist our student services professionals in serving our students

As I look at the big picture, I see far more opportunity than danger. Our mission is to teach and we are good at it. That is our foundation. We must simply continue to build on that foundation to survive and thrive in the "new normal."

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So my ride from Swainsboro to Athens today is about over and, even more important, the battery on the laptop is about to expire. My concluding thought is that I deeply appreciate the commitment of the faculty and staff of EGSC to student success. Although we are facing a "new normal" during a tough economic cycle, I marvel each day at the individual student successes resulting from your efforts. It is deeply appreciated.

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