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December 10, 2012

Board of Governors Strategic Planning Committee
325 West Gaines Street, Suite 1614
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0400

Dear Members of the Strategic Planning Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to provide feedback on the report prepared by The Parthenon Group. I have read the findings and recommendations with interest. As you are aware, Florida has made great strides in the use of technology in higher education. As the first Chairman of the predecessor to the Florida Distance Learning Consortium, I have a longstanding interest in this issue and look forward to being an active participant in these discussions. The Presidents of our 28 institutions are also excited about the opportunity to participate in this discussion.

The nation is envious of the strong articulation policy between the Florida College System and the State University System. It is my belief that this strong articulation policy and common course numbering can continue to serve as a strong foundation for Florida continuing to be a national leader in online education.

The Parthenon Group identifies primary objectives for online learning, all of which have been and will continue to be goals of the Florida College System. The Florida College System closely identifies with the objectives as inherent to the mission of each institution and the system as a whole. The Florida College System has, at the core of its mission, a commitment to access by providing a wide range of opportunities for students. Distance education is a critical component of our strategy for providing affordable access and flexibility to a diverse student population.



While there are several areas of the report that I disagree with, I will not use this letter to point out those differences. Regardless of my concerns, I believe the Parthenon Group identified a number of important issues that Florida must address as we move even further into the online learning arena.

I am appreciative that the consultants and your staff sought input from our system throughout the process. Representatives of the Parthenon Group spent considerable time with our staff and I personally spent more than five hours with company officials sharing my thoughts. I am also appreciative of the recognition in the report of the tremendous work that has already been done by Florida's colleges and universities in online education.

While the report identifies four separate options for consideration by the Board of Governors and the Florida Legislature, I do not believe that an issue as complicated as online learning can be put into four distinct categories.

However, the report successfully identifies a number of issues that the state must confront as we look to even further expand online learning. These include, but are not limited to: (i) ensuring state of the art course delivery methods for all online courses; (ii) offering of competency-based or prior learning credits; (iii) sharing of high quality course materials across institutions; (iv) providing adequate support services for online courses; (v) development of back-office functions; (vi) tuition policies; and, (vii) marketing efforts.

While the report identifies a number of institutions nationally that only deliver online courses, I believe any serious discussion must include a thorough exploration of blended courses. A small percentage of students exclusively take online courses, meaning few complete all the credits for the degree by enrolling solely in online coursework. Many students take several online courses in addition to courses delivered in the traditional classroom. Others take blended courses. For example, I received a graduate degree through a blended delivery model from a "top-ten" business school by attending classes for one week at a time, every seven weeks, with online delivery in the interim.

We must also include a serious discussion of the changing landscape of the delivery and financial models. Not a day passes without one reading articles about massive open online courses (MOOCs) and the number of elite universities joining these efforts. While a sustained business model for the MOOCs has not yet been identified, this clearly represents greater availability of higher education to more of our students. I can represent that the Florida College System is actively exploring the possibility of developing open online courses to assist students testing into developmental education.

I believe it is too early in the process to make a recommendation on a particular course of action that Florida should take. I do, however, have some specific thoughts that may be helpful as we explore this

issue. First, Florida as a state has tremendous marketing potential. If our goal is to market online courses across the country or in other targeted markets, the “Florida brand” is golden. I seriously question any added benefit from a marketing standpoint in creating an individual online university or identifying one institution that would provide the predominance of online education. Collectively marketing Florida’s higher education system and its courses that are available online and identifiable as transferable through our Statewide Course Numbering System has great potential. While I am sure that time limitations did not allow the report to fully consider this option, I am convinced that the marketing potential of this approach is much greater than the stand-alone approach discussed by the consultants.

Conversation around online learning and working together often leads to a discussion of accreditation issues. Generally, a student has to take at least 25 percent of their courses from the degree-granting institution. The consultants emphasize ease of accreditation with Options 3 and 4. Accrediting agencies are constantly looking at the issue of online learning, including the offering of MOOC’s. I know this topic will be part of the discussion at this week’s meeting of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges, in Dallas and I believe this will be a continuing area of discussion by the accrediting agencies. With a statewide common course numbering system and a guarantee of transfer, Florida is in the driver’s seat to work with the accrediting agencies to develop a program that works best for our students.

While Option 3 recommends a “lead institution,” there are a number of different roles that such an institution could play. In fact, based upon discussions with the consultants, it is clear to me and was confirmed by Parthenon that the “lead institution” does not have to be a degree granting college or university. While there may be some advantages to having the lead institution being a college or university, one of the major roles to be performed by the lead institution is providing back office and design support to faculty members. These functions can be provided by a number of our current institutions or may be split up based upon the individual expertise of the college or university. What is critical is that there be an entity that makes a determination of who can best offer these support services. The back-office design and support activities are absolutely necessary tools for faculty members as they work to design state of the art courses. Limiting it to one institution may not be beneficial to our students in the long run.

One tool being used by several online universities is the issuing of credit for prior experience or for demonstrated competency. Florida has been engaged in this effort for many years, including the awarding of credit for national examinations like Advanced Placement and CLEP, credit for military service, and other demonstrations of prior learning. However, we can do more. Through the use of the Articulation Coordinating Committee, Florida should begin a serious review to determine whether college credit can and should be awarded for MOOC’s and the methodology to assess whether a student has achieved the appropriate competencies. Florida is not behind the curve in this area. However, we must continue to work diligently as this area is constantly evolving.

The report does point out a concern in duplication of course development. While I share this concern, I am also sensitive to the desire of faculty members and postsecondary institutions to be able to develop state-of-the-art courses and utilize different delivery models. However, with the state providing approximately 50 percent of the cost of a degree, it is critical to ensure that efficiencies are matched with sound pedagogy through innovation. Allowing only one university or college to be the lead in developing new programs would not necessarily lead to the best faculty members offering the best online courses. A process whereby colleges and universities compete to design new programs that will be available to all institutions appears to be more advantageous to our students.

Florida must be careful to measure and document the success of our online students. Many of the online institutions referenced in the report do not provide completion, retention or job placement data. Florida must carefully incorporate data analysis into the process as we constantly look at the best options for our students and our state.

This discussion must also include tuition. While there are various debates about the cost of online learning, research indicates that the actual cost of delivery from an online-only college or university can be less than online courses offered by traditional universities and colleges. While there are also arguments about the quality of content from different types of institutions, I will not address that issue here. I find that some online-only universities offer high quality instruction that meets the needs of certain students. Florida must, however, look at the tuition rates of at least some of its online courses. I am not recommending that the price of all online courses be reduced to a common level, but, as we move into an ever competitive world and as the issue of student affordability becomes even more important, this issue must be addressed. In addition, I strongly urge a discussion of tuition rates for out-of-state students taking online courses.

As I stated in the beginning, I am uncomfortable suggesting one particular alternative at this time. I believe this discussion, started by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, is one of the most important issues regarding the future of higher education in Florida. My initial reaction is that there is a model between Option 2 and Option 3 that can be developed utilizing the best efforts of faculty and staff from across the state. We have already seen significant success in the merging of the two library automation systems, the online counseling service and the distance learning catalogue into the Florida Virtual Campus.

The activities currently being undertaken by the Florida Virtual Campus could be a part of this effort in order to enhance student success. If the Legislature determines to utilize the Florida Virtual Campus or a similar entity as part of this model, additional statutory changes will have to be made in order to provide for selection of institutions to provide back-office and course delivery support. A significant effort must be devoted to marketing, and we must undertake a hard look at tuition, competency/experiential credits, and course delivery models. This will, by necessity, require legislative authorization to explore certain options.

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Regardless of the approach ultimately taken by the state, the Florida College System is steadfast in its commitment to providing high quality, affordable certificate and degree programs. The Florida College System stands ready to work with our colleagues in the State University System to build and fortify Florida's online learning capacity.

Very truly yours,



Randy Hanna
Chancellor
The Florida College System

RH/jac

Cc: Frank Brogan, Chancellor, the State University System of Florida (SUS)
Nancy McKee, Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, SUS
John Holdnak, Executive Vice Chancellor, the Florida College System (FCS)
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