

Statement by Donald E. Simon, Ph.D., Regarding the Draft Statewide Plan  
for Higher Education

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Good Morning. I am Donald E. Simon, Assistant Vice President for Governmental Affairs at Monroe College.

Monroe College, founded in 1933 in the depths of the Great Depression, has campuses in the Bronx and New Rochelle in New York and on the Caribbean nation of St. Lucia. We enroll approximately 7,000 students in certificate, associate, baccalaureate, and master's programs. According to New York State Education Department data, the college awards the greatest number of diplomas to minority students of any of the colleges and universities in New York. The college offers three full semesters each calendar year to enable students to graduate as quickly as possible, maximize use of our facilities, and eliminate the "summer slump." We are proud of what we do and look forward to continued progress in the future.

The Statewide Plan for Higher Education is a major planning tool for the higher education community. The nearly 100-page document provides a comprehensive framework through the year 2020. The report is an impressive accomplishment and I am pleased to have played a role in its development.

This morning I wish to comment on four issues that command special attention: strategic planning, workplace readiness, college readiness, and college retention.

### **Strategic Planning**

The Statewide Plan offers opportunities for each college and university to align its strategic planning to the Regents' priorities. This framework helps institutions establish initiatives and policies that are supportive of those articulated by the Regents.

Appropriate strategic planning is essential for institutions. The plan provides a framework within which institutions can develop long term objectives and goals that will maximize effectiveness and efficiency. Widespread recognition and understanding of the content of the plan should simplify the work of the Office of College and University Evaluation since institutions will know in how proposed offerings must be in congruence with the plan's goals.

At Monroe College we utilize strategic planning as a mechanism to formally incorporate change, to maintain the currency of our curricula, and to meet needs necessitated by changing technology or social issues. Indeed, today happens to be the first day of our annual, two-day planning retreat that will be attended by more than 65 members of the faculty, staff, administration, and board of trustees. Each year we review a report card showing progress with the prior year's goals, and discuss in detail initiatives that have been identified as the basis for future efforts. It is a vital, useful, and effective process.

Similarly, the Statewide Plan should be a living document that is used as a framework to assess the appropriateness of new initiatives.

### **Workplace Readiness**

More and more we hear from business leaders that they are unable to find qualified personnel to fill available jobs. The key word here is "qualified." There appears to be a disconnect between the needs of business and the competencies college graduates possess. The Statewide Plan does reference this issue, but it should provide greater detail regarding objectives to be pursued. Technical and manufacturing positions often require substantial proficiency with computers and digital technology.

There should be greater emphasis on rapid adjustment of curricula to meet the requirements of business. It is not enough to provide training in the competencies required to do a task. There is a great need to provide students with the mindset regarding the work that they will be doing.

Monroe's Office of Career Advancement begins working with students when they first enroll. Our goal is to provide the context necessary for students to become competent and responsible employees in their chosen fields.

Our placement rate of 85 percent reflects the effectiveness of these activities. Also, at our most recent career fair we had more than 90 employers on campus - and each had one or more positions to be filled. Employers recognize that our students understand the essentials necessary for success in business.

One of the challenges facing us is how to provide these important educational components to the increasing number of students studying online. This is a major concern that cries out for remedy.

### **College Readiness**

There is also a great need to provide high school students with realistic information about what they will face as college students. Unfortunately a large percentage of high school graduates are not deemed ready to perform at the college level as evidenced by the number requiring remedial courses. Yet, there is also a failure on the part of many students to understand the importance of mastering the traits that are essential if they are to be successful in their undergraduate studies.

Many students do not understand that college is not the 13<sup>th</sup> grade. There are substantive differences between high school and college. But, too often freshmen arrive at college without any understanding of the challenges they will face.

Monroe College offers a program for high school juniors and seniors to overcome this awareness gap as well as to offer college-level study opportunities. The institution receives no special funding for this effort. The cost is borne by the college as a public service.

At Monroe, our “Jumpstart Program” enrolls approximately 250 high school students each semester. The courses are offered on-campus on Saturdays. Some students enroll for two courses each semester, but most take a single subject. These include introductory subjects including information technology, business, accounting, allied health, and liberal arts. The experience gives students a chance to sample different areas of study as they plan their own college and future careers. Participants are recognized as students at Monroe and receive transcripts for their work. Credit for these courses can be transferred to whatever institution the student chooses to attend.

In addition to the academic content of the courses, Jumpstart students and their parents participate in seminars regarding college expectations, financial aid, and career preparation. The entire program is funded by Monroe College. Participants pay neither tuition, fees, or for books. Books are loaned to students for the duration of the course.

This program has been in place at Monroe for many years. Literally thousands of high school graduates have finished the 12<sup>th</sup> grade with as many as four college courses already completed through Jumpstart. They also are familiar with the culture of higher education thus making the transition to freshman-year study less stressful. They possess both the competencies and confidence necessary for success in college.

## **Retention**

Almost every report about higher education laments unacceptable attrition data, and rightly so. Sadly, large numbers of students abandon their studies prior to completing the education they sought. This is one of the most complex issues facing policy makers and higher education administrators alike. Colleges must maximize the likelihood of success. And sometimes this requires unusual approaches.

At Monroe College we undertake a multitude of retention initiatives. Today I want to reference one. We have identified remedial mathematics as a major problem for many students.

In preparation for a strategic planning meeting a number of years ago we analyzed the outcomes of many math classes. We found that retention was best in small classes. This led to the decision to assign two faculty members to each remedial math class. One acted as the professor, the other was a tutor who spent time working with students individually. We also doubled the amount of time students spend in class for these courses, from three hours per week to six hours.

The results were impressive. Retention increased and the students were better prepared for the credit mathematics courses that followed. As an aside, the role of the tutors soon expanded to that of counselor. Rather than making major decisions in a vacuum, students had someone with whom they could discuss their concerns, someone who was familiar to them – and from whom they would receive assistance and encouragement. Attendance was better than before the experiment was initiated.

When I describe this experiment, people often ask how the college can afford the cost. I respond that it is less expensive to retain current students than to recruit new ones. And, of course, this does not factor in the benefits that accrue to the students and society when they achieve their academic goals

## **Conclusion**

Finally, permit me to note that New York's system of higher education is unequalled in terms of the quality, diversity, and integrity of its programs. It is through thoughtful and careful planning that this success was achieved and is maintained. As a result of comprehensive reviews such as take place in the formulation of the Statewide Plan New York's higher education institutions will become stronger and better able to serve their historic role enabling students to achieve their dreams. To do so, we need to innovate. We need to experiment. We need to support the ideals upon which the University of the State of New York was founded. The Statewide Plan provides a framework within which such progress can be realized. Let's take advantage of the opportunities that are before us.

Thank you.