

Assembly Colleges and Universities Hearing on the WTCS

August 31, 2004

Paul Gabriel Report

The Assembly Colleges and Universities Committee met on WTCS issues for more than three hours on August 31st, 2004. Chairperson Rob Kreibich noted that this was an opportunity to learn about the general state of the system, as the committee had done in the past concerning the UW.

Testifying were:

Representative Garey Bies, Co-chair of the Speaker's Taskforce to Review the WTCS and Assembly representative serving the Door Co. area: Bies very briefly covered Taskforce issues and findings. He said he was particularly frustrated with the perceived lack of progress toward better transfer between systems. He believes "promises were made" that are not being kept. He noted that he still thinks WTCS districts should be removed fully from property tax funding and that local district boards could be eliminated (!). Rob Kreibich quickly said he didn't think businesses want to lose local boards and local responsiveness, especially in return for more control from Madison. He said he'd rather "have the UW be more like the WTCS than the other way around." In response to another question, Bies admitted that the elimination of "all" WTCS property tax support and local district boards is his own "editorial comment" and not reflective of the Taskforce's recommendations.

Unfortunately, Rep. Sue Jeskewitz, the other Taskforce co-chair and a member of the Colleges and Universities Committee, was away on an urgent family matter and presented written testimony through her staffperson.

Bies seemed to imply the Taskforce had not yet made final recommendations. Jeskewitz's written testimony noted a next Taskforce meeting in October, 2004, followed by others to monitor and "provide accountability." This reinforced the notion that the Taskforce is ongoing and has not made final recommendations. In fact, Rep. Jeskewitz conveyed the Taskforce's "final recommendations" to Speaker Gard on 11/10/03, saying they would meet further to monitor progress and responses on recommendations. Rob Kreibich seemed unsure about the advisability of the Taskforce going on indefinitely and urged Bies that it should meet in October to "narrow its focus."

Jeskewitz's written testimony was quite positive in its overall tone and expressed that much positive about the WTCS had been learned through the Taskforce process. She also said she did not support a change to elected district boards "at this time."

Dan Clancy, Brent Smith, and Nino Amato testified. Dan spoke primarily about funding, enrollments, and the erosion of state aid support. Brent spoke primarily about transfer initiatives with the UW and discussions with the Regents to expand bachelor's holders in

the state (COBE). Nino spoke primarily about financial aid, tuition, and student access. The issue of WTCS Board officer elections did not come up.

Smith reviewed progress on each of the 6 areas of agreement on transfer with the UW. He highlight very positive statistics about WTCS learners and graduates, as did Clancy. They covered employer satisfaction, the huge increase in health care workers through reallocation, increases in minority student enrollment, etc. Clancy also highlighted restraint in local levies and budgets despite huge enrollment growth.

Amato argued that higher education is becoming a "gated community" that excludes all but the wealthy and those who take on unrealistic debt burdens. This discussion was about both systems but focused more on the UW in its specifics and questions from the committee.

Amato also urged restructuring both the WTCS (state) and UW Regent boards to include legislators of both houses and parties. This did not generate legislator questions or any outward sign of support.

Throughout the Clancy, Smith, and Amato testimony (and eerily reminiscent of the Assembly Taskforce experience itself) the hearing often seemed more about the UW than about the WTCS

Richard Carpenter testified by phone from Las Vegas. He was quite positive about the system and its impact. He noted that he felt there was an undue amount of legislative concern about a relatively "thin slice" of property taxes accounted for by the technical colleges. He noted that he thinks the state has lost opportunities to make the WTCS more of an economic development engine, such as through Wisconsin Advantage bills.

Carpenter closed by saying he believes Wisconsin is heading toward having only one two-year system and ought to realize as much. He noted that it's one of only a couple of states with distinct technical college and 2-year public colleges (the UW Colleges). He also criticized that Wisconsin has statutory language requiring the UW Regents approve any WTCS effort to expand its general offerings.

The UW Center for Adult Access proposal was raised several times in the hearing as an example of a "unilateral" UW move that duplicates what WTCS already does well statewide. It was made clear to the Committee that this initiative is included in the UW 2005-07 budget request despite past concerns raised by the WTCS through the Taskforce process and directly with the UW System.

Bill Ihlenfeldt, Chippewa Valley President and Assembly Taskforce member, testified about the WTCS role leading the state and its citizens to the high paying jobs of the future as well as for today. He used nanotechnology as an example, and reinforced that Wisconsin could, but has not, made a decision to compete with other states for job growth by using/investing in its technical colleges. He also reflected some of the specific

hybrid degree opportunities with the UW (that could come out of the COBE process) to improve student mobility while keeping graduates in the state.

Scott Stenger, a contract lobbyist representing Door County's Municipal Taxpayer's Commission offered that group's standard arguments about "high" WTCS property taxes and the perceived accountability issue of appointed boards having taxing authority. He also noted that elderly residents and others who are not WTCS students somehow don't benefit from the WTCS (!). However, on a positive note, he did recognize that funding must come from "somewhere," and that reducing property taxes likely takes new state funding for the WTCS.

The overarching themes all morning were about duplication, transfer and merger. Do we have a distinct mission from the UW? Does the UW from the WTCS? Is the gray area between us increasing? Why is the UW seeking to compete with us in serving place-bound adults? Why are we apparently seeking to compete with them by becoming more like traditional community colleges or by expanding our liberal arts offerings?

There was no hesitation to use the "m" (merger) word during the hearing. Unfortunately, the group did not hear that the Taskforce had studied the Minnesota and other merger experiences in detail and had rejected merger as a solution for Wisconsin. Today's lengthy discussion, however, suggests that mission, merger, transferability, joint programs, and willing collaboration versus legislatively forced cooperation with the UW are all on the front burner for the 2005-07 legislative session.

Joan Jenstead, WCTC Board member and member of the Taskforce attended the hearing, along with a number of WTCS presidents, college staff, WTCS state staff, faculty and labor representatives, UW staff, legislative staff, and other education-related lobbyists. It was a very well-attended and lengthy hearing for the last day of August in an election year.