November 7, 2013

Open Letter to Faculty at UConn

Lawyers at the bar often use the term "my brother" or "my sister" when referring to a fellow member of their profession. This practice recognizes the close connection members of a profession share, even among people engaged in an adversarial argument. In the academic ecosystem, professors at different schools are all part of academia. The work done in different places can often complement that done at the others.

Most students in the USA transition from elementary to middle to high school. Some go to vocational schools. Some enter the workforce. Some go to college. The path they travel is often curved, sometimes circuitous. This path is comprised of various types of institutions – community colleges, regional state universities, small colleges, large research-intensive universities, and the K-12 system. Recent articles [Cassuto; Reed (19 Feb. 2013 and 10 Feb. 2013; Shugart; Cassuto, Fain] have explored the notion that academia is more properly conceived as "ecosystems" than as separately existing entities.

When our brothers and sisters at UConn propose to make a change to the academic policies at UConn, those changes will affect other parts of the ecosystem. The recent proposal by Sally Reis and Wayne Locust (respectively the Interim Vice Provost for Academic Administration, a Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor, and Teaching Fellow in Educational Psychology at the University of Connecticut and Vice President for Enrollment Planning and Management) to limit credit hours taken at other schools (which they clearly identify as primarily community colleges) includes the claim that this proposal is to "protect academic integrity."

In this memo, Reis and Locust do not offer a definition of academic integrity, yet the UConn website indicates that it involves avoidance of misconduct. Indeed, the school rightly notes, "Integrity, honesty, and fairness are the foundation of the educational process" ("Undergraduate Academic Integrity Policy"). We at Manchester Community College concur; these values undergird all academic endeavors at our campus, too.

Reis and Locust note that many students transfer from community colleges and call these courses "easier and cheaper." They offer no evidence that classes at community colleges are "easier." This is a fallacy and distracts from the greater pursuit all of us in academia share: high quality education.

Community colleges are proud of our access and affordability. Let's not confuse access with lower quality, however. If a student at UConn fails a course and retakes it at a community college and passes, what might be reasons for that success? For one, the student is re-taking a class and has the opportunity to understand course material better the second time around. Two, the student may have been disappointed and, desiring to do better, commits herself or himself to

improving. That desire contributes. Three, perhaps that student seeks out a chance to have a smaller class. The 100- and 200- level courses at community colleges tend to be smaller than those at universities. Having more personalized attention from professors allows the student to feel more comfortable with asking questions and seeking assistance. There are many other possible variables for subsequent success.

We realize we often have to make quick decisions with incomplete data. Yet this proposal contains no data about whether community college classes are "easier" or whether students who take such classes "fail subsequent courses."

We urge our sisters and brothers in academia to reject the proposal Reis and Locust have offered and search for another way to protect academic integrity.

Sincerely,

Manchester Community College Academic Senate

References

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