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Report: Don't merge community colleges

Study suggests the colleges collaborate more, but some school officials say that advice isn't helpful

By Emily Hunkler

SARANAC LAKE — A long awaited study looking into the possible benefits of combining North Country Community College and Clinton Community College has recommended that the two remain separate but work toward a deeper collaboration.

The study, which began at the end of April, was prompted by state Sen. Betty Little, R-Queensbury, and was executed by the Rockefeller Institute of Government, SUNY's public policy research arm. She said she was spurred by both colleges having vacancies in the president's office. Little's district includes Essex and Franklin counties, which sponsor NCCC, and Clinton County, CCC's sponsor.

"Hopefully we will get some benefit from it and it won't be one of those studies that just sits on the shelf," Little said. "I will be interested in sitting down with both interim presidents and getting their thoughts on it."

The study's findings and recommendations mostly focus on how the two colleges can better cooperate to enhance the educational offerings while also becoming more cost efficient.

Some of the recommended actions include:

Making no major structural changes but relying on new leadership to continue to strengthen each college separately.

Collaborating on academic programs, for example by combining forces to offer jointly some new academic programs that are not now available at either college.

Consolidating the course catalog, registration and admissions for the two colleges.

Making deep collaboration a mandate for new leadership at both colleges as a way of strengthening programs, managing costs and testing whether an eventual merger might be the best long-term option.

However, it seems officials at both NCCC and CCC are not exceedingly anxious to heed the recommendations of the report.

In letters tacked on to the end of the report, both NCCC Board of Trustees Chairman John Friedlander and CCC interim President Frederick Woodward express misgivings with the report's preliminary findings, which they were given a few weeks ago.

"It must be noted in this report that North Country and Clinton do collaborate, understand what the other college is doing and provide regional support to one another in terms of programs of study, student access to our colleges and the transfer of courses between our colleges," Woodward said in his letter.

"The conclusions appear to be based on little actual knowledge or experience with rural education," Friedlander said. "The only apparent useful outcome is the redundant expressions of recommendation that North Country and Clinton find practical ways to cooperate, a process that has been ongoing in both colleges for years."

Little said she does, however, plan to follow through with the study and hopes to help both colleges set their sights on a more thorough collaboration.

"The study suggests making it a priority to hire new presidents who have this goal in mind; I think that would be a good start," Little said. "The more you collaborate, it seems, the more options become

available for the students, and that is what's important."

Frederick Smith, interim president for NCCC, said he was open to the ideas brought forth by the study.

"Any time recommendations come forth, they are going to be studied within the mindset that it is

our main mission to meet the needs of our students," Smith said. "That is what's going to capture our attention in this study."

Smith said the board will discuss the study's findings at its upcoming meeting on Aug. 12.