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Report: No Merit in Merger of NCCC, CCC

By Jacob Resneck

A consolidation study of North Country Community College and Clinton Community College found little merit in a complete merger of the two colleges.

The 26-page report was prepared at the request of State Sen. Betty Little and was released publicly on Monday.

The report does not recommend downsizing or closing any of the college's campuses in Saranac Lake, Plattsburgh, Ticonderoga or Malone.

David Shaffer, a senior fellow at the Rockefeller Institute and principal author of the report, said there are opportunities for closer cooperation, but he discounted a full merger.

"An outright merger would take about five years to pull off and it's not at all clear that it would be worth the agony. But we did think that this was an opportune time for the trustees at two colleges to look at the possibilities of collaborating more closely and trying to pool their student bodies and their resources to see if they can expand the opportunities that are available a little bit."

Shaffer said the goal of the study was to find ways that the two rural colleges could pool their resources into a combined catalogue or streamline non-academic operations.

"The big thing that you find, I think, in looking at these two colleges is they're just so small they lack the critical mass to have the kinds of other community colleges in the state. That's an inherent outgrowth of the demographics of the North Country, not their fault, nothing they can do about it, short of somebody airlifting in an-

other 200,000 population or something overnight which is not going to happen, obviously."

The report found that individually the colleges offer "fewer choices and fewer opportunities" than two community colleges with enrollments similar to a combined North Country and Clinton.

The report recommends that "savings might be realized" if Clinton and North Country increased their level of collaboration on nonacademic operations for efficiency's sake.

But neither community college has received the study with enthusiasm.

North Country's interim president, Frederick Smith, said the college would keep an open mind but has vowed not to stray from its core mission of education. "Any academic institution is going to be interested in looking at ways of better meeting the needs of students. And if in the process, any recommendations that come to be, you know, make it more cost-effective than what we are doing now, fine. But our primary mission is going to be students and how we can better meet their needs."

The president of North Country's Board of Trustees, John Friedlander, had a much harsher reaction to the study.

Friedlander, in a response letter to the Rockefeller Institute, noted that the research was limited to three weeks and the conclusions seemed to be based on limited experience with rural education. He called the report "a waste of scarce financial resources that, had it been performed seriously and directed to a true educational improvement purpose, might have been helpful to all."

At Clinton Community College, interim president Frederick Woodward said the two colleges are

already collaborating but that they have very little overlap in territory or academic programs.

“We meet regularly, we talk about what’s going on at North Country and what’s going on at Clinton, we’re involved in workforce development efforts, collaboratively, presently. We don’t really compete for students with the exception of a little bit out of the eastern part of Essex County and the western part of Clinton County so we’re really not competing for the same students.”

Both colleges continue to independently search for new presidents. Neither has expressed interest in the idea of a shared president as a cost-savings measure.

Shaffer, the report’s author, said the study is only advisory. Any real changes would have to come from the individual board of trustees.

But Sen. Little noted that a large portion of the annual funding of both colleges comes from the

sponsoring counties and Albany. She predicted that budget pressures from county and state lawmakers will likely push community colleges to work harder to find savings.

“Both colleges rely on the counties for funding and the state for funding and I think that that financial condition is going to cause and direct them to at least take a look at more collaboration, and if they are collaborating, then are there ways that they can continue it and do more.”

North Country Community College is currently working on a plan to refurbish its Saranac Lake campus. The report called North Country’s flagship campus “the weak link” and described it as a “ramshackle former hospital.”

The full report is available on our website – wnbz.com.