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May 1, 2019

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Dear Trustees,

April has come and gone along with another Spring PACT meeting. And what a meeting it was!

Unlike past PACT meetings that tended to be focused on educational issues or best practices at our different universities, this meeting's focus was on the trustee of the future. And to say that there was a divergence of opinions would be an understatement.

I thought the meeting was a huge success. There was an electricity in the air with the attendees seemingly much more engaged than at previous meetings. Instead of listening and learning, there was a great deal of trustee interaction of discussion.

Most of the sessions dealt with the recommendations that were developed by PACT committees formed following the Fall PACT meeting as part of an effort to make sure that trustees were part of the redesign process.

Some of the presentations dealing with good governance received overwhelmingly positive feedback. The efforts to increase the level of communications between the system, PACT, and the trustees were well received. Likewise, the recommendation to utilize regional meetings in the fall and winter in order to make attendance more convenient received a lot of support.

Other presentations, particularly those dealing with trustee selection and trustee evaluation were far more controversial as the recommendations represented a somewhat radical departure from past practices.

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Based on comments that I heard following the sessions, several trustees were concerned about the push for a more open process for identifying potential trustees. While the intent of the proposal was to simply make it easier for “unconnected” individuals to submit their name to be considered, several trustees felt that the proposed process improperly de-emphasized the power of the legislators to select trustees. The trustee selection committee is now in the process of reconciling their recommendation with the comments they received at the meeting. A final proposal is expected to be completed by the end of May.

The Trustee evaluation committee presentation also elicited its share of controversy. The purpose of this committee was to identify what effective trustees “should do” and how to measure whether they were doing so. While it would have been fair to ask, “Why has the System waited 36 years to address these questions?” no one brought that question up. Instead, much of the debate surrounded the problems associated with attempting to do evaluations.

I understand that people do not like others to enforce standards on them. After all, for the past 36 years trustees have had the ability to self-define what a “good” trustee did. If a trustee felt that attending graduation or campus events, they would do so and be a “good trustee” in their mind. If a trustee didn’t feel that was important but did think that contributing financially was what was important, they were under no obligation to participate in those events while still being a “good trustee” as soon as they wrote their annual check.

Again, the trustee evaluation committee has taken the feedback they received and are attempting to develop an approach that will be acceptable to the largest number of trustees. This final iteration should also be completed by month end.

In retrospect, the PACT meeting was very successful. Some important issues were raised and discussed, and the system will be better as a result of those discussions. But we cannot become complacent, we need to keep finding ways to raise the value of the trustees to the system if we hope to remain relevant in the “new” state system.

To those of you who attended, thank you for your participation. If you were unable to make it to Harrisburg this time, hopefully you will be able to attend the Fall Regional meetings which won’t require the same time commitment.

Until next month.

