

Community colleges look to new direction, leadership

RALEIGH (AP) — After 30 years under the shadow of the university system, the state's community college system finds itself at a crossroads as state leaders ponder its future.

The education of thousands of North Carolinians, many of them working people with families, is at stake.

The system's year of turmoil began with sweeping recommendations for change in a performance audit of state government, including a proposal to change the community colleges' mission. Later came reports of financial irregularities involving several schools' attempts to capture more state funding.

The Legislature stepped in.

The state's \$9 billion budget for 1993-94 includes special provisions that direct the community college system to find ways to be more efficient and effective.

State leaders may be able to achieve one of those goals, but not both, according to the system's president.

"Government is not made to be efficient. It's made hopefully to be effective," said

Bob Scott, also a former governor. "If we are going to be more efficient, then we may endanger services."

Lack of Focus

Part of the problems stem from the system's open-ended funding process. The state allocates money according to the number of full-time students enrolled the previous year in community colleges.

Lawmakers learned this year that the funding method caused several colleges to come up with creative ways of counting students. As a result, the General Assembly has instructed the system's governing board to find a funding formula that's based on the cost of programs as well as enrollment.

The state also ordered the board to review the system's mission, particularly an audit recommendation that some schools and programs should be consolidated.

The audit conducted by KPMG Peat Marwick found that some of the system's problems stem from size. The system has grown to 58 colleges and a number of satel-

life campuses.

"There is a lack of focus," Scott admitted. "But the state is so diverse. And we're filling a big gap in the education system of this state."

Scott said he's concerned that mergers and regional programming would hurt those who need the services most.

"Are they saying close the smaller schools? Where are those schools? They're in the rural areas," Scott said. "Who needs the services the most? The rural areas."

The audit also recommended that community colleges establish a better relationship with the university system so that more students can transfer credits. That would mean enhancing the curriculum at smaller community colleges, "and yet they're saying consolidate," Scott said.

New Leadership

In an effort to regain its focus, the system's governing board recently elected a new chairman, one with a considerably higher profile than the previous leader.

Lt. Gov. Dennis Wicker has replaced Bill Simpson as the chairman. Simpson, a low-key man who owns a cafe in Reidsville, will remain on the board as a vice chairman.

Wicker said he'll work to maintain the delicate balance of local autonomy and central authority while pushing the system forward.

"I think it's time to bring forward some reforms and discuss them," Wicker said in an interview.

Before his move to chairman, the lieutenant governor had served as a non-voting member of the board. Now Scott hopes that having the lieutenant governor at the helm will help the system maintain a higher profile when the Legislature is handing out money.

"We have few alumni in position of power and influence," Scott said. "Those people graduated from the universities. So the tendency is to overlook us."

Sign of Change

In addition to ordering studies, the Legis-

lature has:

- prohibited the schools from counting students who repeat courses more than once;
- required progress reports from every college in an effort to improve accountability; and
- reexamined tuition policy.

Although comprehensive studies and major policy changes will take time, there are already some signs of a new direction.

At a meeting earlier this month, the system's governing board voted unanimously to reject a candidate for interim president of Cape Fear Community College in Wilmington. Board members cited her lack of management experience.

Before this year, Scott said, the board would have happily endorsed her.

"This is sending a message that 'we're not going to be your rubber stamp any more,'" Scott said.