Connecticut State U. Wrestles With Role of System Office

By Alexandra Tilsley

Hartford, Conn.

One thing is clear at the Connecticut State University system: Money is tight, and it will be for a while. What's unclear, however, is who will be in charge of steering the system through the financial crisis. And that uncertainty is making many people in this state uneasy.

Legislators, faculty members, and others have raised questions about who should run Connecticut State. Gov. M. Jodi Rell, a Republican, recently suggested that the system's central office should be eliminated, and faculty at one of the four campuses here voted no confidence in the system chancellor and the chair of the Board of Trustees. Even some trustees have publicly questioned whether power is allocated at Connecticut State the way it should be.

Meanwhile, the state is projecting a $3.4-billion budget deficit for the 2012 fiscal year, and many within the system are concerned about what the public scrutiny could mean, particularly at a time when regional public universities nationwide feel overlooked in budget discussions.

Already, Connecticut State has had to make cuts. In 2009, the university offered a retirement-incentive plan, and then it was forced by the state to freeze hiring. As a result, tenure-track professors are being replaced by one-year appointments, which faculty members say can be disruptive to a department and to students, who can find themselves shifted from one adviser to another as adjuncts come and go.

In the past five years, tuition and fees have increased 35 percent, with a bump of about 6 percent this year. Tuition and fees average about $8,000 for commuters, who make up a large share of the system's students, or nearly $18,000 for students who live on campus.

"My freshman year, financial aid helped me cover [the cost], and now financial aid is not enough," says Dominique E. Gouch, a senior at Eastern Connecticut State, which is located in Willimantic, a quiet town about a half-hour east of Hartford. The increased costs have forced him to hold down a part-time job, working as a peer adviser to help pay his tuition.

Rising tuition is not unique to Connecticut, and officials point out that compared with other states, the increases are modest. But the worst of the financial crisis is yet to come for Connecticut, which is looking at bleak revenue projections for 2012.

In the last few years, the state's rainy-day fund and federal stimulus money have helped it avoid the full force of the recession, says Michael P. Meotti, the state's commissioner of higher education. But that money is drying up.

What the next few years hold is anyone's guess, but officials here haven't ruled out a significant restructuring of the system office and the system itself. What this state does could provide an example for other universities struggling to define the role of a system in a time of financial crisis.

Compensation Controversy

The four Connecticut State campuses-Central, Eastern, Southern, and Western-are all located within about two hours of one another, but they're strikingly different. At the extremes are Southern and Eastern. Southern, which lies just down the road from Yale University, in New Haven, serves 12,000 students, about 80 percent of whom commute to the urban campus. Eastern, the state's public liberal-arts college, with 5,600 students, has built more than a dozen new buildings in just over a decade to try to accommodate its growing residential population.
Tension levels differ across the campuses, as well, and there are different opinions about what the role of the system office should be. Paul E. Lingenfelter, president of the State Higher Education Executive Officers, says that having a strong system office can be important, particularly in a state entering a budget crisis, because the office can act as a unified voice.

"As a general rule, the reason systems exist is because they save money, not because they cost money," he says.

But instead, in Connecticut, the Legislature and faculty are questioning the structure of the system, and whether a system office is needed at all. Some faculty members say the system office has become much more visible on the individual campuses recently, sometimes to the point of micromanaging, and they worry about what that might mean for the future. Lawmakers, meanwhile, have wondered about the amount spent on salaries for system-office officials, and if there are opportunities to save money.

A series of political missteps by trustees and the system office has drawn considerable public ire. In December, the board proposed a retention bonus for the chancellor, David G. Carter. The board ultimately withdrew the bonus proposal but not before enduring scrutiny from the governor and public.

In February, Cheryl J. Norton surprised many when she announced that she would be retiring from the presidency of Southern Connecticut State. Not long after, The Connecticut Mirror obtained a letter showing that Ms. Norton had actually been dismissed by the chancellor in November, under a new policy that gives the chancellor the power to hire or fire presidents without the approval of the full board.

And in July, the system was once again in the spotlight when the board announced a plan to give raises as large as 10 percent to nonunion managers. For many, this was the last straw.

The governor wrote a letter to Karl J. Krapek, the board's chair, calling the raises "intolerable." Trustees ultimately voted to rescind a portion of the salary increases, although administrators still received cost-of-living increases of about 5 percent.

But the damage had been done. In her letter to Mr. Krapek, Governor Rell stated that she would form a panel to develop a plan for eliminating the system office. She hopes to have the plan ready by December. The State Senate followed up with a statement that it would look for ways to cut administrative costs at all three of Connecticut's higher-education systems.

Governor Rell may also try to take the power to hire and fire presidents away from the chancellor and give it to state government, and Connecticut's attorney general is investigating the current system, through which Ms. Norton was dismissed.

Although the idea of eliminating the system office might be extreme, State Sen. Mary Ann Handley, a Democrat, says its basis is not.

"Several years ago, before the present chancellor came in, there were some fairly significant changes to the bylaws," Ms. Handley says. "They did reduce the role of the board and increase the power of the chancellor. ... I don't know how you make a governor-appointed, volunteer board do their job, but they're not there to do the chancellor's bidding."

The Legislature, it seems, has lost faith not only in the system office and the chancellor, but also in the Board of Trustees. And it's not alone.

**Hartford Campus?**

Among faculty members, the system office is sometimes jokingly referred to as the Hartford campus. About 70 people work here in the quaint New England-style building, which is near a house where Mark Twain lived for 17 years.

"The majority of people I talk to question day in and day out what is done at the system office," says Chad E. Valk, a digital-media production coordinator at Central Connecticut and chair of the campus's university planning and budget committee. He compares it to a fifth campus but says, "No learning goes on there."
As an example, he says a memo from the system office this year told departments not to increase salaries for university assistants, despite the fact that some departments might have been willing to cut costs elsewhere for the sake of giving assistants a raise.

"I don't understand why the system office would micromanage down to individual departments," Mr. Valk says.

Some, like Mr. Valk, think the system office has gotten too big. The chancellor does not agree. He points to a 32-percent reduction in system office staff since he became chancellor in 2006. In that time, salaries and spending on the system office actually increased, but Mr. Carter says this is because with less personnel, those remaining are doing more jobs.

There has been some streamlining on campuses, he acknowledges, but only after discussions with the four campus presidents and only when it makes economic sense. This has included switching to a single e-mail system across all four campuses and changing the way funds are distributed so the smaller campuses are not put at a disadvantage. Most budget decisions are made by campus presidents, and Mr. Carter says he intends for it to stay that way.

Faculty critics, however, contend that the system office's intrusions have gone beyond normal streamlining. Several worry that Connecticut State could eventually resemble the University of Connecticut, which has one main campus and administration and several branch campuses, and Governor Rell has discussed that possibility.

But for some, what’s even more concerning than the system's actions is the problem of perception.

When the debate about pay increases arose in July, the news media reported that the amount the board intended to grant administrators was enough to send 23 students to Connecticut State. "That's a devastating PR comment to overcome," Mr. Valk says.

Those within the system already feel second best to the University of Connecticut, which many faculty members contend receives more state money and less criticism from lawmakers. Meanwhile, Connecticut State educates more students over all, and more students who stay in the state, but faculty say the system office and the board are not doing a very good job of making their case.

"The leadership making bad choices hurts us all," says Michael Shea, chair of the English department at Southern Connecticut.

Still, no one is sure what the solution is to the system's problems. Some focus on personalities within the system office and the board. Others say it's the structure of the system office that needs to be examined, and still others think a bigger system office with more collaboration among the campuses is the answer.

Mr. Carter, for his part, doesn't think the system office is going anywhere.

"It's not about eliminating us-it's about position control, it's about hiring," he says. "My position is our job is to get people to realize we provide value."

While they await the reports from the attorney general and the governor’s office, and as they wait to see who Connecticut's next governor will be (Governor Rell is not running for re-election), the system and the campuses will be preparing for the worst.

Administrators are modeling worst-case scenarios, trying to figure out how they will respond if state appropriations are cut by as much as 15 percent. Faculty members, who are already working more than they were a few years ago, are being asked to think about what resources they could afford to lose. Libraries are surveying student use to determine where they can cut hours. At Eastern, clocks have been removed from the walls to save on electricity costs.

And at Southern, students, faculty, and administrators are reminded of the university's financial plight when they walk past the half-built library addition that was supposed to be completed a year ago-before the funds were lost.