

# ACHIEVING SYSTEM INTEGRATION: AN IMPERATIVE FOR SEATTLE COLLEGES

(A concept paper submitted to the Board of Trustees by Shouan Pan, February 9, 2017)

## Introduction

The opportunity to serve as chancellor of Seattle Colleges—the flagship, the largest, and arguably the best known of Washington’s 34 community colleges—is a privilege. Particularly so given the generous support extended to me from the date of my arrival by our extended community of students, faculty, staff, administrators, you (my governing board), and local education and community leaders. To all, my deepest appreciation for your trust and support.

This paper seeks to expand on the vision that I articulated for Seattle Colleges at the Fall Convocation: “To become the most transformative and the most relevant community college system in the country.” Towards that end, my attention during the first seven months has been on:

- understanding the strengths, opportunities, and challenges faced by the Seattle College District (district);
- establishing initial relationships with key legislative, city, education, civic, and community leaders;
- exploring preliminary strategies for integrating functions common to each of our colleges, and working with our district’s communities to develop, articulate, and begin implementing principles and initiatives designed to measure and improve our performance at every level.

## Our Strengths

Our Students Unquestionably our greatest strength is our amazing students: 45,000 from 80 countries; speaking 35 languages; an average age of 27; 41 percent work full- or part-time; and 48 percent are the first member of their family to attend college. Our extraordinary students are the *raison d’etre* of our district.

Our Employees The foundation and keystone of our infrastructure, the unsung heroes and lifeblood of our community, are our faculty, staff, and administrators. These talented and committed full- and part-time professionals provide the mission-centric work that propels us forward.

Our Results The demand for pathways to economic security and upward mobility for all residents, particularly those left out or marginalized by our society, has become a national mantra. Seattle Colleges’ primary focus—providing all students these pathways—is a

constantly changing work-in-process designed to meet this demand. Our ability to deliver quality, affordable education and training is the core strength of Seattle Colleges.

Our Community Since the very beginning, Seattle Colleges has received broad support from our external community. Over the nearly 50-year span, we have built significant partnerships with governmental, business, educational, and civic entities throughout the city. Today, we continue to enjoy a significant cache of good will and support from our community partners.

### **Our Opportunity**

With the possible exception of the era of our predecessor Edison Technical School, created in 1946 and driven by the urgent need to provide vocational training and postsecondary education to returning WWII veterans, Seattle Colleges has never been more relevant to the growth and vitality of our city, region and state. Civic, community, business, and political leaders are virtually unanimous in recognizing that the strength, vitality, and growth of our community and state are dependent on a sustainable pipeline of a skilled and civic-minded labor force.

Simply stated, our opportunity is to meet this need through the effective, efficient, and nimble delivery of quality education on the promise of our mission statement:

**“To provide excellent, accessible educational opportunities to prepare our students for a challenging future.”**

Realization of our opportunity, and delivery on the promise of our mission statement, will require a districtwide focused effort to meet our challenges.

### **Our Challenge**

Funding In many ways, we are now falling behind peer institutions across the country primarily because of inadequate state support of our people and plant. Increased state funding is a fundamental pre-condition to our ability to adequately support our students and to recruit and retain talented and quality faculty, staff, and administrators essential to fulfilling our mission. (In making this strong statement, I appreciate the magnitude of our state Legislature’s challenge in responding to the McCleary decision and acknowledge we are not alone—each of the state’s 34 community colleges suffers from inadequate state funding.)

While we face many challenges not related to funding (discussed below), our largest challenge is state underfunding of each of our foundational elements, including:

- our ability to provide students with much-needed scholarships or grants;
- our ability to provide fair compensation to our underpaid faculty, staff and administrators;

- our ability to maintain cutting-edge technological infrastructure and physical plant, critical for providing high-quality education and a healthy learning environment

Given our immediate and longer-term financial challenges, we must recognize the need and the urgency to review and re-conceptualize our existing organizational structures, staffing patterns, operational processes, and organizational habits—in short, a top-to-bottom collective effort to become more efficient and more effective with our limited resources.

Accordingly, we will need to commence a districtwide review of ways to reduce expenses without detracting from (and to the extent possible, enhancing) our mission, including: integration of districtwide functions; elimination of duplication and redundancy; and realizing economies of scale discussed below.

Continuous Enrollment Decline From the highpoint enrollment in 2010, we have experienced a decline of over 2,400 state-supported student enrollment. This trend has seen no signs of abating.

Demographic Shifts The blazingly hot regional economy has changed and will very likely continue to change the community composition. More and more low-income families—African American, Latino, and immigrants in particular—are moving out of our service area to seek affordable housing.

Disjointed Stories The three colleges and Seattle Vocational Institute that make up the district have evolved into different institutions. While there have been movements toward more coordination in recent years, there are four organizational structures and four ways of operation. As a result, Seattle Colleges lacks a coherent identity and a compelling story.

### **Our Urgent Task**

Integration We need to improve public confidence and support for Seattle Colleges by tearing down organizational silos and integrating administrative functions. Toward this end, the district will convene internal and external stakeholders to advise on the development of one mission, one vision, and a common set of values and strategic priorities for Seattle Colleges.

All district strategic and operational decisions will be made in accordance with the Four Guiding Principles adopted by the district Board of Trustees:

- Student Success
- Organizational Excellence
- Balance of Integration and Differentiation
- Fiscal Stability

One Institution Our objective is to transition from the current fragmented operational structure comprised of three separate colleges and SVI—competing for scarce resources, separate identities, and individual autonomy—to one institution serving students and communities in different locations.

Taking on desired organizational changes will necessarily involve eliminating duplication, streamlining administration, integrating functions, redeploying staff, and reduction in force. I will work with a districtwide steering committee, an external panel, and an external consultant to study the existing structure and opportunities for operational integration. Findings and recommendations will be submitted to the district board by the end of Spring Quarter for implementation in the upcoming Fall and Winter quarters.

Members of Seattle Colleges' three employee unions, AFT Seattle, WFSE, and AFT-SPS—critical to our success in moving forward—will be called upon to be part of the solutions to the multiple issues facing the district. The board and executive administrative team will continue to collaborate with union leadership to ensure that organizational changes will comply with relevant negotiated contractual agreements.

Colleges will develop operational plans designed to support and operationalize the district strategic plan and achieve outcomes established by you. Under the direction of the chancellor, college presidents—serving as the chief administrative officers for each of the colleges—will be responsible for providing leadership and management for effective teaching and learning, achieving board-established outcomes, and supporting district policies and system decisions.

The success of this undertaking will require great sensitivity to achieving a delicate balance between accommodating each college's individuality and maintaining system integrity and effectiveness.

We have begun the integration process in a number of ways, including combining the four college graduation ceremonies into one commencement, obtaining \$1.5 million from the city to expand the 13<sup>th</sup> Year Scholarship program across the district, integrating nursing programs, redesigning the budget development process, engaging community and legislative leaders in conceptualizing the future of SVI, and initiating the review and redesign of three operational practices (e-learning, enrollment, and district/college web pages).

Taking on organizational realignment is a complex task. It will take time; it will demand leadership, discipline, and patience. We will need to take a phased approach. For the initial phase, integration projects under consideration may include:

- adopting a common set of districtwide key performance indicators and measurements;
- streamlining of direct student services in support of teaching and learning;

- corporate and contract training, continuing and community education;
- recruitment;
- marketing;
- human services;
- institutional research and planning;
- public relations;
- information technology, web services, and e-learning offerings;
- SVI; and
- private fundraising.

### **Conclusion**

We are undertaking an urgent organizational transformation that is necessitated by changing realities, expected by the students and community we serve, and required for the long-term viability of Seattle Colleges. For sure, it has the potential to create anxiety, confusion, and resistance. While I am concerned about this prospect, we should be more concerned about the outcome of maintaining the status quo.

We are at the crossroads of our destiny. We cannot afford to do nothing. Otherwise, I am afraid that our long-term organizational viability is at risk; mediocrity might take hold; excellence and innovation remain isolated phenomena; and our hopes and dreams for Seattle Colleges will remain just that.

I believe that our faculty, staff, and administrators care deeply about our fundamental mission and our future. I am confident that they will be supportive of positive changes that better position the district for the future.

The words of General Eric Shinseki are particularly important for us to heed today: "If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less."

The urgency is upon us, and we must act with discipline and determination.