MHEC
Creating a state of achievement

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MARYLAND HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION
AID TO COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Senate Budget and Taxation Subcommittee on Education, Business, and Administration

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Secretary's response to recommended action

1. Concur with the Governor's allowance.

   The commission concurs with the analyst's recommendation.

Secretary's comments to issues raised in the Department of Legislative Services Analysis

2. MHEC should comment on the status of this new system to report student entry goals and explain how it better captures the dropout rate of the community colleges.

   The commission believes that the use of the term "dropout" to describe community college students who do not transfer to a four-year campus or earn a formal award is misleading. While retention, transfer and graduation rates provide important measures of success at community colleges, two-year institutions have expanded their missions in recent years and are enrolling increasing numbers of students with other educational goals. These include taking individual courses to prepare for entry into a career, upgrading skills for one's current job, or enrolling in classes for the purpose of self-enrichment. Maryland community colleges have initiated an annual survey of non-returning students to determine how many had achieved their educational objective prior to leaving. These figures, which are reported in the commission's performance accountability report and which include transfer as well as alternative goals, ranged between 56 and 81 percent in the most recent year. The community colleges prefer this approach since they believe that analysis of student success based on a student's goal upon entry is not a reliable measure for many students.

3. MHEC should also comment on the factors that prevent community colleges from achieving a 35 percent transfer and graduation rate and comment on the inverse relationship between it and the dropout rate. Furthermore, MHEC should include additional MFR measures, including its new dropout rate system, to better capture the dropout rate and provide a complete picture on how the community college population is moving through higher education.

   Community college transfer and graduation rates are one of the most closely monitored indicators in the commission's performance accountability report. The four-year rate of new full-time freshmen in the most recent cohort (32.2 percent) remains considerably below the levels of 10 years ago. In addition, a huge gap persists between racial/ethnic minorities and white students. Community colleges that are lagging behind their campus-established benchmarks in this area are required by the commission to provide an explanation for their lack of progress and/or a description of corrective actions that have been taken or are planned. Among the steps that colleges have initiated are changes in staffing, the introduction and enhancement of student support programs, instructional interventions, curricula changes, articulation efforts and expanded data collection. Most institutions have expressed optimism that they will be able to meet their benchmarks; if they are successful, the statewide average will reach 35 percent.

   The commission will work with the community colleges to collect the data needed to develop a statewide measure that shows the proportion of non-returning community college students who met their educational goals. The commission however, does not support any MFR measures that use a "dropout rate" for the reasons addressed above.

4. DLS recommends that MHEC and the community colleges discuss the factors driving tuition costs and the relationship between tuition charges and enrollment growth.

   The community colleges are in a better position to respond to this question.

5. The Secretary should comment on whether MHEC plans to revise the space guideline for community colleges and conduct an analysis on the constraints on growth at community colleges similar to the USM analysis.

   USM and DBM have begun some preliminary work in reviewing the space guidelines for capital projects. The 2004 State Plan for Postsecondary Education includes the following recommendation:

   The Secretary of Higher Education, in consultation with the Secretary of Budget and Management and the higher education community, should examine and recommend revisions to the capital improvement planning process, including any needed revisions of the capital facilities space guidelines for higher education. This study should incorporate data on the actual use of academic facilities and on the impact of distance education to aid in the development of guidelines and should include consideration of the deferred maintenance needs of higher education.

MHEC has statutory responsibility to develop guidelines to assess the adequacy of capital funding. The commission will be establishing a workgroup to undertake this review, working cooperatively with 4-year and 2-year public institutions as well the Department of Budget and Management.

6. MHEC should comment on the enrollment projections and space needs of community colleges. The recent trend in community college enrollment is uneven and it is unclear how the trends translate into building needs. The commission should discuss the factors used in determining capacity needs and alternative methods, such as online courses and use of other facilities to address current capacity and enrollment growth.

   As previously mentioned, the 2004 State Plan for Postsecondary Education recommends a comprehensive review of the capital improvement planning process, including any needed revisions of the capital facilities space guidelines for higher education. The commission will establish a workgroup to undertake this review, working cooperatively with 4-year and 2-year public institutions as well the Department of Budget and Management. The review will include use of academic facilities and the impact of alternative strategies such as online courses and other strategies.