

OEI Exchange: A Costly “Solution” in Search of a Problem

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To: Julie Adams, Executive Director, Academic Senate

CC: David Morse, President, Academic Senate; Sue Gonda, Academic Senate President, Grossmont College; ASCCC Executive Committee

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Subject: Online Education Initiative (OEI) Exchange: Solution in Search of Problem

My time as an Academic Senate representative on the Online Education Initiative (OEI) Steering Committee came to an end earlier this year. As requested, here's my final report.

For those unfamiliar with the OEI, here's a summary taken from the official website:

The purpose is “...**to develop a robust, one stop statewide online education portal [Exchange] where California community college students can apply, register, and take online courses from participating colleges throughout the state.**”

So the Exchange, when up and running, will allow students from any college to seamlessly sign up for courses at any campus across California. For example, a full-time Grossmont student might enroll in one course on her home campus and the other four at Fresno, Pasadena, Bakersfield and Chaffey colleges. And next semester she can choose a whole new set of campuses. Seamlessly.

And due to falling enrollments statewide it's easy to imagine how big this can get. For example, let's say LA City College continues to see a drop in enrollment and over time adds 30 sections to the Exchange. And Bakersfield adds 28. And Fresno ... If each of California's 112 colleges added on average 30 sections, before long we'd have an Exchange with 3360 sections, or 134,400 virtual seats - a de facto 113th community college.

That's very exciting! In fact, the California legislature is so enthusiastic about the transformative nature of the OEI that they've committed \$56.9 million taxpayer dollars.

I, too, was certain that the OEI would have a huge impact on our students, faculty, and local campus FTES (Full-Time Equivalent Student) stability, so in January of 2014 I volunteered for, and was appointed to, a two-year term on the OEI Steering Committee. That first year I served on the Academic Affairs and Consortium subcommittees, while attending monthly meetings alternating between Los Angeles and Sacramento.

My experience can best be summarized with list of questions I had asked. Some were answered in part – others not at all. Some raised serious concerns. Here are just a few:

Question 1: In times of declining statewide community college enrollment, will the Exchange actually result in an FTES net loss for many local campuses?

The Exchange – allowing “seamless enrollment” for students in any online class in the Exchange from any campus across the state – arguably made sense many years ago when enrollment was at an all-time record, and seats on local campuses were in short supply due to massive statewide budget cuts.

But campuses across the state are now scrambling for FTES because of the improving economy and high school demographic shifts. In fact, the Chancellor's office reports a statewide decline of 149,230 FTES since the 2009-10 academic year, with 105 local campuses experiencing an FTES drop.

With falling enrollment we can expect local campuses to do one of two things: cut sections or add them to the Exchange. Since losing FTES one year means a campus won't get them back the next, a huge majority will most certainly choose the latter. The goal then for each campus putting sections in the Exchange will be to gain FTES from ... wait for it ... other campuses seeking FTES!

Result: Cross-campus cannibalization. And the possible dismantling of the California community college system as we know it – byte by byte.

For example, let's say Miramar College and Butte College are both short on FTES and that both put sections in the Exchange. Who really wins here? If Miramar has a net gain, then Butte has a net loss. And next year it could be Miramar on the losing end? And if all 105 campuses add courses to the Exchange in search of FTES, we will definitely have winners and losers, and erratic FTES swings. (Note: FTES goes to the teaching campus, not the home campus.)

And with more enrollment swings we can expect regular resource re-allocation, resulting in inconsistent funding for local campuses, hitting especially hard the underprepared, minority and low-income students most in need of local campus resources.

Other issues remain: Will a shift of just a few students from a local campus to the Exchange result in cancelled local courses, causing FTES losses beyond just those students who move? For example, Grossmont has a minimum enrollment of 20 students. Imagine 20 students in our district enrolling in a hybrid section of History 101. But just before the start of the class three students “seamlessly” move to the Exchange.

Result: Section is cancelled, FTES is lost, faculty member loses paycheck, and 17 students wanting the on-campus/hybrid learning environment are forced to the Exchange or made to delay transfer/graduation.

Bottom line, the Exchange is very much looking like an expensive solution designed to solve a problem that no longer exists, and the fallout from its implementation has the potential to cause serious harm to local campuses. The OEI Management Team doesn't want to hear this, and the Academic Senate leadership is afraid to tell them (see question #6).

Question 2: Can a local campus just opt out of the Exchange and avoid potential damage to its FTES?

The short answer: No.

The OEI website does make the assertion that “participation is voluntary” in the Exchange, but that’s not the whole story. Here’s the Budget Act language: “The chancellor shall also ensure that these online only courses are made available to students system wide, regardless of the campus where they are enrolled.” (2013-14 California State Budget Act, item 42, schedule 26, page 540)

It is true that your campus can’t be forced to add courses to the Exchange, but your home students can’t be kept out. So even if you don’t add courses to the Exchange, your FTES can still be sucked away by other campuses. And to make up for any students you might lose to the Exchange, you’re quite likely going to add some courses too, right? Before you know it, you’re in the Exchange -- along with 112 other campuses. Not because you want to – but because you have to.

Question 3: Is the OEI Management Team going beyond the legislative intent to “alleviate shortages” by including courses in the Exchange that show no signs of a shortage?

Following the intent of the legislature is crucial when spending \$56.9 million taxpayer dollars. Sometimes this intent is hard to discern. This time, though, it’s

quite easy. Here's language from SEC. 37. of Section 2.00 of the Budget Act of 2013:

42.a. "... The Legislature's intent is to maximize the development of online courses available across campuses to **alleviate shortages** of certain core courses at certain campuses." (Emphasis added.)

But a "shortage" designation was not at all a factor when selecting courses for the pilot Exchange. I was part of the Academic Affairs subcommittee, and notwithstanding my protests, the criteria used for selecting courses for the Exchange was all about course that are "popular."

And what's popular is not necessarily in short supply. For example, Psychology 110 is a popular course on our campus, but is not in short supply. Philosophy 120 is in demand, but we have enough seats. Economics 120, too is popular, but there is no shortage of desks.

And won't an Exchange full of courses that are popular but not in short supply result in serious scheduling instability on local campuses, with students potentially bouncing from campus to campus, impacting local resources and funding for all students? (See question 1.)

[Why the OEI Management Team claims on its website that "high-priority bottleneck" courses were its focus is a mystery.]

So we actually have an easy fix to the problem of FTES losses at local campuses caused by the Exchange. Just follow the intent of the legislature and only add courses to the Exchange that are in short supply.

As a bonus, it's the law.

Question 4: Is the OEI Steering Committee actually driving or being taken for a ride?

The state legislature attached \$56.9 million taxpayer dollars to this Initiative, so one would expect transparency to be the rule, not the exception. Concerning Steering Committee access to important bids and proposals, the OEI Management Team appeared to have had other plans.

For example, an OEI subcommittee was putting together the Request for Proposals (RFP) for online tutoring, a lucrative and long-term contract for some lucky vendor. I was concerned that tutoring jobs currently filled by our own students and staff on local campuses would be outsourced to out-of-state and overseas tutors if the ratings rubric required a vendor to have its own stable of tutors. I wanted to be sure that a vendor offering a "consortium model" – using *only* local students and staff as tutors -- could at least be in the running.

A very brief Base Camp discussion took place among a few committee members, but suddenly the issue disappeared off the radar. I then asked that the full OEI Steering Committee have the opportunity to review the RFP ratings rubric developed by our subcommittee before it was published, allowing for a full and robust discussion. It was, I thought, a routine request.

The answer from OEI Executive Director Pat James: "No."

That's right. The full OEI Steering Committee was actually denied access to work product of its subcommittee. Never before had I worked on a steering committee that reported to one of its subcommittees, and not the other way around. Two days later the online tutoring RFP was published.

And the lack of transparency was once more the rule when the Common Course Management System (CCMS) RFP was being developed. Again, I requested that the full OEI Steering Committee have an opportunity to review the RFP ratings rubric developed by our subcommittee before publication to allow a robust discussion about this important and lucrative vendor contract.

"No", was once again the response from Pat.

Instead the CCMS RFP would be posted on Google Docs for 72 hours, beginning at 5:00 p.m. on a Sunday. That's right – a Sunday. Individual Steering Committee members could post comments and questions, and the Management Team would, if they deemed it appropriate, post responses.

But what harm could come from a full and robust Steering Committee discussion, I asked? We had all signed non-disclosure agreements, after all. (Another interesting adventure I'll save for another time.) And most importantly, the full OEI Steering Committee had an in-person meeting scheduled in Sacramento just two weeks later. Can we all discuss the CCMS RFP at that gathering?

Final answer: No.

Never did the Management Team explain why the full OEI Steering Committee was denied unfettered access to the subcommittee work product. But even more perplexing was what I learned about Academic Senate representation on the online tutoring subcommittee.

Question 5: Is the Academic Senate's role on the OEI Steering Committee that of a powerful guiding force or merely window dressing?

The OEI Management Team has made it clear on many occasions that they need faculty buy in. In fact, of the 26 Steering Committee seats, 9 are reserved for Academic Senate appointments. Quite impressive.

But how is this playing in real time. Let's look back at the online tutoring RFP. Yes, the full OEI Steering Committee was refused access to the RFP ratings rubric prior to official publication, but we should take comfort knowing that the Academic Senate was being heard on the subcommittee, right? Wrong.

Here's a breakdown of the OEI online tutoring subcommittee membership responsible for developing the RFP:

Subcommittee members: 14

Subcommittee members also members of the OEI Steering Committee: 1

Subcommittee members appointed by Academic Senate: 0

Question 6: Did Academic Senate President David Morse cut me from the OEI Steering Committee because of a concern with "expertise" or to put an end to the tough questions?

The Steering Committee charter sets member terms at two years. But just as the second year of the full two-year commitment to the OEI Steering Committee was about to get underway I received word that I was being cut from the team. Yes, statewide Academic Senate President David Morse had determined that "expertise in other areas is necessary" going forward.

The specific "expertise" he was seeking is still unclear. Teaching experience? I have 15 years. Online teaching? As department chair for eight years I've evaluated online faculty and I'm teaching yet another hybrid class this spring. Academic Senate work? Ten years as a local campus rep, with statewide roles as SB 1440 lead and C-ID work. Campus Involvement: Enrollment Strategies and Curriculum committees. Confidence to ask the tough questions? You bet.

In hindsight, maybe the "tough questions" were too much. As you can see, I raised issues that possibly made some on the OEI Management Team – and David -- a bit uncomfortable. Maybe so, but I promised to protect the interests of all students and faculty, and to make sure those \$56.9 million taxpayer dollars were spent wisely. Tough questions were crucial, if not altogether welcome.

And I probably should have seen this coming. As the first year was coming to an end I requested that this item be placed on the Steering Committee agenda: *Is the Exchange fixing a problem from five years ago that no longer exists, while setting up local campuses for increasingly unpredictable enrollment and dangerously unstable funding?*

OEI Steering Committee co-chair and Academic Senate Executive Committee member John Freitas denied my request. He said I first had to discuss this with this Academic Senate President David Morse. "Why," I asked? This is a point

of discussion, not an official position of the Academic Senate. Such a restriction on speech would be inappropriate in the classroom, and should be in the boardroom. And besides, David isn't even on the committee.

I asked David Morse to a call. He never did. He did, though, just two weeks later, remove me from the committee.

Question 7: So, what's next?

After 12 months on the 24-member OEI Steering Committee I've come to this conclusion: **The OEI Exchange is a multi-million dollar solution designed to solve a problem that no longer exists.**

Nonetheless, the Exchange pilot is set to be launched this fall with ten or so campuses offering more than a dozen subjects, including Administration of Justice, Economics, Math, History, Psychology, Geology, English, Anthropology and Philosophy.

It is possible that the Exchange will be set on "low priority" with more attention given to online tutoring and the CCMS. Several respected colleagues shared with me that this appears to be the current path. But if reports from the OEI Management Team can be trusted, the Exchange is actually picking up steam. "*Summit Rallies Faculty Around Course Exchange*," reads a March headline on the OEI website. "*The enthusiasm in the room on both days with faculty and staff from across the colleges was just amazing...*" declared a participant. (<http://ccctechedge.org/news/miscellaneous/517-summit-rallies-faculty-around-course-exchange>)

Or maybe campuses across the state will pour sections into the Exchange in search of FTES, ultimately resulting in the 113th community college in California, resulting in erratic local funding and a reallocation of education dollars to our local campuses.

It's also possible the Exchange will just implode. Maybe students won't come even if you build it. And it's possible local campuses will realize that the Exchange will most likely create winners and loser in this environment of declining enrollments. Of course, we can all guess what the \$56.9 million dollar question will be if that happens.

We can't know for sure what will happen. But what I do know is that more transparency is crucial, and the Academic Senate needs to step up to the plate and start asking the tough questions.

That's it for now. I'm around for questions: 619-644-7520.

