Lawmakers consider NSHE breakup as regents talk consolidation

By ANA LEY

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As state lawmakers consider dismantling the Nevada System of Higher Education, the agency's Board of Regents will gather Friday in what some political insiders criticized as a bureaucratic stunt aimed at thwarting reform efforts.

Sources say Assemblyman Stephen Silberkraus and other Republican legislators are drafting a bill that aims to split up NSHE, an agency whose schools have long been plagued by weak performance and dismal graduation rates, which rank among the lowest in the nation. Although the effort has drawn praise from some education insiders and Las Vegas business leaders, NSHE officials maintain that they can improve the state's eight colleges and universities without legislative intervention.

"While I appreciate the Board of Regents' sudden interest in reforming their system, this is only a first step," Silberkraus said of Friday's meeting, where regents will spend at least five hours contemplating their role as policy and budget setters for Nevada's public higher education system. "It is going to take a lot more than a single agenda to prevent the legislature from moving forward with much-needed and long overdue NSHE reform."

The proposal's backers say NSHE badly needs a breakup to better serve the state's 100,000 college students, especially as Gov. Brian Sandoval seeks to push his signature issue: diversifying Nevada's tourism-dependent workforce. But board Chairman Rick Trachok, who emphasized Thursday that he had no knowledge of the emerging legislation and dismissed accusations that Friday's meeting is politically motivated, said there is no need to restructure NSHE.

"In a state like Nevada, where we have scarce resources, to create an entire new administrative system to oversee part of what the Board of Regents covers right now is not a wise use of funds," Trachok said. "More importantly ... what we do as a single system is we can work together between the colleges and universities and make sure that we have seamless articulation between the students attending a college and then either transferring to a state college or a university."

Funding and student success will dominate at Friday's all-day meeting, where regents will discuss an array of initiatives that seek to consolidate — not divide — the system's duties. For instance, regents will consider proposals to create an automatic transcript exchange and a single registration platform for all system institutions. Along with discussing the "alignment of NSHE institutions," regents will discuss a new self-
assessment with metrics that include how the board is working to increase the number of students getting college degrees in Nevada.

Only 15 percent of Nevada's college students graduated on time from a public four-year university in 2013 — that's less than half the national average, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics. It has the fourth-lowest ranking in the country, followed by New Mexico, Alaska and the District of Columbia. Completion rates at the state's two-year colleges are also poor — only 2.8 percent of students graduated on time in 2013, with only Indiana and Vermont posting worse rates.

"The current arrangement is 50 years old now, and in 50 years there should have been more progress," said Carol Lucey, who served as president of Western Nevada College for 14 years before resigning in 2013. "Suddenly there's a lot of activity now, and that's good — that's fine. But one gets the sense it's under pressure."

The push to restructure NSHE isn't new.

In 2013, legislators created a temporary committee to consider pulling the state's community colleges from under NSHE's purview, a proposal that never came to fruition. Instead, the system created an internal standing committee to focus on issues affecting the state's community colleges.

The process faced scrutiny after the Las Vegas Review-Journal revealed last summer that NSHE Chancellor Dan Klaich had tried to quash a report critical of NSHE that was meant to go before the legislative committee.

Asked about Friday's meeting and Silberkraus' proposal to break up the higher education system, Klaich said regents are gathering to advance the efforts of the 2013 Legislature.

"My advice to legislators who ask me how to go about studying this is that you want an objective, outside source giving you different options — someone who doesn't have a stake and was not hired by Dan Klaich," said Mario Martínez, a former UNLV professor and vice chancellor of strategy at the National University System in San Diego. "If you live in a state with less than 1 million people, maybe a single system works. But as your state grows, then you ... need to allow enough attention for all institutions."

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Community colleges should be freed from university system

By JOHN CWALTNEV and RON REMINGTON

Gov. Brian Sandoval, the state Legislature, the Board of Regents and the Nevada System of Higher Education deserve to be commended for working to improve education in Nevada during the 2015 legislative session.

However, for months the authors of this op-ed, joined by our also-retired colleagues Tony Calabro (Western Nevada College president, 1982-1995) and Carol Lucey (Western Nevada College president, 1999-2013) have looked on with concern about our state’s economic future and that of our students. Simply, the recently revised funding formula, with a goal of rectifying inequities between the state’s two universities, has created budgetary chaos for the state’s four community colleges.

In particular, one consequence of the new formula was to shortchange students attending Nevada’s most rural colleges. Great Basin College and Western Nevada College must soon absorb budget cuts in excess of 30 percent. The temporary “bridge” funding provided by the Legislature in June will only ease the inevitable budget devastation by allowing time for faculty and staff to polish their résumés and seek employment elsewhere, while presidents agonize over which services and communities to abandon, which programs to dismantle and which employees to fire.

In the larger view, both the current funding formula and college governance structure penalize more than half of Nevada’s college students. Yes, more than half of all students in higher education in Nevada attend College of Southern Nevada, Great Basin College, Truckee Meadows Community College and Western Nevada College.

Although it’s seductive to imagine college students having unlimited leisure time for strolling campus, pledging fraternities and attending football games, in reality, many Nevada students work, support families and are first-generation college students. This is particularly true of community college students. For many of these students, education is a ladder out of poverty. A bad college budget removes rungs from that ladder. These students have the same desire for an education that can improve their lives as do those who attend universities. Our leaders expect them to graduate and become the backbone of a new state workforce, thereby changing our economy and culture for the better. To regard community college students as lesser is wrong.

The work of community colleges is not glamorous, but the return on the taxpayer’s investment is profound. These are open-door institutions with a focus on learning.
Faculty members are paid less to teach more (often for the same classes offered at universities). Their colleges don't have postgraduate degree programs, boosters, strong alumni support or wealthy donors who can supplement institutional revenue. Community colleges, without frills, efficiently and effectively go about training and educating Nevada students. So to regard community college faculty and the colleges themselves as lesser is also wrong.

The governance of the NSHE and the chancellor’s office are consumed by the business of our universities. The universities are complex institutions — their issues and concerns require full attention and deserve no less. The Board of Regents, however, has not proved to be an effective governance board for the community colleges, nor has the NSHE office been an effective advocate for community college students. Despite regular attempts to improve the effectiveness of the system within the current governance model, major weaknesses persist. These should be seen as structural and not the fault of any given board, which has generally been composed of diligent and sincere citizens who have tried to do their best.

The chancellor’s office, recognizing the dilemma, recently proposed the hiring of a vice chancellor for community colleges. This “new idea” is not new at all. It has been implemented at least three times before, and each time, it has been unsuccessful. The result inevitably was too much authority devolving to a centralized system bureaucracy, isolating the chancellor and the regents from issues and concerns of individual campuses. These individuals may well have advocated for community colleges, but on each occasion, the person occupying this highly paid position and the position itself disappeared.

Time and again, independent consultants have recommended changes for Nevada community college governance. Time and again, those recommendations have been ignored. Time and again, independent consultants have warned against the meager funding allotted to community colleges. Time and again, those admonitions have been ignored. An addiction to the status quo does not allow for change, innovation and improvement. Why does the state preserve a governance model that, in effect, inhibits the contributions of its community colleges and, most importantly, penalizes more than half of Nevada’s college students?

It’s time to admit the current college governance structure has hurt Nevada and its students. The state must find a better way forward and free the community colleges from a university-focused system.