

December 19, 2003

Yes, New Jersey Does Need a Higher Education Commission
(Letter to the Star-Ledger, not published)

Glenn Shafer
Professor, Rutgers School of Business – Newark and New Brunswick

Bravo for your thoughtful and detailed editorial (Dec. 14) promoting a “Plan B” now that Governor McGreevy has shelved his proposal to merge New Jersey’s three major research universities and then split them on geographical lines. After so many months when public discussion of the Governor’s proposals emphasized politics and personalities, it was heartening to see so careful a discussion of the difficulties and issues.

As a member of the faculty of Rutgers University, I strongly endorse your call for an entity that “aggressively coordinates” needed collaboration between Rutgers, NJIT, and UMDNJ. All three of these institutions have new leadership—dedicated presidents and provosts who must now develop visions for moving their institutions forward in the next decade. We need a revived Commission on Higher Education, which can provide these leaders with an opportunity to develop and implement their own proposals for dovetailing priorities and administrative procedures.

With the planning that has been done for the Governor’s proposals, a new Commission would be in a position to create a framework for the collaboration between Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital and the Rutgers science departments in New Brunswick that the Vagelos plan envisioned. First steps could also be taken towards the collaborations the plan envisioned between Camden and Stratford.

In Newark, a new Commission could revive and strengthen the Council for Higher Education in Newark (CHEN), fashioning it into a forum where the leaders of the three institutions could set priorities for collaboration that would then be protected from the vagaries of competition within each institution. Such a framework would allow Rutgers – Newark to work closely with its Newark neighbors while retaining the advantages that come from the many collaborations its schools, departments, and individual faculty members have with established research centers at Rutgers – New Brunswick.

Although many other states have models for inter-campus collaboration on which we can draw, we must also take account of the unique intensity of the collaboration between higher education in New Brunswick and higher education in Newark. Less than 30 miles apart by car – less than 40 minutes apart by rail – these two campuses are much closer together than any of the campuses in the multi-campus systems of the states that are cited as models for our collaboration. This proximity has had a strong influence on the development of both Rutgers and UMDNJ. Under the twenty-year leadership of former Newark Provost Norman Samuels, Rutgers – Newark developed not merely as a satellite

teaching institution, but as an integral part of Rutgers. It boasts a research faculty and its own share of centers of excellence, including but not limited to those in the professional schools headquartered in Newark. This approach makes sense, and a new state-wide Commission of Higher Education can provide the framework in which the continued development of first-rate centers of excellence at Rutgers – Newark can be recognized, properly supported by the legislature, and leveraged through collaboration with the other Newark institutions.

A revived and strengthened Commission on Higher Education must be concerned, of course, with the state colleges as well as with the research universities. It would play an essential role in planning and coordinating the state's response to the sharply increasing need for higher education in the state. Higher education in New Jersey obviously needs more money to meet this new challenge. But the state's taxpayers and the legislators who represent them are unlikely to provide it unless the state's institutions of higher education have a forum through which they can speak with one voice. Without such a forum, any new initiative will founder, as the Vagelos plan foundered, over anxieties about who will get what.

I hope Governor McGreevy will put aside his disappointment over the failure of his first initiative and move quickly to support a revived Commission of Higher Education that can push his goals forward without delay. Our separate institutions have new leadership ready to move. The opportunities in biomedicine and technology make this the right time to move. The flood of new high school graduates will not wait. Higher education in our state cannot wait for the next governor.