

“On the Invasive Influence of Politics, Business, and Economics on an Innovative Education Initiative: A Longitudinal Case Study”

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Abstract

This paper chronicles the establishment of a unique, high school, dual enrollment program emanating from a partnership between the Okaloosa County (Florida, USA) School Board and Troy (Alabama, USA) University with a view toward illuminating, via a longitudinal analysis, the political and business/economic issues that led to the unfortunate demise of a highly successful educational initiative during which some 1600 students earned in excess of 20,000 college credit hours, without leaving their high school campuses, at no cost to parents, and saving families in excess of 2.3 million dollars in tuition alone over a two year period.. Ironically, however, the short-lived “University School” subsequently served to provide the impetus for the proliferation of high school dual enrollment initiatives throughout the state of Florida; which, to date, have resulted in over 100,000 high school students having earned higher education credits as well as numerous national industry certifications.

Keywords: Business, politics, education

1. Introduction

In the Spring of 1999, the Okaloosa County (Florida) School Board began exploring ways in which students in the county high schools could obtain college credit and perhaps even acquire an Associates Degree prior to completing high school. Although dual enrollment programs had already become common, the Board insisted that this initiative be guided by one overriding principle; namely, that the students not be required to forfeit any of their “high school experience.” This parameter further specified that the students should not be required to leave their high school campuses in order to receive the college instruction. This non-negotiable restriction by the School Board, intended in part to retain some of the best and brightest students in the local high schools and in part to protect the state funding accompanying those students, resulted in the Board’s inability to reach an agreement with any of the Florida schools. Even the local, Florida-based Community College, preferred to establish a Charter School on its own campus which would draw those students, accompanied, of course, by their state funding revenue to that campus.

In October of 1999, the senior leadership of Troy State University (hereafter designated by its current name, Troy University) an Alabama institution with several very successful educational programs in its Florida Region, headquartered in Ft. Walton Beach, Florida authorized the Florida Region leadership to be of assistance in developing a modified dual enrollment program that would be beneficial for all stakeholders (The School Board, Troy University, parents, and most importantly, the participating students). The resulting Articulation Agreement between the School Board of Okaloosa County and Troy’s campus in Fort Walton Beach established a unique, “School within a School” program to be located on the campuses of four high schools within the Okaloosa County School District albeit in the face of significant local political opposition.

The program was funded in its entirety by the County School System, resulting in some 1600 students earning in excess of 20,000 college credit hours at no cost to parents, saving families in excess of 2.3 million dollars in tuition over a two year period. Additionally, thirty students completed all requirements for an Associate's Degree, without leaving their high school campuses and while continuing to be eligible to participate fully in all of the extra-curricular activities offered by the school.

The articulation agreement established a financially viable "University School" project which became a well-documented academic success, culminating in a "No Recommendations" evaluation by an accreditation team of onsite reviewers from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) led, in person by its Executive Director. The fact that such a successful endeavor survived for only two years raises the obvious question: What went wrong? In retrospect, the answer seems surprisingly simple. From the outset, the University School was the center of overtly contentious political maneuvering by the School Board, the senior leadership of the local Troy University Campus and the local community college, which, for financial considerations alone, understandably preferred to establish a traditional charter school on its own campus. Perhaps of greater significance, especially from a long range perspective, the project also became the target of the broader higher education community in Florida which clearly revealed itself to be an opponent of such an innovative and, from their perspective, financially detrimental concept.

2. Innovative Education: The University School

While the primary focus of this article is on the academic and economic aspects of the University School, there can be no doubt that the prevailing political issues were the impetus for rigorous opposition among those who felt economically threatened by the initiative but, more importantly, also contributed significantly to the eventual legislative interest in the project that led to the proliferation of dual-enrollment opportunities for high school students throughout the state of Florida. Since the innovative aspects of the University School were generic to the resistance of its implementation, the following summary describes some of the more innovative aspects of the project, which has become a Teaching Case designed to illustrate the potentially adversarial relationship between academically beneficial educational innovation and the vested economic interests within the political arena (Meine and Dunn, 2008).

Following the formal signing of the Articulation Agreement in November, 1999, a series of meetings between representatives of the four high schools and the senior leadership of Troy's Florida Organization (TROY-FL), including the Director for TROY-FL, the Associate Director for Academics, and the Director of Distance and Participating Programs, were held to develop specific academic and administrative parameters for the program, which included:

Eligibility Requirements - The program would enroll only the "best and the brightest" of the incoming juniors and seniors (those having a 3.5 GPA or above since the ninth grade).

The Degree Program(s) to be offered -TROY's Fort Walton location would offer incoming juniors the opportunity to achieve a 66-hour Associate of Arts degree with an emphasis in either Business or Social Science. In addition, seniors in the initial year would be allowed to take University School courses for TROYcredit.

The Pairing of High School and TROY Courses - Wherever possible the high school courses selected for inclusion in the University School would be those designated as AP (Advanced Placement) or IB (International Baccalaureate) courses. The rationale for this decision was derived from the fact that these courses routinely use college-level textbooks and provide the student with an opportunity to take a nationally standardized, comprehensive examination. Successful performance on the AP and IB exam leads to the course being accepted for college credit at most colleges and universities in the United States. Although it varies by academic subject, the overall success rate on these examinations is approximately 50%. As a result, students who participated successfully in the University School would be guaranteed that their efforts would have earned them credit for an accredited university course.

The Delivery System – Among the most innovative aspects of the University School was the decision to utilize a team teaching approach to deliver course content, with an emphasis on cooperation between the two faculty members in accommodating 1) the high school teacher's mandate to prepare students for the AP or IB comprehensive exams and, 2) the TROY instructors' mandate to ensure that both the course content and the academic rigor be comparable to their counterparts in their traditional Troy University courses.

Faculty-In order to staff the University School courses, TROY hired 5 new full-time faculty members to support the program while also utilizing existing full-time and adjunct faculty to ensure appropriate full-time faculty participation. Adjunct faculty members were hired on a section-by-section basis as needed.

3. The “Politics” of the University School

Once the University School was launched it was of critical importance for the School Board that the program succeed, especially since the struggle with the local college had quickly emerged as a high profile and contentious issue in the county. It was equally important for TROY to create a successful program; in part as a result of the emerging academic and accreditation concerns, and in part because of the tenuous financial viability of the program as a result of the necessity for hiring new faculty and staff to support it. Fortunately for both of its high profile institutional stakeholders, as well as for the students and their parents who benefited the most from the academic opportunities and fiscal policies surrounding this unique endeavor, the University School was an unqualified success. While the “No Recommendations” evaluation by the SACS onsite reviewers, had validated the program's academic excellence, the fact that the impressive accomplishments of the University School students were indeed achieved without their having to leave their high school campuses attested to the program's compliance with the School Board's seminal and non-negotiable parameter. Although admittedly self-serving, it seems reasonable to conclude that even though the numerous academic and administrative regulations had to be created both expeditiously and, on occasion, under duress the ultimate success of the University School would seem to justify those regulations being regarded as “good public policy.” That a successful program resulting from beneficial public policy could endure for only two years suggests not only that political intervention might have been at play but that a systematic examination of that possibility is obligatory as well.

In retrospect, it is clear that, from the outset, the University School was characterized, in part, by competition between the creation of a desirable academic opportunity for all stakeholders and the desire by certain actors on the School Board to push the education community to be more accepting of innovation. It was correctly posited that using an out-of-state “interloper” for that purpose would be the most effective strategy for identifying the barriers to such innovation (Fuller, Frank, Senior Policy Advisor on Education to the Florida Senate, On Record Interview, Destin, Florida, September 14, 2012).

It is highly likely that had the local community college initially agreed to a program that would have allowed high school students to remain in the schools rather than starting a competing charter school of its own, the University School project might never have been undertaken. The competing local politics and financial considerations of the School Board versus the local community college had driven the Board to seek a partnership with TROY, an out of state institution—an effort that was sure to create significant political turmoil in the community. The political process also pitted TROY against the competing interests of the local community college in public hearings before the School Board. Ultimately, TROY received the endorsement from the School Board to launch the University School, and the local community college decided to move forward with its competing program as well.

With the preponderance of the local media coverage being supportive of the community college, it quickly became apparent that the University School would be navigating both a perilous political landscape as well as relentless overt and covert opposition from the community college. As a result, the possibility that its leadership may well have been instrumental in stirring opposition to such an innovative program because of its threatening competitive academic and financial nature cannot be discounted. In the final analysis, it became clear that despite promising and delivering significant academic advantages to an impressive number of students and financial benefits to their families, the inevitable outcome of the University School would be the unfortunate demise of an academically and fiscally sound educational program that had been trumped by politics and unrelenting, if frequently disingenuous, resistance from the educational establishment.

Since the efforts to undermine and eliminate the University School on grounds of inferior academic quality and integrity had failed, as documented by the SACS' findings, and since the state's public universities had, as expected, never been supportive of a program that they correctly perceived could result in significant numbers of high school graduates being ready to enter, those universities as sophomores or even juniors based on university credit earned elsewhere it was not long before political issues began to surface throughout the state. Soon thereafter, an unanticipated change in the transfer credit acceptance policy, which limited dual enrollment transfer credit only to work completed at Florida public educational institutions, was enacted by one of Florida's flagship universities. Although that law had been in place for quite some time, the abrupt change to limiting dual enrollment credit to only that required in law was obviously focused on eliminating credit earned through the University School Program, since that credit was delivered by, an out-of-state institution. The transfer policy change thus compelled the Okaloosa County School Board to re-bid the program. Under the circumstances, Troy University chose not to bid; opting instead to be of continuing assistance to all of the University School students and their families. To that end and beyond, the Regional Director, and co-author of this article, published an open letter to all interested parties in the local newspaper. After presenting a synopsis of the impressively successful partnership between Troy University and the Okaloosa County School Board he went on to observe:

Unfortunately, the viability of the partnership, which did not find favor in all Florida political circles, is now called into question because the University of Florida, one of the major Florida public universities has recently established a new admission policy disallowing dual enrollment credit unless provided by a Florida public college or university earned after this academic year. This action forces the Okaloosa County school system to submit the program for bid to other colleges and universities. We at Troy State University understand and support the need for this re-bidding process. To ensure students are not harmed by the exclusionary admission policies being established at Florida Colleges and because we can no longer guarantee course transferability, Troy State University will not seek to continue the University School partnership unless specifically asked to do so by the Okaloosa County School System. Of course, students will receive full TSU credit for courses they have completed or in which they are currently enrolled...and, we will do all in our power to assist students and parents during any transition. We stand ready to continue to provide quality educational programs and services to University School families (Meine, 2002)

3. The Demise of the University School—Academics Versus...?

To this point the discussion has focused on academics and politics, but was that really the etiology of the demise of the breakthrough educational effort called the University School, or was it simply a matter of business and economics? While the education community may posture itself to be singularly focused on public service in general and the well-being and future success of students in particular, none of those noble goals are achievable without the financial resources to make them a reality, and as such one can legitimately speak of the "business of education." Certainly in the current education delivery environment especially with the removal of geographic boundaries as a result of online education delivery, competition for students is fierce, making the tendency for the educational community "to protect its turf" understandable (Allen and Seaman, 2008; Aldridge, 2010).

The published notion that the demise of the University School was the result of politics (which, on the basis of numerous private and public conversations, memoranda, and e-mail exchanges, had been the inevitable conclusion) was never refuted. The local community college, which had publicly opposed and subsequently been in competition with the University School (in favor of its own charter school) from the outset, now became the successful bidder, and, not surprisingly, almost immediately closed it down (Meine and Dunn). With the revenue they stood to gain and the turf they sought to protect, the inevitability of them eliminating the only competition for their preferred charter school was never in serious doubt.

Considering that \$3479.22 of state funding currently accompanies any student leaving a local high school for a charter school, the pressure to retain students can certainly go beyond academic or school activity reasons. In addition, considering that any student entering a public university with one to two years of credit already completed, provides two years less of tuition, fees and other economic support for such a university, the pressure to limit such admissions arguably also has an economic cause. Although business and economic and/or academics and student participation in school activities were contributing factors, the University School was undeniably derailed through the use of political pressures in support of economic advantages by the education establishment.

4. The University School: An Ongoing Legacy and the Eventual Victor?

Ironically, the demonstrably successful, if short-lived, University School appears to have resulted in a much broader application of such methods in providing innovative educational opportunities for Florida high school students, their families and the anonymous, but omnipresent, taxpayer. According to Florida Senator and incoming Senate President Don Gaetz the University School was indeed the catalyst for subsequent educational innovations that have been and continue to be of substantial benefit to Florida high school students. More specifically, he noted that the proliferation of high school dual enrollment initiatives throughout the state of Florida since the University School project have, to date, resulted in over 100,000 high school students having earned higher education credits/national industry certifications (Gaetz, Don, personal e-mail correspondence, September 4, 2012).

In addition to the impressive overt ramifications of the University School, the successful completion of the latent agenda of the more forward thinking members of the Okaloosa County School Board to push the education community to be more accepting of innovation also produced some important, long-range outcomes. Simply put, the focus on innovation fostered by the University School project has led to visionary educators and political players in Florida being able to push for educational reform specifically designed to result in higher education being more directly linked to the needs of employers; in other words, to be more closely aligned with available jobs or evolving job opportunities. In an environment where acquiring a traditional liberal arts education no longer guarantees the acquisition of a quality job, the need for innovation in the linking of education to employment opportunities and trends may well be critical. As such, and in the final analysis, the University School deserves not only to be regarded as a success in its own right, but having been identified as a catalyst for educational innovation involving dual enrollment credit throughout the state of Florida (Gaetz) it also appears to be worthy of similar recognition for its beneficial influence on both the current Florida high school students and their families and their countless future counterparts as well.

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