

PERSPECTIVES ON PROGRAM DUPLICATION

Concerns about program duplication in higher education are often reminiscent of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s now famous remark about pornography: “I know it when I see it.” The problem with that reaction is that, at least on its surface, this response seems intuitive and emotional, to say nothing of subjective and personal. The fact is that the addition of new programs at public institutions in South Carolina is the result of an extensive process that is reasoned and analytical. This process encompasses a critical analysis of barriers and opportunities, market assessment, and estimates of costs and benefits to the students, the institution, and the state by the institutions as well as by the Commission on Higher Education¹.

Creation of New Degree Programs

The process of creating new degree programs typically begins at the departmental level of a college or university; each new program request then moves through a scrutinizing approval process by different institutional bodies at each institution which usually include such entities as the curriculum committee, the faculty Senate, the Deans’ Committee, the Academic Council, the Board of Trustees, and one or more committees operating under the auspices of such groups. Once a proposed new program has passed the institutional gauntlet, the program proposal is then submitted to the Commission and examined extensively by Commission staff; the Advisory Committee on Academic Programs, which consists of the chief academic affairs officers of the public four-year institutions and representatives from the technical colleges; the standing Committee on Academic Affairs; and the full Commission. It is during the staff analysis portion of this process that many proposed programs are modified or deferred by the institution as a result of staff feedback.

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¹ According to Section 59-103-20 of the South Carolina Code of Laws, the Commission on Higher Education is charged with examining the state’s institutions of higher learning relative to “areas of state-level coordination and cooperation with the objective of reducing duplication, increasing effectiveness, and achieving economies and eliminating sources of friction and misunderstanding.” In addition, Section 59-103-30 requires the Commission to consider critical success factors for academic quality in examining the state’s institutions of higher learning. One of the critical success factors for administrative efficiency is the “elimination of unjustified duplication of and waste in administrative and academic programs.” (www.scstatehouse.gov/code/t59c103.htm).

additional, intermediate scrutiny process involving the State Technical College System Board. In short, each new degree program is subjected to an extensive, multilayered process of consideration that is data-driven, reasoned, and analytical. By the time a new program request reaches the Commission it has had to jump through enough institutional survival hoops—one institution identified 21 different steps – so that only the best defended and carefully justified programs survive to attempt the final hurdles of staff and CHE approval.

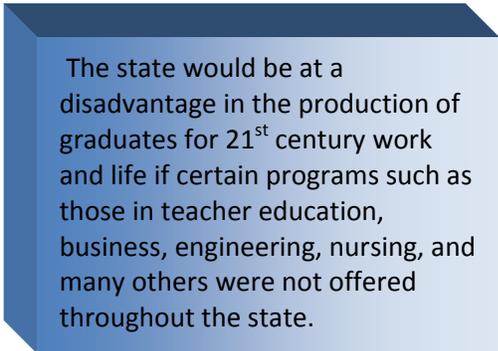
The complexity of the new program approval process is testimonial to the nuanced issues surrounding program duplication. First and foremost, no institution wants to invest the considerable resources involved in mounting a new program, including hiring faculty, supporting physical plant and equipment, purchasing appropriate library materials, achieving and retaining expensive specialized accreditations, and so on, if no demand for the program exists. The only two exceptions to this norm involve 1) a limited number of liberal arts programs such as philosophy or Classics which need to be represented in the system but for which demand tends to be lower and 2) high need (even if high cost) undergraduate (e.g., nursing) and high cost graduate programs where the need must be weighed against the cost.

As a result, some programs tend not to be widespread throughout the higher education system. This statement is particularly true of doctoral programs, not only because of statutory designation of the three research institutions as the primary providers, but because of the significantly higher cost and lower enrollments involved with most graduate programs.

Meeting the Needs of Place-Bound Practitioners and Their Communities

Historically over the last 30 years, with respect to certain master’s degree programs, the Commission has followed a policy of allowing master’s degrees in education and business to be implemented throughout the state, assuming specialized (program) accreditation is attained and retained. This policy serves place-bound practitioners who need critical professional development in disciplines in which most of the costs are already incurred given the presence of undergraduate programs in the same fields. It is impractical to expect working teachers or business people to move from Charleston to Columbia, for example, to acquire an MBA or M.Ed. when Charleston has a large enough population to sustain such programs locally.

Statewide demand for sufficient numbers of teachers, accountants, entrepreneurs, engineers, nurses, doctors, scientists, non-profit managers, and writers, among many others, cannot reasonably be met by a handful of programs that would of necessity be so large that existing facilities could not accommodate them nor would students be able to be treated as anything other than nameless and faceless numbers. The personalization of the learning experience, as well as student success, is always a hallmark of quality but is particularly important in a state educating large numbers of first-generation college students.



The state would be at a disadvantage in the production of graduates for 21st century work and life if certain programs such as those in teacher education, business, engineering, nursing, and many others were not offered throughout the state.

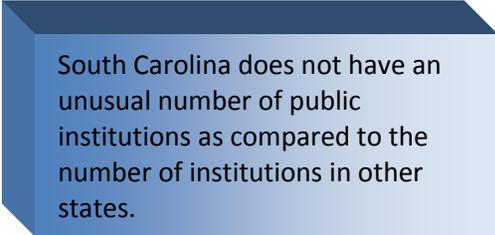
The political inequities of restricting high need programs to some communities over others and advantaging local

employers only in certain communities where key programs are offered would in all likelihood not be tolerated by the business and political communities. Students typically change majors two or three times as part of a process of self-discovery and exploration of new horizons opened to them at colleges and universities. Even if institutions were willing to engage in the massive transfers of students seeking a particular program that is not widely offered, it is unrealistic to expect students to move from Florence to Charleston to Clemson in pursuit of the degree program of the moment.

Further, consider the disadvantage to the state if Clemson were the only computer engineer provider, MUSC the only provider of nurses and limited in its production by the accreditor's required six-to-one student/faculty ratio, or the College of Charleston the only mathematician provider. This model is the only one that would truly eliminate program duplication, and it would effectively discourage the Boeings, Proterras, and Trulites, to say nothing of the small businesses that form the backbone of the state's economy, from establishing themselves in a state where the production of graduates for 21st century work and life are parsed out so—well—parsimoniously.

The Number of Colleges and Universities

Another dimension to the program duplication discussion relates to the number of colleges and universities in the state, and hence, the number of programs offered. For the most part, the growth and development of the higher education system in South Carolina has been serendipitous as population centers emerged, beginning in the pre-colonial era virtually through the present day. Communities grew large enough to demand their own colleges, sometimes beginning as two-year colleges, and then expanding to four-year colleges when a certain enrollment threshold was met. With the possible



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exception of the state technical college system which strategically located its 16 colleges throughout the state when the technical college system was created, the state's higher education system has evolved over an extended period of time rather than emerging from a coherent master plan.

This historical fact has given rise to a perception that the state has too many colleges. Could the state have begun with a *tabula rasa*, it might well have positioned institutions slightly differently and had fewer of them; if the state were not to have been a segregated society for over 300 years, then some of the locations of current institutions which began as institutions serving the African-American community (Denmark Tech; Central Carolina) might not exist in their current locations if they existed at all.

History notwithstanding, however, South Carolina does not have an unusual number of public institutions as compared to the number of institutions in other states. The state ranks near the middle in terms of the number of public institutions per capita. Given the troubling ranking of 40th in terms of the number of residents holding baccalaureate degrees and the desire of the state to host more major corporations (BMW's, Boeings, Proterras, Computer Science Corporation) and other knowledge-based businesses, access to higher education through full-service associate-degree and baccalaureate-degree

granting institutions should be considered a tremendous asset, not a liability, for the state. Indeed, access and quality have been the lynchpins for most of the development of new programs.

Historically, the Commission has supported the development of institutions into full-service institutions that offer an array of traditional arts and sciences programs as well as professional programs and programs in new fields where employment opportunities have emerged (e.g., environmental science; athletic training; bioinformatics; computer information systems management; nuclear engineering/technology, etc.). At the undergraduate level, this approach makes a great deal of sense since with a few exceptions (e.g., engineering; architecture; nursing), the cost per FTE is relatively similar across all the disciplines. Thus, how the undergraduate pie is divided up among programs has not been of major concern except with respect to a handful of high cost disciplines.

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Program Duplication vs. Unnecessary Program Duplication

The operative principle in the program duplication dialogue, then, should not be *program duplication*,

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but **unnecessary program duplication**. Clearly, there is considerable program duplication, especially among undergraduate programs, for all of the legitimate reasons described above. However, **unnecessary** program duplication is quite another matter. Graduate programs in particular are carefully scrutinized, given their much higher costs, with respect to unnecessary duplication.

Given the acute shortages of physicians, nurses, engineers, scientists, mathematicians, teachers and administrators, all of whom are critical to 21st century life and work, duplication of graduate programs in these fields is certainly defensible and even desirable.

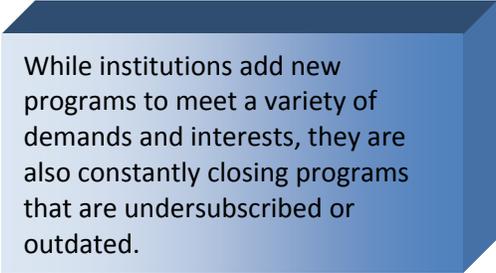
Other programs, particularly doctoral programs in the arts and humanities, have been held to rigorous standards of non-duplication. Even at the master's level where access to programs for place-bound practitioners is critically important to provide advanced training and education, the practice has been to require proximate institutions to develop joint or collaborative programs (e.g., The Citadel and the College of Charleston) at the master's level rather than have separate free-standing programs.

Unnecessary Program Duplication and Undersubscribed Programs

Another dimension of unnecessary duplication to be considered relates to undersubscribed programs which might well be considered unnecessary. To guard against the proliferation of programs which are graduating too few students, the Commission has in place a biennial process by which it measures program productivity for enrollments and graduates against a set of productivity standards. Programs

which do not meet these standards are given the option to come into compliance with the standards over a four-year period or they must be terminated.

This process provides a useful tool to the institutions for weeding out programs that may be non-productive for a variety of reasons ranging from lack of demand, lack of job opportunities, or migration of a long-standing program into a new discipline or program configuration. Based on data collected over the past six years, the evidence is that this scrutiny has worked to encourage institutions to purge non-productive programs. And, although it is not possible to quantify the deterring effect this policy has on new program requests submitted, obviously institutions must have some confidence that proposed new programs will meet the productivity standards and must project accordingly or staff return the proposals.



While institutions add new programs to meet a variety of demands and interests, they are also constantly closing programs that are undersubscribed or outdated.

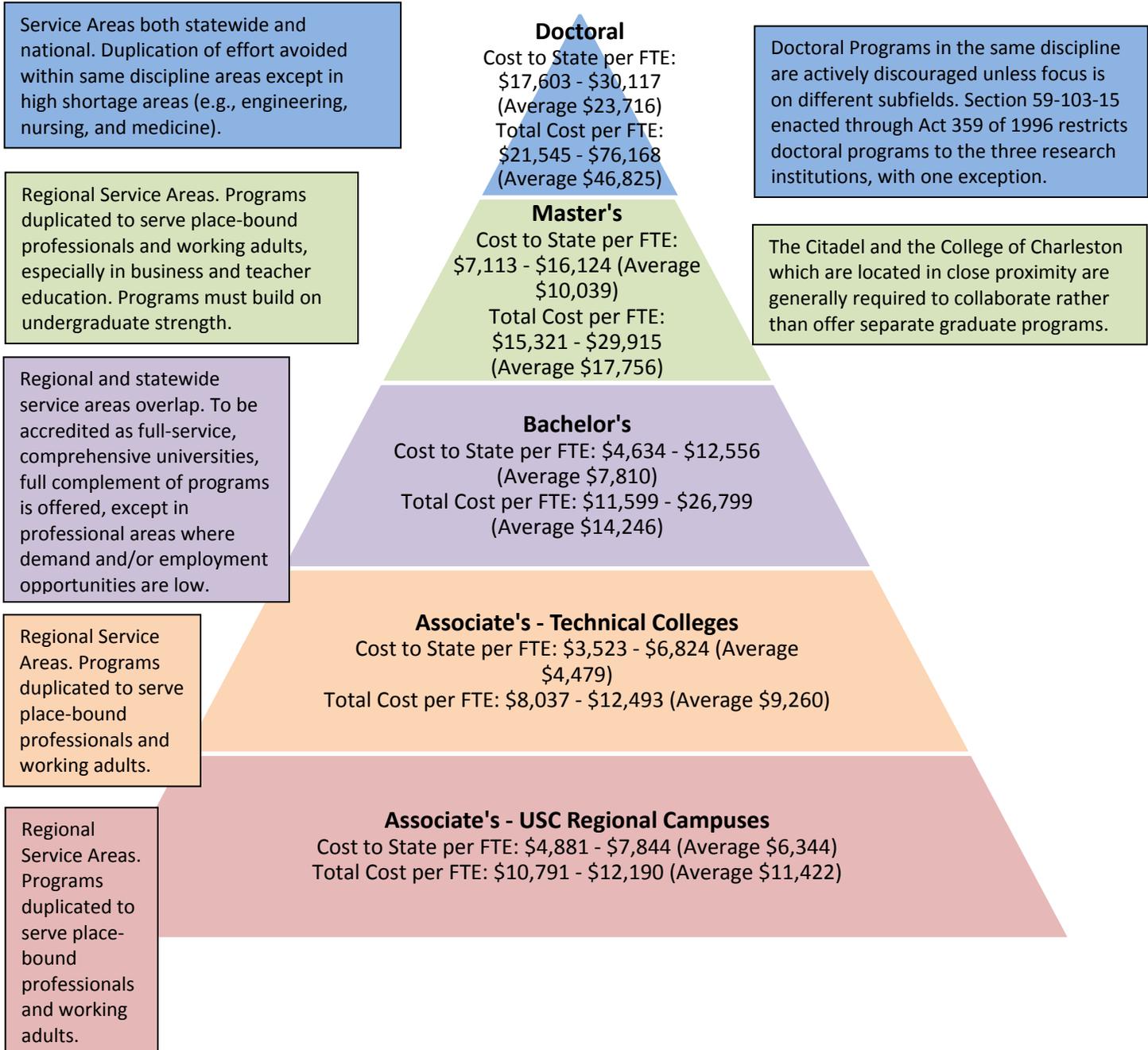
For example, for FY 2009-10, as of this writing (May 24, 2010), 23 new programs have been approved, but 45 existing programs have been terminated, a net difference of -22. These numbers exclude centers, bureaus, institutes, and concentrations or options within existing degree programs; if these are all included, the total for new approvals is 41, but the total for terminations is 70, a net difference of -29. ***In both cases, terminations substantially exceed the number of new programs established in this single year.***

Conclusion

In summary, then, unnecessary program duplication is not so simple a concept as it might seem. Rather, academic program offerings are fluid and responsive to complex interactions among student demand, employer needs, faculty and institutional strengths, cost-benefit relationships, the emergence of new disciplines, the decline of older disciplines, and community development and enrichment, among other factors. Issues of access and quality must be balanced against degree and enrollment productivity. Greater flexibility is accorded to establishing undergraduate programs than to doctoral programs while master's programs enjoy greater or lesser flexibility depending on whether they serve place-bound professionals or not.

Dr. Gail M. Morrison – May 28, 2010

Program Costs



Note: Total Costs per FTE were calculated using the 2009-10 Mission Resource Requirement data. Costs to the State per FTE were calculated using the same data based on the percentage of state appropriations provided to each institution.