

Higher Education Healthcare Coalition

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Ed. Note: a copy of the Rowan report is available for download at www.aftnj.org

Coalition calls for open planning process to study higher education realignments

Unions critical of Rowan plan position civil service and collective bargaining

EDISON, N.J.—After hedging on details at joint Senate and Assembly Higher Education Committee hearings Monday, a plan distributed today shows Rowan University is looking for an executive order, an undisclosed payment for “transition expenses” and a dramatic shift in labor relations to assume management of what is currently Rutgers Camden. The document, titled “A Plan for the Reorganization of Higher Education in Southern New Jersey” and prepared by Interim President Ali Houshmand’s office, dramatically alters the bargaining process, according to Kathleen Hernandez, Executive Vice President of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 1031.

“This plan would eliminate protections against nepotism and discrimination, trampling on workers’ rights,” said Hernandez. “Removing basic standards of fairness in the hiring process will have a detrimental effect on the quality of education for New Jersey students and families.”

Nicholas Yovnello, Council of New Jersey State College Locals-American Federation of Teachers President and Assistant Director of Library Services at Rowan University said the plan by Rowan management—in its current form—calls for elimination of the current statewide bargaining that Rowan AFT is a part of with the other eight senior state colleges and universities. According to Yovnello, the change in bargaining and elimination of civil service constitute “a complete betrayal of the longtime excellent working relationship the three unions on the Rowan campus have enjoyed with the Rowan administration.” The three unions on campus include CWA, the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFTPE) and the Rowan AFT local. “Eliminating civil service could eventually lead to abuse and will undermine the transparency and accountability that currently exists on our campus,” said Yovnello.

Union representatives also questioned the Rowan document’s assumptions of doubling research funding within five years and an insular focus. “The report released by Rowan University addresses a re-organization of higher education in southern New Jersey ignoring the impact its recommendations would have on the rest of the state,” said Jean Pierce, Public Policy staffer with Health Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE). “When individual institutions, such as Rowan University, develop their own re-organization plans, they undermine the Advisory Committee’s original goal which is to advance higher education and medical education statewide.”

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The Higher Education Healthcare Coalition (HEHC) is an umbrella group comprised of UMDNJ, Rutgers and Rowan labor organizations. The coalition’s mission is to ensure that any reorganization of healthcare education in New Jersey makes each of the institutions stronger and enhances the quality of higher education in New Jersey. The coalition maintains that any reorganization must protect the services currently provided, the skilled professionals who provide those services and the New Jersey communities that rely on these services.

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Representatives of the doctors, nurses, professors and all levels of workers throughout the state's higher education institutions are raising questions about the Governor's proposed merger and decrying the lack of a comprehensive plan. The union coalition is calling for continued public hearings, inclusion of stakeholders' perspectives and support for a democratic legislative process.

AFTNJ Executive Vice President for Higher Education Dr. Susana Tardi called on the legislature to take the lead in examining the merits and potential pitfalls of realignment. "The Senate and Assembly have been conducting joint legislative hearings," said Tardi, a Sociology Professor at William Paterson University. "They should have access to all planning documents that our institutions are creating and play the central role in determining whether a strategic realignment will truly benefit our students, hospital patients and the state's economy." Tardi advocated against a hasty executive order—arguing that extensive planning and projections of financial impact have not been conducted.

History Professor Janet Golden, AAUP-AFT Executive Council Representative for Rutgers-Camden agreed with Tardi's analysis. "The Rowan report—like the Higher Education Task Force report—offers few details and no cost estimate," said Golden. "'What are they going to do? How are they going to do it and how much is it going to cost?' are still outstanding questions. To date, the only serious research regarding the details of this proposal has been provided by Rutgers-Camden faculty and all that evidence suggests that partnership and collaboration is a better model."

Higher Education Healthcare Coalition unions, representing a majority of workers at the institutions which could be affected by any realignment, are united around core principles of improving medical services and education while preserving and protecting vital community resources.

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