December 22, 2006

Dear Meeting Attendee,

On Friday, December 1, 2006, many of you participated in a roundtable meeting at the Ilikai Hotel called by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), as part of a Ford Foundation grant. The purpose of the meeting was to find ways to bring higher education and workforce development into better alignment in Hawaii and to better serve underrepresented students in postsecondary education. This letter is intended to summarize the discussion and to enable the agenda set during the meeting to be put into motion.

Dennis Jones, President of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), and WICHE’s partner on this project, presented a wide array of information demonstrating the challenges facing Hawaii in serving its citizens with postsecondary education and training and in assuring a sufficient supply of jobs paying adequate wages. A central conclusion drawn from this information is that, in order to remain competitive in the global economy, Hawaii will need to concentrate energy on both workforce development and workplace development, with the former meaning the need to adequately prepare all students for education beyond high school and the world of work and the latter meaning the need to diversify the state’s economy by adding jobs outside of government and the visitor industry, particularly in technology and health care.

Jones and WICHE identified several short-term initiatives to get Hawaii started on a reform agenda that would bear fruit, including:

- Better aligning K-12 learning outcomes and postsecondary expectations;
- Increasing workplace literacy efforts for adults and incumbent workers;
- Better serving areas, such as `Ewa and Waianae, with postsecondary education;
- Improving student retention and graduation rates;
- Expanding degree production in key fields, such as nursing and allied health, teacher education, computer science relevant to Hawaii’s needs, and science technologies;
- Create and sustain a rapid response capability in order to more effectively and quickly meet the workforce needs of growing businesses;
- Enhance entrepreneurial education; and
- Promote technology transfer.

Following this presentation, a lively discussion generated several action steps to be pursued in the coming weeks and months. The action steps were divided up among the responsible parties, with all parties sharing responsibility for negotiating and ratifying a compact with associated accountability measures directly related to goals. In addition, the legislature should seek a new long-range financing plan of the University of Hawaii System (UHS) that eschews the current practice of line-item scrutiny, moving instead to a more flexible budget arrangement tied more directly to priorities. For its part, the executive branch should use the “bully pulpit” to promulgate the list of priorities to all relevant state agencies, support P-20 initiatives focused on alignment, establish policy leadership for adult/incumbent worker literacy efforts, and submit a budget aligned with the priorities. Together, the legislature and the executive branch should also oversee the development of a policy audit, best conducted by an objective third party that will illuminate the ways in which policy requirements have accumulated to “get in the way” of the priorities. The UHS should submit a long-range financing plan and participate in the policy audit. It will also
present its biennium budget proposal in alignment with this agenda. Finally, the private sector including the media can make the critical initial contribution by helping to define the public agenda and serve as champions for this process and the priorities that it establishes. It can also contribute by supporting a privately funded venture capital fund for rewarding improvements and by providing strong incentives to individuals looking for work or to upgrade their skills. A central theme that was carried throughout the meeting was that while attention to meeting these challenges is needed immediately, success will only follow if that attention is sustained. No matter which direction the political winds blow in the months and years to come, the state, its educational institutions, business community, and media must remain committed to the goal and a consistent strategy for solidifying the nexus between Hawaii’s education system and its workforce needs.

The December 1 meeting was an important step in building a consensus in how to address the challenges facing Hawaii, particularly in terms of ensuring both workforce and workplace development through effective deployment of Hawaii’s educational system. I encourage each of you to focus attention on these issues; please let me know if I can answer questions or otherwise be of assistance in your efforts.

Sincerely,

David A. Longanecker
Executive Director