



Roger Moe, former Minnesota State Senate Majority Leader

Bias against vocational-technical education just starting to reverse

A Civic Caucus Focus on Human Capital Interview

March 27, 2015

Present

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Summary

Roger Moe, former Minnesota Senate Majority Leader and architect of the 1995 merger of state colleges, community colleges and technical colleges into the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system, says frustrations with the state's postsecondary system led him to propose the merger. He felt the campuses were competing, rather than cooperating, leading to higher costs; the culture of higher education was treating vocational-technical education as the "doormat" of postsecondary education; and students were unable to transfer credits from one state postsecondary institution to another. He says he concluded that the state higher education system needed a better system of governance.

Moe believes the merger has relieved some of those frustrations. But he's not sure the culture of higher education has changed in its view of vocational-technical education. It would take more study, he says, to determine whether the merger contributed to the devaluing of vo-tech education, as some people have asserted. He says, though, that he's beginning to see some efforts to put more emphasis on career and technical education.

Moe says the distribution of state community colleges, technical colleges and universities would look entirely different if it were planned today, largely due to the advent of the Internet. But he doesn't see a way for the technical colleges to leave the MnSCU system and go back to the previous model of locally run Area Vocational Technical Institutes (AVTIs), as some people have suggested. He does believe that the AVTIs, among all of the state's postsecondary institutions, had the strongest

relationships with business and industry. But he says that at least some postsecondary campuses around the state continue to have those strong relationships.

He asserts that the E-12 education system is not doing its job, as shown by the high percentage of community and technical college students needing remedial courses. And Moe believes students should have earlier exposure to career opportunities-during their elementary and high school years-and should have the opportunity to take career and technical education classes at their high schools.

Biography

Roger Moe is former Minnesota Senate Majority Leader. He served in that position for 22 years, from 1981 to 2003, making him the longest-serving Senate Majority Leader in the history of the state. He was elected to the Minnesota Legislature in 1970 and represented northwestern Minnesota's Second Senate District as a member of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) party until January 2003. He was the DFL candidate for lieutenant governor in 1998 and for governor in 2002.

His legislative achievements include the 1991 landmark measure streamlining Minnesota's higher education structure through creation of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System (MnSCU); championing quality and high standards for K-12 education; and authoring legislation that created the Environmental Trust Fund and the Midwest Higher Education Compact.

Moe is president of his own consulting company, National Strategies, Inc., and serves on the board of directors of the Policy Consensus Initiative. Prior to becoming a legislator, he taught mathematics and coached at Ada (Minn.) High School. He earned a B.S. degree from Mayville State University in North Dakota, followed by graduate studies in education administration at Moorhead State University and North Dakota State University. In 2004, the University of Minnesota presented Moe with an honorary Doctor of Laws degree for his many years of public service.

Background

The Civic Caucus has released two recent statements on human capital: [one in September 2014](#) laying out the human capital challenges facing the state today and in coming years and [a follow-up paper in January 2015](#) offering recommendations for maintaining a high quality workforce in Minnesota. The Caucus interviewed Roger Moe, architect of the MnSCU merger, to learn about the place of vocational-technical education in the state's postsecondary system.

Discussion

Minnesota's technical colleges started in the high schools, then spun off into the Area Vocational Technical Institutes (AVTIs), then into a state system and, finally, into the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system in 1995. Roger Moe served on the Higher Education Finance Division of the Senate Finance Committee from 1973 to 1983. He said over that time he watched the budget requests come in from the state's higher education institutions and decided some changes were necessary.

He noted an example of what led him to that conclusion. Thief River Falls wanted to build a new technical college campus at the high school. "They wanted to get in line for a state appropriation," Moe said. "I finally conceded, but said I'd only go along if they built it connected to the community college there."

"Reluctantly, they did that," he continued. They built the community and technical colleges together with a commons area between the colleges. "I thought you'd start to see some cooperation," he said. In 1990, he reevaluated the campus and noted that there were still two heads of the colleges, two financial aid offices and two deans. "They had two of everything," he said, "on a single campus. And I was seeing this constant aggressive marketing of the campuses. Everybody was fishing in the same pool. If you didn't get out and aggressively market and hustle these students, you were going to fall by the wayside."

The culture of higher education was always frustrating. "People felt that vocational-technical education was the doormat of higher education," Moe said. "Then on the next rung up were the community colleges, then the state universities and then the University of Minnesota (U of M). My view is that anything you do in postsecondary education is worthwhile. I wanted to take this vertical notion of higher education and turn it onto a horizontal plane. It's easier to move on a horizontal plane than it is to move vertically."

Another frustration of many legislators, Moe said, was that students would go to a community college and then decide to transfer to one of the state colleges (now state universities), but half their credits wouldn't transfer. "Most of this was driven by dollars," he said. "If students had to start over again after transferring, the colleges would make more money on tuition."

The state needed a better governance system for these campuses. Moe said those frustrations led him to believe the colleges needed better governance. "So I moved ahead with a plan to put the community colleges, technical colleges and state colleges together," he said.

He commented that he didn't include the U of M, because in the 1970s, then-Senate Majority Leader Nick Coleman advanced a plan with all the colleges and the U of M under the same roof. The U of M strongly objected and it never passed. "I learned from that not to do that to the University," he said. "They have their own unique niche, anyway."

The single governance system would have several potential benefits. Moe believed combining the colleges into one system would:

- Help change the culture of higher education so that all postsecondary education-no matter on what campus-would be viewed as important.
 - Improve the transferability of credits, making it easier for students to move from one campus to another within the system.
- Allow consolidation of campuses and personnel to start to bend the cost curve for higher education.

Several of those benefits have occurred under the merged higher education system. Moe pointed out several positive developments: (1) the issue of transferring credits among campuses has

been resolved, and (2) there is one president shared by three campuses in northwestern Minnesota and one president for four campuses in central Minnesota.

Moe said he's not sure if the creation of MnSCU has helped changed the culture of higher education, since many people continue to emphasize the benefit of a four-year degree over a two-year degree or certification. And he questioned whether MnSCU has been able to bend the higher education cost curve. "But it's not the creation of MnSCU that's contributed to additional costs for students," he said. Greater legislative emphasis on health care and corrections has hurt funding for higher education. "We went from almost two-to-one in state funding for higher education compared to student tuition to just about the reverse: one-to-two in state funding vs. tuition," he said.

The division of higher education that had the best relationship with business and industry was career and technical education. One of the strengths of the AVTIs, Moe said, was that they all had a local business/community committee that helped advise them, even down to the particular curriculum that was being offered. For example, he noted, the people advising a carpentry program were carpenters and window manufacturers. "I don't think you see that quite as much in the rest of higher education," he said.

He offered an example of a good local business/education connection today. Some of the curriculum at technical colleges in the northwestern area of the state has been designed to provide a workforce for Digi-Key in Thief River Falls, the seventh-largest electronic components distributor in the world.

Society has taken the emphasis off career and technical education (CTE) at both the secondary and postsecondary levels in favor of four-year college degrees. Moe said projected differences in income for four-year college graduates compared with high school graduates have driven a lot of this shift in emphasis. That is coupled with a diminished focus on CTE from the federal government, which, he said, used to put a lot of money into CTE.

"Cultures slowly emerge," he said. "And it takes awhile to change them. Now we're in the process of trying to change the emphasis back to CTE. It's driven by the want ads today. There are very few listings for people with four-year degrees, but there are a lot of jobs available for people with CTE skills."

He said there should also be more opportunities in the E-12 system for students to find CTE. Those opportunities are rarely available now.

The high percentage of community and technical college students needing remedial courses is an indictment of the E-12 education system. "That's where the problem is," Moe said. "They're not doing their job. That's the bottom line."

We're not moving faster on making the transition from high school to postsecondary easier because we have institutions that are difficult to move and change. Moe said legislation creating Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) and College in the Schools was viewed as a way to blur the line from high school into college. "What's holding that back are some of the traditional institutions," he said.

Teacher certification requirements in Minnesota have erected barriers for potential teachers.

The requirements make it difficult for teachers coming from other states wanting to get certified here. They find they must take teacher-training courses at Minnesota colleges first. In addition, Moe said, licensing can be a barrier for people with great expertise in various areas, who, with a few teaching method courses, could be excellent teachers. He believes they shouldn't need to go through a whole rigorous program of teacher preparation. "There are a lot of community experts who could be invaluable to schools," he said.

Ever since MnSCU was formed in 1995, the question has come up of whether the merger caused the liberal arts side of higher education to supplant the vocational-technical side. Moe believes this trend to devalue vocational-technical education was in place before MnSCU was created. He thinks more study would be required to determine whether the merger accelerated that trend. "I would certainly accept some of the responsibility if, in fact, creating MnSCU as a single governance structure deemphasized vocational-technical education," he said, "but I don't know if that was part of it."

An interviewer asked if both Minnesota and MnSCU would be better off if the state took some of the state technical colleges out of MnSCU and put them back into the former locally run AVTI system. The interviewer commented that the AVTI model might better serve the business interests of different parts of the state by helping the technical schools be better connected to the area needs for vocational-technical training.

"I wouldn't be thrilled with taking these technical campuses now and creating a separate governance system for them," Moe responded. "I don't see that happening, considering the costs. It seems to me we need to give them greater emphasis within the MnSCU governance structure and create more autonomy for them, with additional resources and priorities."

Another interviewer asked if the technical colleges would be more responsive to local needs if they were under local control like the AVTIs were. "It's not clear how to provide local autonomy to technical colleges within a governance system like MnSCU," Moe responded. "Even after the merger, the technical colleges have retained some local link with businesses and industries in their regions. And all of them have customized training, courses requested by employers to train their employees in a particular skill." He stated, though, that the technical colleges must focus on the career training needed both locally and statewide.

Minnesota is starting to see some renewed emphasis on vocational-technical education, driven by the private sector demanding the workforce they need. Moe said he has seen renewed interest in technical education in the Legislature.

Students should have earlier exposure to career opportunities. "We need to go back upstream," Moe said, "and get people to see earlier that these careers are great Middle America opportunities for young people." He noted that Minnesota has some of the highest ratios of students to counselors in the country, making it difficult for students to get career counseling.

Expand significantly the Minnesota Jobs Skill Partnership , run by the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). In response to an interviewer's question about

one small step Moe would recommend to help maintain the quality of the state's workforce, Moe said he would provide additional resources to significantly expand the Minnesota Jobs Skill Partnership. The program provides training grants of up to \$400,000 to offset training-related expenses incurred by business, industry and educational institutions to meet current and future workforce needs. The grants go to public or private educational institutions that partner with businesses to develop new-job training or retraining for existing employees.

"That's probably the single most effective and cost-effective public program working with postsecondary institutions and employers to meet the emerging training needs for their employees," he said. "Businesses have skin in the game. It's been a significant success." He would like to see the program advertised more.

The distribution of state college and university campuses around the state would look entirely different if it were planned today. Moe said when the decisions were made on locating colleges, there was an entirely different philosophy than there is today. Minnesota was an agrarian state and there was no Internet.

"But the political reality is the location of campuses is extremely difficult to change," he said. "There are some campuses, particularly rural campuses, that have struggled based upon enrollment. I don't know the answer for it, but I know it's very difficult to close a campus." He said the only campus he can recall being closed in the last 30 years is the U of M campus at Waseca. He pointed out that the University could do that on its own without needing the approval of the Legislature.

"Now, thank God for the Internet," Moe said. "There are no more boundaries any more. That certainly has helped."

Sometimes the rigidity of the educational structures makes change difficult, but it must be done collaboratively. In response to an interviewer's question about whether Minnesota will adopt Wisconsin's way of dealing with unions in education, Moe said he doesn't think so. "I'd prefer to do it differently than Wisconsin has been doing it," he said. "I don't think that's how we should go about making changes. That causes rifts that take a long time to heal. We need to have more of a collaborative process. Consensus reached that way lasts longer."

By and large, Minnesotans get a decent return on their tax dollars. But, Moe said, people might disagree about the proper balance among the income tax, sales tax and property tax. He noted that we have a tendency to use statewide taxes to relieve property taxes when they get too high through local government aid and school aid.

Former Governor Rudy Perpich attempted to get the sales tax broadened, Moe said. "It's legitimate to do that, because the sales tax is a more stable tax source and broadening it could bring down the tax rate," he said. "But it's problematic at the Legislature."

Long term, business needs to bring back its focus on big-picture state issues. Moe recalled the leadership the Minnesota Business Partnership provided on big state issues in the 1970s and 1980s. "The top companies in the state can have such an enormous influence on these big-picture issues," he said, "if they would have a more collaborative process of making statements, rather than engaging in a more partisan rhetoric."

Investing in broadband access across the state is extremely important for education. Moe recalled growing up on a farm and watching the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) stringing wire to bring electricity to rural areas. It wasn't profitable for private investors to run electricity into sparsely populated areas. "It's no different from what's going on in the broadband area," he said. "The REA model is the answer."

He noted that Minnesota Senator Matt Schmit (DFL-Red Wing) has been very active in trying to focus state resources on sparsely populated areas to equalize opportunity for everyone.

It's unlikely there will be a collective, bipartisan effort by the Legislature to deal with the state's educational achievement gap. In response to a question about leadership on trying to close the achievement gap, Moe said there is no elected official who isn't aware of the gap. But he has greater faith that community-grown efforts like those of Generation Next and other organizations will be more successful than any efforts by the Legislature.

He said his skepticism that any bipartisan effort will come out of the Legislature stems from the fact that there are no Republican legislators in the center cities. Because they have no seats there and are unlikely to get any, they don't need to put any emphasis on the center cities. "That's not a partisan statement," he said. "That's a statement of reality."