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Study suggests smaller board, autonomy for UNC campuses

The Associated Press

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The body that oversees the 16-campus University of North Carolina needs no more than 15 members and local trustees should be given more authority, a new study says.

The independent study released Monday by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni also said the governor, not the General Assembly, should select members of the UNC Board of Governors.

"Essentially, it's an issue of accountability," said council President Anne Neal. "The governor is essentially not at the table," Neal said. "The power to appoint is the power to lead. This (would allow) one person to set the agenda and take responsibility."

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The council is a Washington organization started a decade ago in part by Lynne Cheney, wife of Vice President Dick Cheney and former chief of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Phyllis Palmiero, a senior consultant to the council and former executive director of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, wrote and researched the report. She concluded that North Carolina should retain its higher education system, with an overall governing board that makes policy for the 16 UNC campuses and keeps watch over strategy, cost controls and quality measures.

Palmiero commended the board for its hard work and clear commitment to its biggest priority - affordable access to higher education. But the system could be improved, she said.

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The systemwide board should delegate more operating oversight to campus trustees, she said. The report does not take a position on which boards should set tuition - a controversial issue now before lawmakers.

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Earlier this spring, the state Senate approved as part of its proposed state budget a measure that would give North Carolina State University and UNC-Chapel Hill trustees the authority to raise tuition. That measure has been strongly opposed by UNC system leaders, including the UNC Board of Governors.

Palmiero's report is complimentary of much of the work of the board, but suggests that the 32-member board panel is too large to be effective.

"A smaller board would facilitate a focus on central issues, allow thorough discussion and increase each member's accountability," the report states.

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The report was commissioned by the John W. Pope Center for Higher Education Policy, a Raleigh think tank that often champions conservative views and is a frequent UNC-Chapel Hill critic.

John Sanders, a longtime government professor at UNC-Chapel Hill who served two years on the UNC system's board, said if the process was starting over, gubernatorial appointments would be the best route for picking a board.

"But we have 200 years of history, of the legislature choosing the top board," Sanders said. "My guess is, the legislature would be very reluctant to give up that power."