



SOUTH CAROLINA COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

RUTLEDGE BUILDING

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TELEPHONE
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SUBJECT: Optometric Education

In my own retrospective review, without referring to any of the innumerable communications that I have received about the proposed tri-state regional school of optometry for Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, the following ideas emerge.

Two to three years ago the President of the South Carolina Optometric Association wrote to me concerning the interest of the Association in establishing a school of optometry at the Medical University. This was sent to Dr. McCord, President of MUSC, who later either met with representatives of optometry or at least informed them that the matter would be studied. To my knowledge, nothing specific came from this.

The next activity in this field came from the Southern Regional Education Board that retained a team of consultants who identified a need for a tri-state regional school of optometry to serve Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. SREB then convened a group composed of one higher education staff representative from each of the three states to develop a model for implementing the consultants' recommendation. Dr. Fulton represented South Carolina in these deliberations at SREB. Later the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education was asked to send board representatives to Atlanta for further discussion. As I recall, I asked Emmet Walsh and Gedney Howe to participate along with Dr. Fulton. Gedney Howe could not participate at the time because of illness, however, and I asked Bill Draffin to serve in this capacity. This group, which also included representatives of the optometric associations in the three states, ascertained that if all states were interested in such a school all three would have the opportunity to request that their state be the host state if all criteria were met. These criteria required that the school become a part of a major academic health center.

We were informed later that the President of MUSC, the Board of Trustees of MUSC, and the Chairman of the MUSC Department of Ophthalmology all supported the concept and desired to have MUSC proposed as the host institution. I had always been aware of the cleavage between MD's and OD's and I clearly remember thinking that such a remarkable turnabout from antagonism to cooperation constituted a minor miracle. It appeared that I had kept my head in the sand and had let the world pass me by. It was not long, however, before the real impact of the decision by the MUSC officials reverberated throughout the South Carolina medical community and the thunder, shouting, and cannonading continues unabated.

The proposal was assigned by the Commission to the Health Education Authority which in turn formed a "task force" that studied and reported back to the Commission as to its findings concerning the needs, costs, and plans of financing. From the very beginning of this extended project some members of the Commission registered doubts about the proposal. Notably, Mr. Prioleau expressed the point of view of ophthalmology and Mr. Burns expressed concern about the cost at the first meeting of the Commission that considered this subject, held at MUSC in Charleston in July of 1976. Questions were also raised then and later as to why Georgia and North Carolina were willing to cooperate and participate, but were unwilling or unable to become the host state.

Later, after the Task Force on Optometric Education and the Health Education Authority had made their studies and were reporting to the Commission concerning their "Statement of Need," the Board of Trustees and administration of MUSC at another meeting formally rescinded or withdrew their previous vote to host such a school. I appointed an ad hoc committee composed of three Commission members to study the matter further and to make recommendations. It was later brought to my attention that a member of this ad hoc committee had informally discussed with Mr. Solomon Blatt and possibly others the idea of the University of South Carolina acting as the host institution. In a brief conversation with Eston Marchant I told him that I thought University officials had about all the problems they could handle with their developing school of medicine and that they did not need this other school with all of the difficulties it would entail. I still am of this opinion.

The last action of the Commission on this matter was the acceptance of a report on need from the Task Force on Optometric Education and agreement to submit this matter to the Legislature next year. The Commission also agreed at this time to seek a grant from HEW for further regional planning. Later, however, a communication from SREB was received stating, in effect, that since no prospective host institution had been identified, no further action could be taken on this proposal. For the time being, at least, the issue is dormant.

As far as I am personally concerned, I prefer to see the project held in abeyance unless we are directed by higher authority, namely the Legislature, to reopen it.

I appreciate the time and effort dedicated to this project by members of the Commission, its staff, the Health Education Authority, the Task Force, and the other various advisory committees. I believe all of the proceedings and the staff work on this subject have been carried out with the utmost integrity and professionalism.

R. Cathcart Smith, M.D.
Chairman