Moore inherits lots of issues in first few weeks at NSU

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After Norfolk State University Interim President Eddie Moore Jr. and a cabinet member recently presented an overview of the school’s six-year plan, NSU board member Ed Hamm Jr. asked Moore if in the future he could provide such information a week before board members had to vote on it.

Hamm said the issue – which wasn’t new – was that he didn’t have time to assess the plan at the meeting. Moore, who had been in office one week as of that Sept. 30 executive committee board meeting, said he’ll see to it, but the plan needed a vote that day. It was due to state officials in August but NSU got an extension until Oct. 4.

The board eventually approved the plan.

“To a certain extent I feel a little blindsided,” Moore told the board, “but I noted it and we will do better in the future.”

That plan’s tight deadline and board member concerns were just a few of the inherited issues that confronted Moore his first two weeks on the job. As he settles in, the veteran president is also dealing with a fiscal 2012 financial audit that’s behind schedule, an emergency management plan update that’s overdue and an ongoing investigation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the school’s accrediting body.

The school has been in the news since mid-summer for delayed audits, sanctions on its two-year nursing program and the termination of former president Tony Atwater.
Moore, a former Virginia State University president of 17 years, postponed retirement to take the job. He said he seeks to “right the ship” at NSU, and that task involves addressing several issues that are not his fault but are now his responsibilities.

Moore said submitting NSU’s six-year plan was one of his top priorities because the two-year budget Gov. McDonnell is preparing is partly based on it.

Shortly after Hamm’s remarks about not having time to assess it, board member Lloyd Banks Jr. said any approval should be subject to later revisions by board members. Before the vote with that stipulation passed 5-0, board member Lula Holland said, “I guess at this point in time, with the situation as it is, we have to trust that what [Moore is] doing is right. We’ve got a leader. We’re trying to follow that leader, so let’s move forward and believe that this is correct.”

The school’s emergency management plan has to be updated periodically and requires stakeholder input. NSU’s most recent plan, however, was crafted by the campus police and, to Moore’s understanding, wasn’t shared with the broader campus community. Moore said the plan was supposed to be submitted to state officials last week, but it was inadequate and didn’t even make it to his desk. He said he hopes to have it ready for a vote by the board’s November meeting.

As a result of media reports, SACS has been in correspondence with NSU since the summer. The body sent an investigatory committee to visit the school earlier this month, researching meeting minutes and conducting interviews.

In a few weeks SACS will send NSU a report on its findings, Moore said, then NSU can provide further information for the body to consider. The final report will be reviewed at SACS’s December meeting.

Moore said he was told there was inconsistency in the board member’s responses to SACS officials, but didn’t have details. He also said he doesn’t expect the audited financial statements for fiscal 2012 – which should have been processed by June – to be complete by SACS’s year-end meeting.

“So my expectation is that we get some sort of sanction because of that,” he told the board.

Another issue is NSU’s ability to spend money from the previous fiscal year, a privilege that may be put in jeopardy because of non-compliance. Moore said he isn’t sure what the official circumstances are, but he’s investigating. He said the ability to spend “a couple million dollars” is at stake.
Moore said his first week went well in terms of getting to know staff, faculty and students. He said he’s made some alterations in his cabinet. He didn’t make any major changes to structure or personnel, but he’s invited staff to cabinet meetings that he said didn’t participate in cabinet meetings under his predecessor, including the athletic director and the internal auditor.

“I thought that athletics should be in the room,” Moore said. “They have such a large piece of our budget and they are, to a certain extent, the public face of the institution.”

Moore hired Clementine Cone as his executive assistant for university compliance, effectively creating a new position. Cone retired from Virginia State University as vice president for finance and administration in 2008. The Virginia Beach native has a bachelor’s in accounting from Hampton University, a master’s in management from Regent University and has spent 17 years as vice president for business and finance at NSU starting in 1980.

“I really need a complete, independent assessment as to where we are,” Moore said. “If you look at our audit report, one of the things the auditor said we didn’t do was evaluate our internal controls well.”

Moore also signed his contract last week, a move delayed in part because of family obligations of Rector Thomas Chewning, school officials said. The contract is for an unspecified term and is subject to resignation or termination. It calls for an annual base salary of $295,000.

The school is also paying Atwater the same amount through June. Atwater is a tenured professor who’s on sabbatical until then, former acting-President Sandra DeLoatch said last month. DeLoatch didn’t say what Atwater was doing on sabbatical. He couldn’t be reached for comment.

Attorney Henry Light, former chief legal officer with Norfolk Southern, resigned from the board of visitors. Light joined the board in July 2007, making him the second-longest serving board member behind businessman W. Wayne Perry. Light’s second four-year term was set to expire in June 2015.

Chewning said Light’s is the only confirmed resignation he’s gotten as of last week, though he’s heard talk of another board member resigning for health-related reasons.

Chewning wouldn’t disclose a name, but several close to the matter said it was businessman Julien Patterson. Patterson joined the board around March 2012 and his term was set to expire in June 2016.
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