



October 5, 2016

The Western Carolina University Faculty Senate created a task force of faculty and staff to provide feedback to the Board of Governors on its strategic plan. The task force reached out to WCU's student government association for their input as well. The task force considered each of the five themes and suggested a set of goals for each theme. Faculty representatives provided some overarching feedback on the five themes, presented draft goals for each theme, and opened the floor for comments from the audience.

Access

Task Force-Proposed Goals

- Proposed Goal 1: Increase the percentage of students entering the university from the community college system and graduating in 2 to 3 years.
 - Rationale and Context: For many students community college is the most appropriate entry point for higher education. We need to invest in UNC/NCCC faculty partnerships to increase articulation of curricula. Dual enrollment credit hours should count towards "full-time" status at the home institution.
 - Possible Metrics: Two and three year graduation rates for transfer students from community colleges. Number of post-transfer hours to bachelor's degree (hours-to-degree metric).
- Proposed Goal 2: Increased Cooperative Programs with PK-12 to Enhance Preparedness.
 - Rationale and Context: In order to assure that the citizens of NC can successfully access higher education as promised in the State Constitution, the University must find ways to help strengthen public education and enhance the skills of the teachers and leaders they produce for the public schools.
 - Possible Metrics: Counts of cooperative programs, number of contacts in the School Services Report.
- Proposed Goal 3: Increase capacity for residential and commuting students on University's campuses.
 - Rationale and Context: A growing population and increases in college-going rates will increase demands for services. The University should actively engage in a continuum of means for serving students (e.g. distance, residential, hybrid education).
 - Possible Metrics: Indicators of placement of qualified students within the system.

Discussion

- Some faculty participants raised questions about the readiness of community college transfers in particular (i.e., nursing students who complete an Associate's before transferring to Western; engineering majors was another area of concern).
- Faculty discussed the need to "reach down" into K-12 to improve college readiness, including providing opportunities to assess academic needs before college.

Student Success

Task Force-Proposed Goals

- Proposed Goal 1: Increase the percentage of students involved in internships, work experiences, research, and study abroad.
 - Rationale and Context: High-impact activities increase student success during and after college. Students test major/career decisions and develop connections to campus life. Experiences

complement and enhance relevance of program curricula and prepare students to meaningfully engage in 21st century life.

- Possible Metrics: Percentage of students participating in career-relevant internships, research experiences, research, and study abroad opportunities
- Proposed Goal 2: Decrease the achievement disparities in the areas of gender, race, income level, generally and in regard to STEM disciplines.
 - Rationale and Context: There is currently an unacceptable set of gaps that we are ethically obligated to close. The University, NC Community College System, and PK-12 School System must collaborate in these efforts to decrease achievement disparities.
 - Possible Metrics: Size of gaps.

Discussion

- A number of stakeholders raised concerns about existing measures of student success as being too narrow and limited. One faculty member argued that it would be inappropriate to compare campuses with different missions on a measure like a retention rate.
- A student pointed out that students who work to support themselves while enrolled may not see graduating in four years as their definition of success, meaning that the four-year graduation rate is not a good measure for those students.
- Others noted that performance-based rewards might lead to gamesmanship and consequences for access, which would represent a departure from Western's mission.

Affordability and Efficiency

Task Force-Proposed Goals

- Proposed Goal 1: Decrease the average debt load of students graduating from the university or leaving the university prior to graduation.
 - Rationale and Context: Increases in university costs have risen at rates significantly above inflation for decades. Students often need help finding out how they can keep their college costs down.
 - Possible Metrics: Percentage of students with scholarships; percentage of students who incur debt; average debt of those who do incur debt.
- Proposed Goal 2: Reduce fee hikes charged to students.
 - Rationale and Context: Collectively, student fees each year rival or even exceed the cost of tuition; therefore, reducing fee hikes each year will positively impact students' ability to afford study at UNC institutions. The University must create a more robust system in curriculum development/change that identifies fee increases; create a transparent web presence that shows precisely how student fee money is spent; initiate a "pay as you go" fee structure to avoid students paying fees for services that they do not need or desire; reduce the cost of academic fees or "differential tuition."
 - Possible Metrics: Measurable reduction in annual fee increases.
- Proposed Goal 3: Develop high quality data leading to a more robust collection of input and output information.
 - Rationale and Context: Utility of data depends on the quality of indicators. Institutions can improve efficiency by focusing on quality indicators across the disciplines and programs (academic and non-academic) and using relevant artifacts and data for multiple purposes.

- Possible Metrics: Indicators of the quality of academic and administrative assessment systems, in particular goals/objectives/outcomes, methods of assessment, reporting of results, and use of results.

Discussion

- The speaker posed a question about student fees and amenities. Are those amenities an important factor in deciding to attend Western? Students explained that some fees were reasonable and even desirable—like a fee to cover the cost of textbooks and textbook rental. Students were less enthusiastic about other fees, for instance those for athletics and parking. One faculty member in nursing noted that student fees help cover the cost of supplies, which does represent a cost-shift to students.
- One student proposed adding a course on personal finance to required courses, arguing that such a course would help students better manage their debt and be prepared for repayment.
- The speaker posed a question about online learning. Faculty and staff argued that online education is not a “cheap way out.” While it does not require investment in bricks and mortar, it is very labor intensive. The resources needed for online education are not less in ‘cost’; they are just different. One staff member noted that she had taken online courses at several UNC institutions and could tell when a professor and institution had put resources into the online environment and when they had not; the learning experience is very different.

Economic Impact

Task Force Proposed Goals:

- Proposed Goal 1: Increased Enrollment from Economically Distressed Communities.
 - Rationale and Context: Bachelor’s level education results in a significantly higher income for the individual, contributing to broader economic benefits for the surrounding community. This impact should be most influential in areas with lower average socio-economic levels. It would be beneficial to intentionally recruit and admit students from lower SES counties.
 - Possible Metrics Percentages of recruitment activities, admissions, and matriculations from Tier 1 (and possibly Tier 2) counties are easily tracked.
 - *(Also relates to Access Strategic Priority.)*
- Proposed Goal 2: Increased Externally Sponsored Research and Service Programs.
 - Rationale and Context: Externally funded programs provide support for instruction, training, research, or service activities that create cooperative relationships with external partners while providing opportunities for students to participate and enhance their academic experience, preparing them for a successful transition into the workforce.
 - Possible Metrics The amount of activity in this domain could be measured in terms of total dollars from external sources, number of community partners involved, number of students participating, etc.

Discussion

- Faculty repeatedly warned against simplifying higher education as “job training.” There was a sense that students needed to be prepared for their third, fourth, and fifth jobs, not just their first.
- One representative argued that public higher education needed to do a better job of explaining that higher education was much more than job training.
- At the same time, a faculty member in construction management raised concerns about firms not being able to find enough graduates and therefore looking to high schools to fill the pipeline.

Excellent and Diverse Institutions

Task Force-Proposed Goals

- *Proposed Goal 1: Enhanced Leadership Abilities.*
 - Rationale and Context: Graduates should be better prepared to take active, effective roles as citizens and leaders, in myriad ways, including entrepreneurship and innovation, corporate leadership, organizational citizenship, roles in community, civic, and religious/spiritual organizations. Development of leadership skills is seen as an essential aspect of public higher education. Attaining skills related to professionalism, teamwork, and cultural responsiveness will contribute to the development and functioning of the 21st century leader.
 - Possible Metrics: Senior and alumni surveys (e.g., Leadership Practice Inventory, National Survey of Student Engagement).
- *Proposed Goal 2: Enhanced Sense of Responsibility as a Steward of Place.*
 - Rationale and Context: This concept incorporates related ideas of community engagement, service, leadership, and others. It can serve as a focus of the student's experience during the bachelor's level education, and will allow the student to transfer this sense of responsibility to future environments in which they will be living and working.
 - Possible Metrics: Number participating in Service Learning experiences, the number of community partners. Alumni surveys.
 - *(Also relates to Economic Impact Strategic Priority.)*

Discussion

- Faculty representatives asked whether all goals and metrics would apply equally to all institutions while still respecting institutional missions.
- One suggestion: Make system level goals for the Strategic Plan and let each institution develop their own related goals. Plan for unintended consequences to ensure academic rigor is not compromised.
- One concern was that not all goals have to have quantifiable outcomes. For instance, measuring how many "high impact practices" a campus has in place would be one measure of institutional quality.

Overall Feedback

- Task force members reported that there was little criticism of the five themes, and that faculty and staff were generally supportive of these five priority areas. Stakeholders felt that the five themes encompass the mission and goals of WCU particularly well. A staff member said that they are excited about the five themes because they can relate to them and they can see how, as staff, they can help accomplish the goals of the UNC system. One faculty member acknowledged that differences will likely emerge when it comes time to spell out goals and metrics.
- Another faculty member remarked on how the proposed strategic plan differs from previous efforts and concluded "this seems to be a much more focused effort... I would encourage you to continue in that mode." Previous plans have been "huge and ambitious" but "unfocused and diffuse," leading to a laundry list approach that may fail to produce results. The speaker commented that a concise plan, ten to twelve pages, implies that there will be important things not in the plan. The Board will need to make tough decisions of what the UNC system can realistically tackle in a five-year time frame.
- Others suggested that some metrics that are suitable for one campus may not work as well in measuring another, and that it may not be possible to measure some goals quantitatively. Having the ability to access reliable data was mentioned multiple times.

- Several stakeholders raised questions about performance-based funding and potential unintended consequences therein. Board members in attendance responded that they had spent some time learning about performance based models in other states over the past two board meetings and are carefully considering whether such a model makes sense for the UNC System.