

WASHBURN UNIVERSITY **A “PLAN TO PLAN”**

Based on two days of campus visits and several interviews with members of the Executive Strategic Planning Council (the council), and others with explicit responsibilities that relate to the strategic planning initiative directed by the Board of Regents of the University, I offer the following comments and recommendations:

First, the University is fortunate to have a cadre of faculty, administrators and students who are committed to serving the University. There is an uncommon level of loyalty and support for “doing what is best for Washburn.” And there is equally a high level of recognition of the challenges—largely based on the external economic conditions—that lie ahead for the University. Moreover all seem to appreciate and understand there are likely to be sacrifices associated with tackling those challenges.

Under Dr. Farley’s leadership for more than a decade, the University has flourished on all fronts. His contribution to the academic and fiscal health of the University is widely recognized and appreciated by all with whom I had contact. Until recently, enrollment growth has been an important and visible symbol of that progress. However, given the risks to which the University is exposed as a result of the crushing decline of external economic conditions, the Regents have determined there is a compelling need to examine the very core of the University’s mission and its range of services. Undertaking such a process does not presuppose there must be radical change. It does assume the stewards of the University desire to continue the trajectory of past successes and to make changes that will sustain its history of meeting its legal, moral and educational responsibilities. If the sample of personnel with whom I interacted is representative of the community, it is clear the University is prepared to undergo serious self-examination and develop a new strategic plan.

EXPECTATIONS

Often times there can be considerable excitement generated on the front end of an institutional planning process and expectations will run high among many of the internal stakeholders. While there are benefits that will emerge from some initial excitement, there is also risk of internal divisions of interest and conflict as the planners will be forced to make some tough choices, choices some will appreciate and some will not. It is imperative the campus leaders signal all who are involved that this planning cycle is likely to be focused on decisions and directions that assure the financial sustainability of the University and on the high quality of its services.

An important initial step in the process is to review the financial data of the University. It is important to look back over the past ten years at all revenue sources. Each one should be analyzed and assessed for its future strengths and risks as well as the proportion each source represents to the total package of revenues. Tuition is an obvious example of a revenue source having changed over the past several years and may or may not be reasonably assumed to continue on its current trajectory for the period of the next strategic plan.

Likewise each expenditure category has to be reviewed and evaluated in the same way—ten years worth of history and forward through 2015 and beyond. In other words, where is the money coming from and how will it be expended? For the University to continue its current service levels, and to consider adding new or additional services, is there sufficient revenue? I am happy to provide details on different questions that should be probed for each category of revenue and expense as you need it.

By doing this simple exercise it is likely the council will be able to manage the community's expectations in a rational manner. The data are readily available through the Office of Institutional Research and the Finance Office of the University. All parties with a stake in this process will be served with a strong and accessible review of the financial patterns of the institution.

PROCESS AND TRANSPARENCY

The Regents and the council have already determined much of the infrastructure of the planning initiative. Nevertheless, it is important to be explicit about the flow of decision making and governance of the University through this process. The Regents are the ultimate governing authority on all matters related to the University and their authority is defined in charter, statute, and their own by-laws. Recently the Regents have created the Executive Strategic Planning Council and assigned the Vice-President for Academic Affairs to chair the council. Other members of the council include the Chair of the Board of Regents, the Vice-President for Administration and Treasurer, President of the Washburn Endowment Association, the Executive Director of Governmental and University Relations, and the Vice-President for Student Life. Plus there is identified appropriate administrative staff to support the work of the council.

On behalf of the council, President Farley and Vice-President Bowen have invited several members of the Washburn community to serve on a widely representative strategic planning committee. The role of the planning committee will be to generate ideas for the new plan as well as filter ideas that come from others on campus or from the community outside of campus. In addition there will continue to be opportunities devised by the council and the strategic planning committee to participate in community open meetings where ideas and suggestions can be shared and concerns voiced. In addition, the council can use such meetings as a forum to communicate progress and directions of the process to all who are interested in the planning and are likely to be affected by the directions for the University that will emanate from a new strategic plan.

It is imperative there be a spirit of openness about the process, both because it is necessary to have the stakeholders informed and consulted about the process for the ideas and suggestions they may have, and to have a strong foundation for aligning the necessary support to execute the plan at the end of the process. But it is also imperative not to leave the ultimate responsibility for developing the content and direction of the plan to the larger committee and the public gatherings. Too often the spirit of participation can supplant the identification and adoption of new, and often-times controversial, ideas and directions that may be of great value to the University in the future. Given the economic conditions in which the higher education enterprise finds itself and the plethora of options students have when it comes to selecting an institution to

pursue their education goals, the plan will need to avoid simply becoming a homogenized consensus of what the stakeholders prefer.

Clearly the burden of creating new directions, defining the options in detail, and providing the leadership necessary to structure a new strategic plan, inescapably falls on the President and the council. They are also responsible to secure the ratification of the plan by the Board of Regents. The assignment of responsibility for this process as described above should be unambiguously communicated to the University constituents as early as possible.

Once the plan is in its penultimate draft, the President and the council are further burdened to “sell” their conclusions to the internal and external communities of Washburn, including faculty, students, alumni and the citizens of Topeka and Kansas generally. This is a process that requires discipline and sensitivity. It also requires the leadership be able to hear and incorporate refinements to the plan once it is shared comprehensively with the constituents and before it is submitted to the Board of Regents for final approval and execution. Not surprisingly, the leadership group will likely be the target of criticism from those whose ideas are not included.

In order to set the stage for the final steps of the process, it is important to establish a dedicated email address where individuals can ask questions, offer criticism, and generally seek clarification on the planning issues. The emails should be answered by the same one or two individuals throughout the process and the replies, ideally, would be completed within two or three business days of receipt. Additionally there should be a link on the campus website that would contain periodic updates and information dispersed by the council throughout the active planning phase.

A final thought about the process: the schedule should be fast-paced and executed with an unrelenting discipline. This will be a challenge to the council and to Vice-President Bowen, as chair. But if the formal process is protracted for much more than a semester, it will lose some of its urgency and the perception of its significance. Moreover there are circumstances peculiar to the University that command a focused and short timetable for completion. Chief among those is the need to plan a comprehensive campaign to coincide with the celebration of Washburn’s 150th anniversary in 2015.

SCHEDULE

May 15, 2009:

Board of Regents meet on campus and the council's consultant presents the proposed process to the Regents, including the schedule through January 31, 2010 and a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities.

May 18, 2009-May 30, 2009:

The council meets and confirms its agenda for the summer months and decides what data and additional research it needs and orders the collection of both.

The strategic planning committee meets and organizes its process and briefly contemplates the creation of up to five sub-committees: enrollment strategy; program, structure, and service assessment; financial resources; academic initiatives; and student development. There may be a need for additional sub-committees and/or some consolidation of the topics. The committee will also need to develop a summer agenda—and a preliminary draft of a fall semester agenda and schedule. Because of the commitment to encourage broad participation by the various constituency representatives, it is expected relatively little, if any, formal proceeding of the committee will occur in the summer months.

June 1, 2009-August 15, 2009:

The council meets periodically and guides the review of data, research results, analyzes trends from internal data, consolidates the best ideas gleaned from the experience(s) of the council members and other sources. The council also refines the schedule for the academic year and plans its own agendas in detail. The council is further charged to absorb as much as possible about the external environment for higher education, both in terms of academic and financial issues (e.g. tuition elasticity, fundraising trends, capacity-demand ratios, etc.) and then overlay the local conditions that impact Washburn University. This is precious time for reflection and for a reality check viz. the University; it is not a time for decisions. The consultant can inform this process in ways that will help make this period of reflection productive and avoid overlooking some potential strategic issues.

August 15, 2009-September 1, 2009:

The President and the council use the opening of a new school year to re-energize the campus community about the planning initiative and its significance. It is also an opportunity to orient the new faculty and new students to the planning cycle that will be a significant activity throughout the semester.

September 1, 2009-October 30, 2009:

The several committees meet and fulfill their charges and the leadership of the University supports these activities. The council reviews the recommendations from all parts of the

planning process and announces a target date of October 30 to present its initial draft of the final plan to the Board of Regents.

November 1, 2009-November 15, 2009:

The president reviews the initial draft in detail with the council and following any proposed amendments, both proceed to review the draft with the strategic planning committee and various other groups.

The council presents its initial draft to the campus and wider community. The council is careful to communicate there are likely to be substantial changes between the initial draft and the final plan.

November 16, 2009 to December 11, 2009:

The council reconvenes and reviews the comments in response to the initial draft and makes changes in accordance with input received.

The President and the council meet with the Regents on December 11 to keep them informed and solicit suggestions before the Council takes the subsequent draft out to the community.

The council also uses this period to develop a communication strategy to be implemented after the Regents meet formally in March to accept or modify the recommendations of the President and the council.

December 12, 2009 – January 29, 2010:

The refined draft of the complete plan is now taken to the campus community for review and reactions. These efforts will be the responsibility of the President with the support of both the council and the strategic planning committee members and will require a series of gatherings. The final date for input is January 15. Any late amendments to the plan will be made by the President and the council based on ideas or recommendations emerging from the meetings and being accepted by the President and the council. The refined draft is presented to the Board on January 29.

February 2010:

The President and the council meet to reconcile any differences existing between them related to the content of the plan.

March 12, 2010:

The President and the council present the plan to the Regents for discussion and action.

April, 2010:

The campus leadership will have the responsibility of presenting the final plan to all stakeholders and explain the rationale for the strategic initiatives it contains. This is a critical step in securing strong campus commitment to the new plan.

Note: This schedule is approximate and will likely need minor modifications as it progresses through the fall semester, but it can't be allowed to vary significantly without compromising some of the time sensitive issues that will need to be resolved during the spring semester of the 2009-10 academic year.