

Western Carolina University

Chancellor's Update, January 2003

I hope that you had a productive semester and a restful holiday break. First, you should be aware that we have passed the "official census" date for the spring term. The good news is that we are within our enrollment band for funding for both resident credit and distance education. Our spring enrollment is up compared to enrollment in the last two spring semesters. Much of this improvement is due to the continuation of undergraduate students who were enrolled in the fall semester. Total graduate enrollments also are up, though enrollment in Asheville is not as strong as in the previous spring. This positions us well to seek enrollment growth funding for the next academic year. In a year that is likely to be difficult budgetarily at the state level, this is a very important outcome. Also, because of sustained enrollment growth, we have had some unique opportunities this academic year. For the first time in many years, we have been able to allocate additional operating monies to academic departments. This is one of the first visible outcomes of our growth. We also have been able to allocate new faculty positions since sustained growth makes it feasible to hire additional tenure-track faculty instead of temporary or part-time faculty members. If this trend continues, it will help us a great deal and improve the quality of academic life at Western.

As always, the growth of the University is tied to recruiting new students and integrating them into the academic and social life of the University. We know that students who are not linked to a major and students who do not have strong social relationships are more likely to leave a university, even if they are in good academic standing. A number of academic departments are working hard to integrate students into the major, and their work is greatly appreciated. The departments of English, chemistry, criminal justice, and engineering technology all have become very visible in their efforts to create relationships with freshman students. I know that other departments are working on this issue as well, and it is very important for our future.

At the same time, I should note the improvements in processes, training, and supervision in our residential life area. They are beginning to develop the kinds of processes and policies that can link students to the institution and improve their non-class experiences. One of the most important areas in which they are beginning to work is in developing "theme housing". Theme housing involves locating people with similar interests—academic or social—in a particular area of a residence hall. This allows students to more easily find social contacts with whom they might be compatible. One theme that has received significant attention this year is possibly creating a "humanities house." This could be a very interesting and important experiment involving academic disciplines, residential living, and student life. I look forward to seeing these plans unfold.

You also should be aware that the final numbers are in for the freshman class. This class was the best in our history, having an official SAT average of 1012 (compared to 1011 last year). Since 1996, the average SAT at Western has increased from 965 to 1012.

Several other institutions' SAT averages have grown at a similar rate (e.g., Wilmington, Charlotte) due to significant increases in demand, but some others have increased more slowly or remained roughly stable. It is interesting to note that in 1996, Western's average SAT was below the state's average by 11 points (965 versus 976). Currently, our SAT is above the state average by 14 points (1012 versus 998). And while our work in this area is not completed, thanks to everyone who is trying so hard to improve the quality of entering students.

One final note on enrollment; although it is much too early to tell what our 2003 freshman class will look like, we are seeing a very significant—double digit—increase in applications. If your department has a desire to increase the number of students in the major, this is an excellent time for you to contact the Admissions Office and get a list of potential students who could be considering your program. A telephone call from a faculty member who has interest in the student can go a long way toward helping a student decide to attend Western. At the same time, I am asking the Division of Academic Affairs and the deans to prepare contingency plans for entering classes ranging from 1250 to 1350 students. These numbers may be revised later as we get a better feel for the number of applicants, but given the state's budget situation, we need to be clear on how we will teach what could be a relatively large class.

Service and Engagement

In my fall address, I commented that it is important that we differentiate public service from internal service (or university citizenship). This assertion seems to have been somewhat controversial and it caused some significant conversation on campus. Recently, I attended the annual meeting of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and it is interesting to note that the entire program was centered on this issue. This is clearly one of the most important and critical discussions going on in the higher education community today.

What I was trying to get at is that “internal service”—being on the Senate, taking part in task forces, etc.—is very important to how we accomplish the business of the University. It is the essence of shared governance, and without internal service we could not operate in a collegial and productive manner. At the same time, there is a trend nationally to substitute internal service for “public service.” The traditional core mission of public higher education involves teaching, research, and public service. Internal service is not a substitute for public service, and we would be misinterpreting the meaning of our mission to consider participating in shared governance (a very important activity) as a substitute for our public mission.

What the various speakers at AASCU noted is that across the country, legislatures, the K-12 education community, businesses, and not-for-profits are increasingly looking to universities to engage with them in solving serious problems associated with the economy, education, poverty, race, migration, the environment, health, and the like. It reflects growing awareness of, and appreciation for, the vast intellectual and experiential resources represented in higher education. Universities that do not effectively engage

with their surrounding communities are likely to be perceived as “out of touch” and, therefore, not worthy of support.

Because those of us who work in public higher education are subject to state funding and regulation, we are seeing an increasing tie between engagement and the willingness of states to fund higher education and to reduce regulation. In fact, it might be argued that much of the regulatory pressure nationally and the impetus to reduce higher education budgets can be seen in the gap between public expectations for engagement and university response to those expectations. To many key constituencies, universities have been seen as “out of touch.” Engagement with the public’s issues and concerns brings with it the ability to go to that same public for support.

One of the speakers at the AASCU meeting, Dr. Mary Jo Waits, associate director of the Public Policy Institute at Arizona State University, presented a compelling case for how public service and engagement are keys to the future of the public university as we move more fully into the “knowledge economy.” Her basic argument is that we need to rephrase our traditional “three-legged stool” mission to better account for the expectations of society. Using her categories:

- “Teaching” should become “Learning.” What are we doing to engage the student in learning? Are we still “presenting information” or are we trying to engage the student in his/her own learning?
- “Research” should become “Innovation.” Is our scholarship helping develop innovative solutions to society’s economic, social, political, health, and environmental problems? Are we supporting the people of the state and region with our scholarship? That is, does our scholarship engage with the broader community, its interests and needs?
- “Service” should become “Stewardship.” To what extent are we engaging with our external communities to support and sustain their development? Stewardship is future-oriented by its very nature and based strongly in the needs of the people.

Some of you are probably reading this summary and saying “but my discipline is already engaged!” Clearly, we have departments that have prided themselves on the degree to which they work with the community. At the same time, I suspect that many of these same faculty members will tell you that they do not feel this type of public service is adequately recognized or rewarded. And, they are probably right. I have heard from many faculty members that they are concerned with the differences between the institutional reward structure and the core mission of the university. Hopefully, the Senate will effectively address this most important issue.

Returning to the AASCU presentation, I am not sure that all of us are ready to accept Dr. Waits’ view of the world, but her message is having some impact with governors and legislators in various states. Likewise, several case studies were presented showing how institutions of public higher education in some states are engaging with their communities and, as a result, they are seeing increased state support. This is clearly a core issue that needs to be addressed.

Campus and Community Leadership Retreat

At the beginning of the academic year, I stated that this semester I would hold a series of faculty discussions regarding the future direction of the institution. There were suggestions being made that we needed to develop a “university theme” to identify us and help us move to the future. During this past semester, I talked with twelve groups of faculty members from across campus. And, while I will write a more complete summary of the results of these meetings, it has become clear that there is no subject-matter based theme that can identify this institution. Since we are a broad-based comprehensive university, this would be a normal and expected outcome.

From these discussions, it has become apparent that we need to engage both with each other and with our constituencies if we are to have a sense of how we might better position our institution for the future. Several suggestions for themes that had strong (though relatively few) supporters were based in personal interests rather than data. There also was a tendency for some to take the position that “I like it here, so other people like me are the ones we should bring to campus.” A few individuals have not recognized that motivations for being at Western are many and varied.

One case may be illustrative of the need for a broader dialogue. Faculty members from several departments were interested in a theme of “Appalachian culture”. They believed it would draw significant numbers of students and set Western apart from other schools. While it is clear that our location in the southern Appalachians should inform some of what we do, there is scant evidence that adopting Appalachian culture or studies as our institutional theme could have a positive effect on enrollment. Western currently offers a minor in Appalachian studies and it has virtually no enrollment. Appalachian State offers the program as an “interdisciplinary major” and, according to the most recent UNC data, only a handful of students have declared that major. It also is instructive that East Tennessee State University, Warren Wilson College, and Berea College (an institution that has as its core mission the education of Appalachian students) do not formally offer the major. (At Berea, students can create an interdisciplinary major in Appalachian studies.) Inquiries to these campuses confirmed that lack of student interest in this field is the reason that each institution does not have it as a major. While it is self evident that we need to honor the people and culture of our surrounding region, potential student interest in this form of cultural study simply has not been demonstrated.

A significant number of faculty members suggested that we think of “excellence in teaching, learning, and advising” as a theme. This broad concept seemed to find a large number of supporters, but there was not unanimity. There were some faculty members who felt that we should reduce the teaching load so that more time could be spent on personal research. The clear conclusion from these discussions is that we need further dialogue on the nature of the institution, and we need to clarify our core values. Do we value teaching or should we focus more on personal research? Should we become more engaged in the issues of the region or should we focus more intensely on specific disciplinary interests? What are the expectations, needs, and interests of the various

constituencies we serve and how do they relate to our understanding of our specific mission?

So, to begin a broader dialogue and to see if there are avenues by which we can reach a common understanding of our specific mission and its implications for our future, I am scheduling a campus leadership retreat for February 21. Senator Marc Basnight has agreed to provide a state-level perspective on expectations for Western. Also, Mary Jo Waits from Arizona State University has agreed to make a presentation regarding the nature of “the engaged university”. As part of the retreat, we will divide into small groups composed of members of campus and external constituencies to discuss the role of the University. A report of the group discussions will be prepared and circulated both to the participants and the campus.

I am not aware of a previous leadership retreat at Western that involved both university and community leaders. I think this should be a most interesting and useful way to begin a dialogue on how Western should proceed in the next cycle of development.