

New Brunswick Faculty Council
Comments on the Draft New Brunswick Strategic Plan
October 2, 2014

Introduction

These comments on the draft New Brunswick Strategic Plan present the views of the members of the New Brunswick Faculty Council. They are based on a discussion at the September 12, 2014 meeting of the Faculty Council, on additional comments sent to the NBFC Chair by individual members of the Council, and on continuing discussions among members of the NBFC Executive Committee. This document was drafted by Council Chair Martha Cotter with assistance from members of the Executive Committee. An earlier draft was circulated to all the members of the NBFC for revisions and additions.

Our comments and concerns are divided into two parts: we first present our more global concerns with the draft and then address in turn each of the five sections on “critical campus priorities.”

Global Comments

Our overarching criticism of the draft plan is that it fails to provide a bold, inspiring, comprehensive, and forward-looking strategic plan for the flagship campus of this major research university.

First of all, the draft provides neither a clear, compelling picture of where Rutgers-New Brunswick aspires to be in five or ten years nor a set of bold, forward-looking strategies for achieving our goals. Instead, it describes five “critical campus priorities,” presents brief descriptions of a number of short-term initiatives, and “kicks the can down the road” by proposing the creation of a Task Force on the Future of Rutgers-New Brunswick.

The initiatives presented in the draft were chosen from proposals submitted by members of the Rutgers community and vetted by panels of faculty, staff, administrators, and students. To be considered for inclusion, each proposal had to satisfy a number of requirements, including the participation of faculty/staff from more than one school and the need for only limited or phased-in financial resources. This procedure produced research initiatives rather narrowly focused on applied environmental and biomedical research and resulted in the absence of strategies for addressing many critically important issues. The narrow focus on biomedical and environmental research initiatives seems to relegate huge areas of our humanities, social science, physical and mathematical science, and professional programs, including many that are highly ranked, to being little more than service providers. Critically important issues not addressed include strategies for greatly increasing fund raising and alumni engagement, for implementing the RCM budget model in a way that promotes, not inhibits, interdisciplinary research and teaching, and for maintaining the excellence of our most highly-rated programs while enabling the next tier of programs to achieve national or international prominence.

Finally, the draft plan is embarrassingly badly written in a number of places. To quote just two of many examples:

These themes hold great promise for developing crosscutting interdisciplinary, intercampus synergies through partnerships among and between university units and with external entities, and Rutgers-New Brunswick will build upon and strengthen these in the years ahead. (p. 12)

Recognizing that academic advising should be an extension of whole-person learning, Rutgers-New Brunswick aspires to develop a central hub for one-stop-shopping, admission-to-post-graduation advising, and guidance that serves the needs of the whole student across all schools. We seek to provide staffing at levels sufficient to serve students with timeliness and efficiency, employing highly trained professionals who are armed with a student-centered service ethos and backed by extensive knowledge of university policies, processes, offices, and opportunities. (p. 27)

The language used throughout the draft is mundane and does not engender excitement or impart a sense of energy or forward momentum. In its present form, the plan is unlikely to inspire or impress anyone, inside or outside of Rutgers.

We urge the Office of the New Brunswick Chancellor to undertake a major revision and rewrite of this draft Strategic Plan.

Comments on the Discussion of Critical Campus Priorities

Strengthening Our Academic Core

This section is the most troubling part of the draft plan. As is made clear in the University Strategic Plan, our academic core is the arts and sciences, i.e., the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural and mathematical sciences. This section does not, however, include plans to strengthen teaching and research across the arts and sciences. Rather, it presents a long list of proposed interdisciplinary, crosscutting initiatives in applied science and engineering with a particular emphasis on those that include collaborations with RBHS. There is not a single initiative focused primarily on the humanities or social sciences. While interdisciplinary, interschool, and intercampus research initiatives in the sciences are especially important because of the merger with UMDNJ, they are far from the only initiatives needed to maintain and enhance the “strong core of sciences and humanities,” which is one of the foundational elements of the University Strategic Plan. Faculty are very disturbed by a plan that proposes spending scarce resources on a variety of applied science initiatives, while the library budget is being cut by more than \$2M and support for humanities departments, including some that are highly ranked nationally, is being decreased.

While we strongly agree that strengthening our academic core should be a critical campus priority, we do not believe that most of the initiatives presented are appropriately listed under this priority. We believe that some of these initiatives might better be listed under the priority “enhancing our public prominence” and/or that a new priority called “enhancing cross-cutting research and teaching” should be added. We strongly suggest that some innovative initiatives to enhance teaching and basic research in the humanities, social sciences, and natural and mathematical sciences should be supported under “strengthening our academic core.” We believe that it is counterproductive to

indicate to an excellent faculty member in SAS that the University will not support his or her proposed initiative, no matter how meritorious, unless it includes collaboration with faculty in one of our professional schools.

Building Faculty and Staff Excellence

The goal of building faculty excellence by hiring, supporting, and retaining outstanding faculty is certainly laudable. But, the University will not be able to hire the best new faculty, retain its most outstanding current faculty, and energize and motivate all faculty as long as our infrastructure and staff support are not up to the standards at aspirant universities and faculty are demoralized and angry.. Nowhere does the document acknowledge the critical role of our current faculty in building faculty excellence by recruiting outstanding new faculty and helping to retain the ones who are here. Several years ago, the faculty contributed a significant fraction of their salary improvement funds to help the university hire new outstanding tenure-track faculty. Since that time, the administration has not shown any discernable interest in appropriate economic improvements for the faculty, nor have they shown any interest in providing faculty a more meaningful voice in university decision making and planning. As a result the faculty are demoralized and angry and are not ready to make a major commitment to work toward building faculty excellence.

Transforming the Student Experience

We have concerns about the initiative on “whole student advising.” We believe that most academic advising, like mentoring, is best done by faculty members, not by “highly trained professionals.” Many faculty members are ready, willing, and able to be academic advisers, both to their own majors and to students who have not yet declared a major. The NBFC Student Affairs Committee is working on a charge to review the current state of academic advising and how it has changed after reorganization of undergraduate education in New Brunswick. Information obtained so far seems to indicate that the quality of academic advising is highest in schools in which advising is done primarily by faculty members.

We also believe that this section of the plan seriously underestimates the role of teaching and mentoring in providing a satisfying student experience. There seems to be an assumption that the student experience can be transformed by providing more professional advisors, more research and internship opportunities, and more living-learning communities, without improving teaching and mentoring. No consideration is given to improving procedures for evaluation and support of teaching, increasing the number of tenure-track lines, providing better financial and professional support for PTLs, and improving the training of TAs.

The rest of this section identifies a number of areas in which improvements could be made, but the recommendations are primarily to establish task forces to review various areas of the student experience, or to maintain or increase support for a number of relatively successful current programs. With the possible exception of the Honors College, which will serve a relatively small percentage of undergraduates, none of the initiatives mentioned seems transformational. As one Council member noted, task forces charged with merely improving existing programs are neither strategic nor forward-looking.

Finally, this section contains student life jargon that we find objectionable, such as “whole student advising,” “whole person learning,” “one-stop shopping,” and “student-centered service ethos.”

Advancing Our Inclusive, Diverse, and Cohesive Culture

This section outlines a number of worthy initiatives to help build a campus culture of inclusivity, diversity, and cohesiveness in which each member of the community feels accepted and valued. It proposes to increase the diversity of our faculty, staff, and administration and to provide enhanced academic and financial support to students from underrepresented minorities. In addition, there are two proposed initiatives dealing with research on diversity, specifically, the proposed Rutgers inclusion and diversity portal and the proposed institute for comparative gender and sexuality. In the brief discussion of the latter, several small SAS humanities departments are cited as having contributed to Rutgers strength in the study of race, gender, and sexuality. The emphasis, however, is not on supporting research and teaching in these departments, but rather on building on their expertise by making it available to the professional schools, particularly the units of RBHS, Social Work, and the Business School. The departments cited are, we note, among those suffering the most from cuts to the SAS budget.

What is very seriously missing here is any mention of how we can better prepare students not only for life in a diverse society but also for life in an increasingly globalized world. There is no mention of enhancing study abroad opportunities or of supporting internship programs that allow our students to work for international agencies or businesses. Astonishingly, there is no recognition of the role of the study of foreign languages, literatures, and cultures in preparing students for life in a globalized world. Nor is there any acknowledgement that Rutgers alone among the 14 schools in the Big 10 has no form of foreign language requirement. The NBFC fully supports the very eloquent statement from members of the Department of French, vetted by other language departments, on the role of foreign language study in preparing students to be effective and successful global citizens.

Enhancing Our Public Prominence

This section describes a number of initiatives to improve Rutgers public engagement activities, to improve our relations with Trenton and the New Jersey public, and to make optimal use of various opportunities for targeted marketing. Several of these initiatives suggest the use of faculty as ambassadors. Effective implementation of such initiatives is going to be very difficult, however, if the current state of demoralization and anger of the faculty continues. In order for the faculty to become enthusiastic and effective ambassadors for Rutgers, changes in budget priorities need to occur. In particular, faculty need to be compensated appropriately, greater efforts need to be made to stop the diversion of funds from our academic programs to cover the athletics program's large deficits, and the proliferation of very highly paid administrators needs to stop.

As noted above, we also believe that some of the initiatives related to the integrative themes from the University Strategic Plan should be highlighted here rather than under "strengthening our academic core." Some of these initiatives may improve the lives of New Jersey citizens, improve our image in Trenton, and differentiate us from some of our peer universities nationally.