A PROPOSED STRUCTURE FOR RUTGERS/NEW BRUNSWICK TO IMPROVE THE DELIVERY OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

Background:
Since the official release of the report of the Task Force on Undergraduate Education in mid-July, 2005, discussion has centered on the recommendation to eliminate the undergraduate colleges. Task Force members have been concerned that the outcry from defenders of the colleges, Douglass in particular, is diverting attention from other recommendations that deserve consideration. They are right. Proposals to improve the delivery of undergraduate education by ending confusion and duplication, streamlining general education requirements, enhancing student/faculty interaction, and addressing misperceptions about the NB colleges, richly deserve our attention. But if Task Force members wanted the New Brunswick community to focus on such proposals, they should have heeded the directive following the President’s and Vice-President’s original charge to them. After all, they were expressly advised to present “several structural models that will enable Rutgers to achieve excellence in all phases of the undergraduate experience” (p.168, Task Force Report). The Task Force elected instead to present just one structural model, a model that would abolish the New Brunswick undergraduate colleges.

This unfortunate decision has meant that response to the report has unnecessarily focused upon that controversial item, rather than upon which one among a set of proposed models might best realize the goal of improving undergraduate education in New Brunswick. A strong case can be made that the Task Force’s model, which introduces a new set of successor institutions to the colleges in six undergraduate “campuses” with six “campus deans,” is far too weak to bear the weight of the high expectations spelled out for it. But whatever one thinks about that model, the fact remains that its architects, by attempting to remove the undergraduate colleges from the table before public discussion even began, have in effect turned over to the wider community, in this mandated fall discussion period, their own assigned task to generate several possible structural models. It becomes a task for all of us now to propose and then discuss one or more such models that might do the job as well or better than the one proposed by the Task Force.

Members of the community, happily, are rising to this challenge. Those who are doing so, however, must trust that the ultimate decision-makers on Rutgers’ Board of Governors recognize the unfair disadvantage under which they are operating. As respondents proposing other models, they are being obliged both to create and defend alternate structural arrangements, rather than being given the chance to respond to the different models that were supposed to have been presented as part of the Task Force report itself – thereby also forfeiting the “legitimacy” of selecting from, or tweaking, one of several committee-endorsed models. In addition, by giving its imprimatur to a single model, the Task Force has obliged proponents of any other model also to take account of the one put forward by the Task Force. At the least, the New Brunswick community deserves to be told why the Task Force elected to present only one model, as well as why the abolition of colleges – not just the colleges we have now but ANY system with colleges -- is being presented as the only way to address the challenges RU/NB confronts in improving the delivery of undergraduate education.
A number of proposed models have already been brought forward, and more are on the way. Indeed, prior to the release of the Task Force report itself, the committee members heard and rejected an alternative model presented by Douglass and available now on the “SaveDouglassCollege” website. Since the report’s appearance, the Dean of Livingston College has also presented a model. Both these models envision the maintenance of colleges, although each offers a college system that differs sharply from the one now in place. Douglass’ model, which speaks chiefly to the feasibility, desirability and curricular and co-curricular possibilities of a restructured college for women, suggests a model similar to that of Barnard/Columbia, with a larger co-educational New Brunswick unit/college and a smaller Douglass College for women. The Livingston model, unlike the Douglass one, would retain ALL the liberal arts colleges as “college learning communities.” But more importantly, like the Douglass one, Livingston’s would accept many of the Task Force’s recommendations for streamlining curricular as well as student life arrangements. A third model has been prepared by faculty in Women’s and Gender Studies and, while building on the Douglass model, appeals more explicitly to involvement of undergraduate students with programs of the six-member Institute for Women’s Leadership consortium. A version of this plan proposes the creation of a brand new upper division school, with faculty drawn from units on all three Rutgers campuses. Focusing on women in leadership and policymaking, the school would offer degrees to advanced undergraduates and graduate students along the lines of the School for Management and Labor Relations or the Business School.

What is striking about these different models is the extent to which they all not only readily accept most of the critiques of the current RU/NB undergraduate delivery system outlined in the Task Force report but also endorse the bulk of the solutions recommended there. For example, they approve the creation of a new top administrative structure to oversee undergraduate education. That structure features a new Vice President for Undergraduate Education, a Vice President for Student Life reporting to the VP for Undergraduate Education, and a set of standing committees designed to link the faculty units offering majors more closely to undergraduate students, involving faculty members more directly in key activities such as admissions, curricular development, and honors programs. In addition, the models introduced so far also accept the Task Force recommendation for a single admissions standard for all undergraduate students, a single admitting unit for those students now in the four liberal arts colleges, a single core curriculum, and a common set of academic integrity rules. **The structure proposal that follows here also accepts all these features as outlined in the Task Force report.**

Where the proposal below departs from that Task Force report is at the same place as the other models described above. It affirms that to address all the issues that need addressing in our arrangements for delivering undergraduate education, it is totally unnecessary to do away with the colleges. To the contrary, colleges, and a college structure, are what is required if the educational goals of the Task Force report are ever to be achieved. The colleges and the college system to be presented here are not the ones in place now, however, since experience has revealed problems in their operation that the Task Force has correctly identified. A revamped college structure is nonetheless what is
called for to achieve the “transformation” of undergraduate education that the Task Force report envisions.

A Simple Structural Model to Enable RU/NB to Achieve the Goals Set Out By the Task Force Within A Redefined Rutgers/NB College Structure

This is a critical moment in the history of Rutgers/New Brunswick, equally as important as the faculty restructuring that occurred a quarter century ago. What confronts us is nothing less than an opportunity to take a huge leap forward by introducing a system for delivering undergraduate education that is dynamic, exciting and a pace-setter among our peer institutions – that is, the large public schools in the American Association of Universities. If we do it right, this new undergraduate system can put Rutgers in a new and enviable place. It can offer a structure that is simple and transparent rather than fuzzy and unclear to our prospective students. It can also make Rutgers/NB a magnet for college-seekers of the so-called “millennial” generation, the current college-bound students who, according to our admissions officers, are a very consumer-oriented group with a high level of parental involvement in the process of selecting a college.

RU/NB can attract many more of these students, who can be persuaded to make Rutgers their first-choice school -- including women looking for a women’s college experience, students of color seeking a university that celebrates diversity and excellence, exceptional achievers seeking opportunities to work with top researchers, out-of-state students drawn by our distinctive offerings as well as our New York metropolitan setting, and more. We must, however, let such prospective students know what we have to offer UP FRONT, and package it in coordinated, comprehensible and credible ways. We have paid a huge price in the past 25 years by failing adequately to spell out in our recruitment literature not only that we are a superb site for producing new knowledge, as the Task Force report points out, but also that we are a set of college communities within Rutgers/NB that offers ALL its undergraduates the “best of both worlds” -- a major research institution with first-rate faculty and research opportunities and a set of smaller colleges that delivers countless curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular options in personalized, student-friendly environments. Many other large institutions are now responding to rising student demand for smaller learning environments -- striving to create the very sorts of colleges that we at RU/NB already have (see http://www.collegiateway.com). It would be foolish for us at Rutgers to abandon these college units rather than to fix them at the very time when so many other large institutions without colleges are attempting to create them.

The heart of the enterprise, then -- an engaging undergraduate learning context within a major public research institution -- is what we need still to spell out in more detail in this campus-wide discussion period. If we cannot do it in plausible ways in the time set out, and outline the model and related plans more precisely by January, then we should simply demand more time. It would surely be a huge mistake if (as happened in 1980-81) we buy a half-formed plan that is not fully understood or has not garnered sufficient input from the very people – faculty, staff, students -- who will be asked to play key roles in its
implementation. At this point, for example, it is unclear how faculty will be engaged in pre-major advising, living/learning communities, etc. as well as how they will be compensated for anticipated major involvement with undergraduate students. Some of the programs outlined, especially the living/learning communities, sound intriguing but go well beyond current levels of faculty engagement. (The Douglass proposal points out that the overwhelming number of existing living/learning communities are located at Douglass, have taken a number of years to put in place, and have required substantial resources from alumnai and other external funders.) How will faculty be encouraged and rewarded for their special contributions to such projects? Where will the monies come from without the targeted campaigns appealing to alumni/ae? We must, in short, do all we can to ensure that the many questions about a new structure and its workability are answered, that the plan itself is complete, and also that the political will and resources are there to sustain it. At this point, most glaringly, the report still does not credibly outline the critical mechanisms whereby students and faculty are intended to be “reconnected,” and no amount of rhetoric that the removal of the colleges will automatically make that happen will persuade anyone whose eyes were open in the last restructuring.

The Qualls report nonetheless holds out a new and attractive possibility: to make the State University of New Jersey at New Brunswick not just a preeminent public institution but THE 21st century model for delivering a first-rate undergraduate experience in a public higher education setting. Ironically, the challenging geography and idiosyncratic history of Rutgers/New Brunswick can turn out to be vital assets in this effort, rather than the liabilities that they are too often portrayed to be. We can staunch the outward flow of the highest achieving college-bound students, and we can attract more top out-of-state students to Rutgers. But as noted, we can most readily and credibly do all this in a structure that retains colleges. I will first outline what an altered college structure might look like, and then make a few comments on how it can work.

First, the structure being proposed here is a variation on the model presented in the Task Force report in that it envisions a single admitting unit to Rutgers/ New Brunswick and a single standard for admission. The admitting unit, however, is proposed to be called The Rutgers Colleges (plural) of Arts, Sciences, and Professional Studies. This title, an appeal both to clarity and “truth in advertising,” acknowledges the fact that fully a quarter of all students in the four “liberal arts” colleges actually pursues a major offered outside FAS, such as in SCILS, Mason Gross, the Business School, etc. The model also incorporates the proposed structure for a VP of Student Life reporting to a VP Undergraduate Education, and recommends that each college should have a small faculty committee working with it that is part of the larger faculty unit proposed by the Task Force for “liberal arts” students. (That body is proposed to consist of FAS faculty and representatives of professional faculties that now offer majors to students in the liberal arts colleges.) The small faculty committee, which would replace the “fellows,” would enable the colleges to draw upon faculty who might be especially interested in living/learning communities or other curricular or co-curricular initiatives of the colleges.

The colleges included in The Rutgers Colleges of Arts, Sciences, and Professional Studies, again following the units outlined in the Task Force report, would be Cook
(dependant upon a yet to be determined structural decision), Douglass, UCNB, Queens, Busch and Livingston. College deans, like the so-called “campus deans” in the Task Force report, would report to the VP Undergraduate Education but work closely with the faculty deans in the mandated standing committees.

Alternatively, and perhaps more politically acceptable given nomenclature in the Task Force proposal that would, in effect, admit ALL RU/NB students to a new entity called “The Rutgers College of Arts and Sciences” – the title of the proposed admitting unit might be The New Brunswick Colleges of Arts, Sciences, and Professional Studies rather than The Rutgers Colleges of Arts, Sciences and Professional Studies. If this were done, then the name of Rutgers College could be retained for the College Avenue crowd, rather than Queens College.

The way all this could be effected to avoid continuation of such problems as the “ballooning” of students at “Rutgers (Queens) College” would be threefold: first, prospective students would be fully informed about the colleges and the differences and similarities among them through a coordinated marketing campaign conducted upfront, and they would fully understand that ALL students in the colleges are taught by the same faculty bodies – that is, FAS, SCILS, Mason Gross, etc. Second, there would be a single admissions standard for Rutgers/New Brunswick students in the undergraduate colleges of arts, science and professional studies. Third, all the colleges would simply be capped at 2,500 to 3,500 students; and all admitted students would list a ranked preference for three schools at the time they apply, thereafter being treated on a rolling admission, first-come first-serve basis. Students would therefore be part of a definable college, although transfer possibilities would be made available and, owing to shared features such as the common core curriculum, there would not be the transfer difficulties that have presented themselves in the past.

Following both the Douglass and Livingston proposals made recently by their respective deans, the college staffs – both academic affairs and student life -- would report to the college deans, not the arts and sciences deans and the Office of the VP for Student Life, although they would have dotted-line relations to those officers. Other specifics would need to be discussed, such as whether honors might be shared, with students of the individual colleges taking seminars together in the first two years or some such arrangement. (The Task Force report already envisions this option.)

A major advantage of this altered college system would be the real possibility that students would benefit from programs envisioned for them in the Task Force report, since deans of these college units would have enough authority to put together living/learning communities, undertake other proposed initiatives, and – very important, this – raise money from alumni/ae and other sources for their support. College deans would all be encouraged to be actively involved in fundraising for their own units, but they would also work closely with faculty deans and departments in a structure that would not have to perpetuate the counter-productive existing arrangements, in which single fundraising units are permitted, for example, to “hoard” prospective donors. College deans would also be formally reviewed on an annual basis (unfortunately, not a practice since the 1981
reorganization) and specific goals would be given to them for fundraising. The structure would help to encourage larger percentage giving on the part of all alumni/ae, and also – if it is done right – promote deeper loyalty to Rutgers University as a whole, along with helping to identify individuals who might be pursued for larger gifts that can benefit wider initiatives within RU/NB. (While underscoring dismay over a confusing RU/NB structure, the recent Marts and Lundy study of Rutgers in preparation for the proposed billion-dollar plus capital campaign did acknowledge the importance of building allegiance to any academic institution through its smaller units. It should be noted, too, that the annual percentage giving record of Douglass alumnae is significantly higher than the other NB liberal arts college units. Also, in the last capital campaign, Douglass brought in 29 million, significantly higher than the Rutgers College figure of 17 million, despite Douglass’ far smaller alumnæ body.)

As is doubtless clear by now, the model being proposed here for what might be called The New Brunswick Colleges of Arts, Sciences and Professional Studies is being presented as a way, in a real world, to achieve the undergraduate programs that are assigned in the Task Force report to the proposed successor institutions to the colleges, that is, the new “campuses” with their “campus deans.” For anyone familiar with running an undergraduate college, even in the post-reorganization era at Rutgers, these “campus” entities are immediately recognizable as not up to their assigned tasks. They are simply too weak and wispy. (Ironically, the responsibilities of a campus dean, as outlined in the Task Force report, are more rather than less demanding than those of a college dean; but the hapless campus deans have been assigned no definable student bodies, no faculty members who are attached to their units, no staff they can call their own, and no evident financial resources.) Most faculty members, in any case, will correctly perceive these campus deanships as positions with zero clout, and few will be attracted to them. In brief, the odds against anything like the programs envisioned for these new entities actually coming to pass are extremely high. By contrast, in a continuing (if altered) college structure, with a definable student body, deans who are held fiscally and programmatically accountable, a faculty committee to work with, and genuine fundraising capacity, programs could be built and strengthened much faster, and students could experience the benefits of a “transformed” undergraduate model within a relatively short time.

In sum, the many worthy goals of the Task Force report can only be achieved if its recommendations are pursued in the context of a redefined college system and if accountability is built in at every governance level. That system will permit RU/NB to address all the concerns outlined in the report. It will also permit the adoption of most of the report’s solutions to our distinctive challenges in New Brunswick. Throughout our deliberations, our eyes must remain focused on our undergraduate students -- on improving what we offer to them as well as the ways we deliver what we offer. Our students are our state’s future and our nation’s future. Their satisfaction and achievement will be the real test of Rutgers/New Brunswick’s future.

Mary S. Hartman
Institute for Women’s Leadership