

Fitchburg State University
Strategic Planning White Paper
Academic Values Working Group
November 15, 2014

Margaret Hoey, Administration (Chair); Marcel Beausoleil, Faculty; Petri Flint, Faculty; Robert Pijewski, Student; Benjamin Railton, Faculty; Rene Reeves, Faculty; Annette Sullivan, Administration

CHARGE

We identify ourselves primarily as a teaching institution that blends both liberal arts and professional programs in a small college setting. This working group will focus on how we might address the changing nature of faculty work, how we define a LA&S education, the academic values we hold as an institution, and whether or not we should redefine the meaning of general education on this campus. A consideration will be made of whether or not our values match our student population and their needs.

Key Questions

1. How do we address the changes in faculty work that are taking place on a national basis?
2. How do we define a LA&S education in this environment? Has that definition changed or should it change? Does becoming a University modify our values? If so, how?
3. How do we ensure that we match these values with our student population and their needs? From the viewpoint of the student, how are these principles reflected in his or her academic training?
4. Will the current LA&S program suffice as we move towards a more diversified higher educational environment?
 - a. Does our current definition of a LA&S education prepare students for a global world?
 - b. Is there a different way to instill the values of a LA&S education? Do we need to modify our general education approach to accommodate the need for students to have specific job skills when they graduate?
 - c. Are there other defining features we should include in our general education curriculum?

PROCESS

The Academic Values Working Group was originally given a different charge than the one stated above. The first charge centered around the following questions: What approximate proportions of faculty attention and effort should be given to teaching, continuing scholarship, and service in order for Fitchburg State best to accomplish its mission? How should each of these pursuits be evaluated for tenure or promotion review? How should the term “continuing scholarship” be defined, particularly the notion of “contributions to the content of the discipline”? What is the expected quality and quantity of continuing scholarship? What do

faculty members need in order to achieve these proportions of attention and how might these needs be fulfilled in the context of constrained resources?

The charge was framed from the view that a campus wide conversation on what we expect as an institution in terms of faculty teaching, scholarship, and service was timely. The questions were, however, very specific and as a result the responses became very specific. Moreover the responses were campus centric. After two meetings it became clear that none of the suggested changes or ideas that were coming forward were going to inform a strategic plan. As a group the suggestions that emerged were operational in nature rather than strategic, and they were not aligned with the suggested readings on the current state or the future of Higher Ed. The committee was faced with spending time meeting and collecting information but at the end of the process not contributing to the final plan. After some discussion, the Strategic Planning Committee concluded it would be better to refocus the charge of the working group.

The new charge was taken up at the August 25th meeting and has been the focus of meetings on September 11th, September 25th, October 7th, and October 23rd. Considerable overlap with Academic Planning emerged and members of the Academic Planning Working Group were invited to the September 25th meeting. A draft document was presented at the October 7th meeting and all committee members and guests present edited the first draft. Throughout the rest of October and into November, the first draft was revised and edited through emails and at the October 23rd meeting, resulting in the final draft submitted to the Strategic Planning Committee.

STRATEGIC VALUES TO PROMOTE MENTORING, COLLABORATION, AND ENGAGEMENT

Strategic Value: We continue to value a dynamic, generative, engaged, and aware community of teaching and learning.

Strategic Value: We value engaged scholarship, including discipline-specific research, scholarship of teaching and learning, creative activity, and service-based scholarship.

Strategic Value: We value our role as a university that combines professional programs with a broader Liberal Arts education, to promote teaching and learning that not only trains students for specific jobs, but also equips them with more broadly applicable skills that will serve them well professionally in a range of new contexts.

Strategic Value: We value a culture of student success.

Strategic Value: We value a culture of civic and global responsibility.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Fitchburg State University has undergone a strategic planning process to produce a plan that will guide the institution over the next 5 years. The strategic planning process has identified numerous ways that the nature of faculty work is changing throughout higher education. For example, technology will make on-line or distance learning an integral part of an institution's course delivery methods rather than an exception. Competency based learning has the potential to liberate learning from "seat time" thus changing both the educational opportunities of the student and the workload of the faculty. Finally, although faculty members continue to desire a robust learning environment, they also desire the ability to enhance their pursuit of scholarly or creative practice.

The value of a Liberal Arts and Sciences (LA&S) core is still relevant and should remain an integral part of our program. In fact, many employers prefer job candidates who have acquired a broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences, not just knowledge specific to their major. The definition of a LA&S education has not changed in the face of new market forces nor does becoming a University change the importance of a general education. However, data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) identified areas where our current LA&S program may not be effective. For example, Fitchburg State students are less likely to be challenged to examine the strengths and weaknesses of their own views or participate in community-based projects or in learning communities. These challenges must be addressed as the institution moves forward over the next five years.

The core institutional values are accessibility, affordability, community, excellence, and enrichment. The Academic Values committee identified additional values that will be instrumental in facilitating the institutional change necessary to adapt to the challenges the University now faces as an institution of higher education. In general, the proposed objectives promote collaboration, engagement, and mentoring among all University stakeholders. We propose that during the implementation of the strategic plan consideration should be given to those objectives that will increase collaboration, promote engagement, and enhance mentoring among students, faculty, staff, and the community. These values, whether applied individually or together, will provide a framework for change.

Strategic Value: We continue to value a dynamic, generative, engaged, and aware community of teaching and learning.

- a. The campus community is divided into discipline specific "silos." Moreover, the general education curriculum is often viewed as something separate from the majors and as merely a checklist that a student must complete. Collaboration among faculty is currently focused on curriculum development within departments and the LA&S Council. While the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) provides numerous opportunities to collaborate or engage in new teaching strategies, participation is often limited to a small subset of faculty. We will broaden opportunities for faculty to teach collaboratively, including greater institutional support to promote more

- interdisciplinary team teaching opportunities. These opportunities could begin by building learning communities that share bridge assignments.
- b. The current model of teaching development is often connected to the high-stakes evaluation process. Thus it is less supportive than it could be and tends to undermine growth opportunities for instructors. Moreover, the knowledge and skills needed to adapt to a more flexible model of course delivery already exist on this campus but are limited to a small subset of faculty. The challenge therefore is to develop a broader system of support and skill transfer among faculty. One possible mechanism to ensure that faculty members have the teaching tools necessary to improve their teaching as well as to adapt to the need for flexibility within their courses is to develop more one on one mentoring pairs among faculty members.
 - c. We have a traditional mode of course delivery based on credits and seat time. We will explore modes of program or course delivery and advising that allow for a more customized approach in order to increase the flexibility for students and faculty that will contribute to higher graduation rates and better workforce alignment. Graduate and Continuing Education already offers on-line advising for example, a model that could be integrated into other areas of the university.

Strategic Value: We value engaged scholarship, including discipline-specific research, scholarship of teaching and learning, creative activity, and service-based scholarship.

- a. The University does support scholarly and creative practice on campus and has made a modest effort to increase support for those activities. However, challenges remain especially in the areas of science where no start-up money is given to new faculty nor is the level of institutional support needed for preliminary data collection adequate. We will enhance scholarly activities on campus while recognizing that they must be strategically focused and cost-effective.
- b. We will evaluate all alternate administrative assignment course release time awarded on campus. Guidelines for the granting of release time will be developed, as they will assure equity in the granting of course releases across campus.
- c. We will enhance support for scholarly activities on campus by increasing the amount of non-administrative release time for both specialized research and the scholarship of engagement and teaching and learning.

Strategic Value: We value our role as a university that combines professional programs with a broader Liberal Arts education, to promote teaching and learning that not only trains students for specific jobs, but also equips them with more broadly applicable skills that will serve them well professionally in a range of new contexts.

- a. We will refocus LA&S towards a model that emphasizes developing the underlying skills and aptitudes that are crucial to adapting to new situations and demands: meta-cognition; critical and creative thinking; ethical reasoning; and communication, both written and verbal. Many of these values are implicit in our current LA&S system, but while we do a good job providing students with a

broad range of disciplinary experiences, we do less well developing these key cross-disciplinary skills through the distributive requirements.

- b. We will extend the idea of inter-departmental faculty collaboration to the development of courses (ideally team-taught or linked via learning communities), to make more explicit for students how distinct disciplinary modes of analysis can be brought to bear on a given issue, question, or problem. This kind of linkage would give better context for why cross-disciplinary thinking itself is valuable than our current system does, because the current focus tends to be on distinct kinds of disciplinary content, rather than on distinct modes of analysis.
- c. We will address weaknesses in the current process by which courses become part of the LA&S curriculum. Our current model is based on individual faculty (and departments) submitting AUC proposals for courses to be designated as fulfilling LA&S attributes, and this process itself contributes to the “separate silos” models that we hope to improve upon.

Strategic Value: We value a culture of student success. Student success is inherent in all of the proposed values of this working group but this value is specific to improving the academic experience of the student.

- a. In spite of the fact that Fitchburg State began as a Normal school, very few departmental curricular decisions with the exception of the Education Department are informed by state P – 12 standards. Collaboration and engagement with P – 12 educators should enhance the shaping of our LA&S curriculum. We will be informed by state and national standards and assessments in order to build proactively on the P-12 educational experience and skills of our current and future students. This objective could be accomplished through increased partnerships with superintendents, principals, and teachers as well as by hosting more P – 12 events on campus.
- b. Fitchburg State University is only beginning to use data to determine how best to meet the needs of our students. We will increase our use of data and assessments to inform best practices for our students in terms of teaching, curriculum, advising, use of technology, and faculty involvement.
- c. The general education curriculum is often viewed as something separate from the majors’ course of study and viewed as merely a checklist that a student must complete. We will provide an educational experience that is cohesive and represents an integrated whole, including the LA&S curriculum and its link to all majors.
- d. Students are generally only given the opportunity to participate in undergraduate research or internships during their junior or senior year. Moreover, the campus lacks high-impact educational practices such as learning communities, first year experiences, and a common intellectual experience. We propose an increase in high impact educational practices in the freshman and sophomore years. Moreover these experiences should be directly tied to courses that have been reshaped to connect key disciplinary concepts to a student’s active involvement in experiential learning.

Strategic Value: We value an academic culture of civic and global responsibility.

- a. Global Diversity is currently one goal of our LA&S curriculum. However, the results of the NSSN study suggest that we are not performing well on this campus in terms of diversity. We propose that the campus develop a definition of diversity.
- b. We will promote student, faculty, and staff citizenship that fosters integrity and social justice on campus, in the larger community, and globally. An increase in local service learning opportunities as well as other high impact practices that address global problems through problem solving and teamwork is proposed.
- c. We will refocus LA&S towards critical and creative thinking, ethical reasoning, and social justice.

A revised program that connects more effectively with individual majors, offers more freshman/sophomore foundational experiences, promotes scholarly activity among both students and faculty, and engenders a greater sense of civic responsibility will generate a more coherent and meaningful education. The success of Fitchburg State University will be guided by several additional values: collaboration, engagement, and mentoring. These values, whether applied individually, or better yet, in combination, will be able to guide the change required as the institution adapts to the ever-changing climate of higher education.