

## Some Thoughts on Our Strategic Planning Exercise And on Graduate Education

### **Introduction**

Last spring, I assembled a small task force of faculty, staff, students, and administrators, co-chaired by Jim Newell (then the President of the Senate); Karen Siefring (President of the local chapter of AFT); and Christy Faison (former Interim Provost and currently the Assistant to the President for Special Projects). I asked Christy to serve as convener.

The reason I created the task force was my concern that there seems to be a disconnect between our relatively new mission statement and the various action steps that are under way across the campus. People were telling me with increased frequency that they did not understand the relationship of project A to project B, or how either related to the long-term goals of the university.

I therefore charged the task force to begin to organize various actions that we were taking or considering under a small number of themes, to link the action steps to the mission. They have done so in the last few months, and now the first part of the strategic planning exercise is ready for broader review, although it is still in draft form.

### **Graduate and Undergraduate Education: Not an Either/Or**

The draft strategic plan as it currently exists does not specifically distinguish between undergraduate and graduate education at Rowan, but even a casual reading of it reveals that it pertains only to undergraduate education, and that indeed was my intent. Before anyone concludes, however, that I am recommending the elimination of graduate education (a recommendation I am emphatically NOT making), let me offer some thoughts on how I believe our campus should proceed.

As is true for virtually all institutions that began as state teachers colleges, Glassboro State and then Rowan has historically focused primarily on undergraduates. Graduate education, in contrast, has been limited, and indeed for many years was available only in Education.

However, as Rowan has evolved, and with the development of new colleges within the university, the opportunity to create more graduate programs—and the interest of many faculty and increasing numbers of prospective students in having such programs—has resulted in a significant number of new graduate programs being offered. Indeed, at the present time, all six of our colleges have at least one graduate program.

The growth of the graduate programs has not been without controversy. Many faculty worry that, in the absence of significant new resources, the graduate programs

will inevitably siphon off resources from the undergraduate programs, with potentially devastating consequences. The nature of our graduate programs has also been contentious at times. Should they be exclusively in applied areas, or should we have traditional programs that prepare the faculty of the future? Should we follow a traditional model of the type that the great majority of us went through and require GRE scores, high standards, and a thesis, or should we instead focus more on credentialing our students through the accumulation of graduate credits only? How, in any case, does graduate education fit into our future?

I think the answers to these questions can be determined from the circumstances surrounding us. As regards undergraduates, we are increasingly becoming a desired institution for students geographically well removed from Gloucester County, or South Jersey, or even New Jersey as a whole. (We currently have applicants for freshman admission from more than 30 states, and a central theme of the strategic planning exercise is that we are rapidly becoming a true residential university with all that entails.)

Moreover, it is vitally important that we clarify, first in our own minds and then in the minds of the external community, just what we are attempting to accomplish with our students. The demographics of the 18-year-old cohort on the East Coast in coming years are unsettling. With few exceptions (and New Jersey is one such exception), the numbers of high school graduates will be dropping in most states in the Northeast and Midwest, generally by double digits. We can expect to see growing competition from both public and private out-of-state institutions for New Jersey's high school graduates. (At least two campuses in the State System of Higher Education in Pennsylvania have dramatically lowered their out-of-state tuitions, with the result that they charge out-of-state students *less* than we charge in-state students, meaning for the first time it is actually cheaper for students to leave the state for college than to stay in-state.)

We are also facing increased competition in-state from the community colleges because of the STARS program. This program provides full tuition and fees to any student who graduates in the top 20% of his or her high school class if they attend a community college. STARS II allows the program to continue receiving a waiver of tuition and fees at the public universities in New Jersey for STARS students who complete their A.A. degree with a 3.0 GPA or better. Because the program is only available to students who start at a community college, a significant number of very able students are now choosing that route over starting at Rowan or other universities.

To deal effectively with these threats, it is not enough that we simply "stay the course." We must focus on quality and value, and on the virtues of being a part of a 24/7 learning community (something the community colleges can never offer). The strategic planning exercise is therefore focused on clarifying our evolution as a campus over the next decade, with an eye toward securing our place as a sought-after campus for high-achieving undergraduates.

I suggest to you that, with few exceptions, our graduate programs are not drawing students from great distances, nor do they resemble the programs we ourselves went

through. Rather, our graduate students are primarily part-time students from the local area who are seeking to advance in their careers, or wish to credential themselves to begin a new career. As we have learned painfully in recent years, their criteria in selecting a graduate school are convenience, a short time of completion, price, and only then quality.

Our undergraduate programs are increasingly populated by high-achieving students whose homes are often distant from Glassboro, whereas most of our graduate programs serve local residents who are career-focused. It therefore seems clear that we have to appeal to those two very different populations using very different criteria. We are attracting undergraduates based on quality and value; we are attracting graduate students based on relevance of programs, convenience, and cost.

If we are willing to accept those different standards, then our inner turmoil over what to do largely disappears. We devote our resources to our undergraduates. We move the great majority of our graduate programs (and there are a handful of exceptions) to a self-support basis. In doing so, we eliminate the potential for resources to be drained away from the undergraduate programs to support the graduate programs (since the latter are self-supported), and we focus on serving a growing population of local residents (as the area continues to diversify economically) who need post-baccalaureate education to continue to advance in their careers. We are providing a *service* to the graduate students, and to the local businesses and organizations that employ them.

Using the self-support model, there is essentially no limit to the number and type of graduate programs we offer, since by definition they cost us nothing. We should therefore be attentive to changing demands, and anticipate what our local population will require in the future by way of post-baccalaureate education. As a public institution, we have that obligation, and by extending our educational reach to new populations, we cement our relationships with our South Jersey community.

We can anticipate that certain of our graduate programs will, in time, begin to draw increased numbers of full-time students, perhaps from locations other than South Jersey. (Such an outcome has already occurred in a handful of our programs.) As that occurs, we may decide to change the nature of the graduate program in question, and create a more traditional program, using GREs, theses, and providing graduate stipends.

In the meantime, focusing our resources exclusively on the undergraduates (assuming that we agree to move to a self-support model for graduate education) will allow us to continue to grow in quality and reputation. Since that is where the challenges are, that is why the strategic planning exercise is exclusively focused on the undergraduate programs.

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