Management Letter/Academic Affairs Update
Academic Year 2014-15
(Revised February 2015)

In many past years, I would post the annual management letter which I prepared for President Perry. Having not done so this past year, I have rewritten the letter I did provide him last summer to update the information and make it more of a current status report on Academic Affairs.

In that letter, I started with the opening line of the Tale of Two Cities: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…” because it seemed to describe our circumstances of the moment and still does.

Several members of our academic community indicated to me that after careful reading of our NCA Self Study, they found that it was really quite uplifting because it laid out the many achievements Eastern has realized over the last decade. We truly have given thousands of students a superior education and a wonderful experience! On the other hand, our continuing fiscal challenges with the relentless budgets cuts that we are struggling to accomplish and the seemingly relentless flow of difficult news from the recruitment/enrollment/admissions front is depressing.

In what follows, a number of topics pertaining to activities and initiatives in Academic Affairs are discussed, what we have done, what we are doing, and what will come next. Just as I used to do when I held my cookies and conversation happy hours where I would not let the first question address the budget, I will arrange the topics so that this topic falls on a later page.

Accreditation

While many folks became somewhat fatigued by the length of time this topic was high on our list of activities, it proved very successful with the NCA-HLC having now officially reaffirmed our accreditation for the maximum allowed period of ten years. Having co-chaired the previous trip around this track, Dean Augustine along with his co-chair Dr. Stowell and the members of the NCA Steering Committee, orchestrated a comprehensive process that engaged all members of the campus community who wished to be engaged. The Self-Study document reflected well on Eastern’s accomplishments of the past decade and did not skirt the challenges we currently face. The only areas where we had, and continue to have, significant challenges pertain to the fiscal picture driven by both the state’s unreliability and our enrollment challenges due, at least in part, to the dramatically changing landscape of higher education – demographically, competitively, sociologically and politically. Our efforts with Strategic Enrollment Planning are addressing the latter, but returning to a favorable growth path will take time. I am not sure there is any effective way to explain or present favorably the state’s and more broadly society’s abandonment of public support of higher education. This, of course, is not unique to
Eastern nor even Illinois, but it has affected the entire county as evidenced by the decline in educational attainment and student success for the U.S. compared to other countries. The U.S. is nowhere near leading the pack any longer and will not regain this position again under current public policy. In any event, our accomplishments at EIU are numerous, and we are thoughtfully addressing those portions of our future over which we have meaningful influence. The NCA’s reaffirmation of accreditation stated this clearly.

**Recruitment/Admissions/Enrollment**

The foregoing discussion suggests a natural segue to this topic (or perhaps more accurately these topics). While the long-term enrollment decline has been a source of angst and frustration for a number of years, the leadership uncertainty in admissions and the desperate need to bring our institutional approach to admissions into the 21st century has been my personal concern. Initially, we needed our enrollment to decline somewhat from the significant peak of 2006-7. The long-term trend of smaller entering classes created a serious hangover effect, however, making a cessation of total enrollment declines hard to achieve and slow to reverse. When it became apparent that new leadership was needed to effect a re-engineering, events conspired to delay this well beyond what I desired. Until just a few years ago, the approach to our recruitment and admissions activities was essentially the state of the art circa the 1980s and 1990s.

I am pleased that we have made huge strides in getting into the 21st century with our processes; although, we still have a ways to go in terms of strategically marketing our programs and their fundamental quality. Nevertheless, we have a fully staffed operation, now using current techniques and strategies, with a talented administrator (Mary Herrington-Perry) overseeing the entire enrollment management effort. We now need to “buy time” for it all to work and bring our total enrollment back to more sustainable levels. This latter need speaks to the challenge of budget management, a topic to be discussed shortly. I do believe we have the best admissions/enrollment management operation since I arrived at Eastern.

**Academic Initiatives**

- Revision of University Learning Goals

While gathering, mining and evaluating data on student achievement across various desired educational outcomes is not easy, it became clear several years ago to those looking at the data which were available, that our students were not achieving at levels consistent with our expectations of them. Quite simply the preponderance of the evidence showed that our students did not perform as well as we desired nor as well as students at many of our peer institutions on certain important skills. Certainly, most of us would like to live in a world like Garrison Keillor imagines where all our “children” are above average. We do not.

Fortunately, under the leadership of several committed faculty members, especially Dr. Rebecca Throneburg and Dr. Stephen Lucas previously and now
Dr. Rebecca Throneburg and Dr. Richard Jones currently together with a large cast of their colleagues, our overarching University Learning Goals have been revised, and the process has now moved on to a systematic examination of their inclusion and achievement in General Education coursework. In future years, the process will look at their achievement within each undergraduate major. This is a massive mountain to scale, but there has been remarkable progress; although, the full implementation plan has three more years yet to run. This effort speaks directly to the themes of “rigor” and “high expectations” on which we have focused for several years, and I will continue to give it my strong support.

- **Undergraduate Research**

There are moments when I get concerned that too great a focus and too much time spent promoting undergraduate research will be seen by some as disinterest in graduate and faculty research. Such could not be further from the truth. All this said, however, undergraduate research has been one of the “high impact experiences” that is essential to Integrative Learning, and it is one at which Eastern has had significant success to date. Significant student participation in the National Conference on Undergraduate Research is only one measure of such activity, but our track record here has been exemplary.

Our shared goal last year was to start an initiative to take us to the next level of accomplishment and participation. It took a full year to schedule a consultation with CUR workshop leaders, but we finally did so in early May 2014, and it was a rousing success (53 of the 54 invited participants were in attendance!). Each college put together a template of college-level action steps focused on what could be done to advance student engagement, and the deans have been charged with moving the plans forward within their colleges. I am aware that two of the colleges put together faculty committees which began meeting this past summer. We also have an institutional template, and Dean England and I, working in conjunction with the four college deans, have started working on the specific action steps specified therein including assembling an institutional faculty committee. Some of the examples of actions offered by the workshop presenters will have to wait for a less stressed fiscal environment, but there are several actions we can take with the resources we have already committed.

- **Online/Hybrid Degree Programs**

It has taken too long to gin up significant interest in on-line/low residency/hybrid degree programs, but we are finally rounding a corner on this front. Until two years ago, most of our on-line activity had been the work of individual faculty on individual courses. The conversion of our BS in Nursing into an on-line environment predated this, but it was an isolated initiative which had little carryover to the rest of campus. In general, making occasional courses available on-line helped students meet certain requirements and assisted in keeping our summer programs reasonably populated with students who had returned home for
the summer, but such an approach was never going to bring new students to Eastern in meaningful numbers.

The faculty-lead initiative in Communication Disorders and Science (CDS) to inaugurate a mostly on-line cohort of their very successful MS degree changed the conversation. We have a number of Masters programs which focus on working professionals, and the program model developed by the CDS faculty is proving a very tractable approach. Dean Augustine has assembled an ad hoc “On-line Board” to work on transferring the CDS approach to other Masters programs, and the concept has taken off. We now have three additional programs online including the MA in Art, Art Education Option; the MA in Music, Music Education Concentration; and the MS in Family and Consumer Sciences with several others in development. Good progress is being made.

In addition, this “Board” has been working with the undergraduate programs which were identified as good target programs for a different, but related, initiative to offer baccalaureate degrees to transfer students which are, at least, fifty percent available on-line. Two such programs launched this past fall with several others under development for future years. The three programs now active are the B.S. in Family and Consumer Sciences, the B.S. in Recreation Administration, and the minor in Psychology. Plans are underway to have the entire B.S. in Psychology available in the online format. These programs, of course, are in addition to the B.S. in Organizational and Professional Development, the B.A. Program in General Studies, and the RN to B.S. in Nursing, all of which are available fully online.

To address the felt need which was clearly stated in the Online Committee Report (often termed the Stowell Committee Report) for more adequate training of faculty providing on-line coursework, CATS has reconfigured some existing personnel and operating resources to establish a Center for On-Line Learning. Not only is this being done by redeploying resources, but there is a net savings to boot.

- Program Adjustments

While the Program Analysis process was effective at engaging many members of the campus community in a reflection on the activities to which we devote our energy and resources, it did not give much specific guidance on how to re-allocate and adjust our menu of programs to remain competitive in the educational marketplace. It did not offer much guidance on how to shrink our budget either.

More helpful was the Strategic Enrollment Management effort led by Dr. Herrington-Perry. At the risk of over-simplifying the results of this process, it revealed that our menu of undergraduate programs needed a bit of refreshing. Some of the “hot” programs as identified by potential students are among those we will never have for financial reasons. For example, starting an engineering
program is simply not financially feasible, nor is initiating a four-year nursing program. In the latter instance, the cost of developing and supervising the clinical sites is too great. However, there are programs closely associated with programs we do have which we have not pursued or effectively marketed. To make “official” changes through our shared governance processes can be time consuming, and these processes are too often characterized as change averse. Where substantive curricular changes are necessary, there is no alternative. Where the curriculum essentially exists but the marketing and packaging needs to be adjusted, we have somewhat more latitude. I am going to urge Dr. Herrington-Perry be a bit more proactive in this arena.

Budget Management

This is the aspect of this report which constitutes “the worst of times!” Clearly, there is no easy way to re-size an institution’s budget. Some individuals and some groups are going to be affected negatively, and there is no reason to expect them to be pleased. The commitment to shared governance means that there are complex political dimensions to such a process in addition to the personal dimensions. Challenges abound!

I think it fair to reflect that Academic Affairs has been cognizant of the need to begin paring back the most important driver of costs – personnel – for several years and the almost annual faculty/staff reductions which I instituted are evidence of this. To date, these reductions have been accomplished by attrition and strategically reducing the number of term contract employees. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the re-sizing now upon us is more significant than previous reduction efforts. Making the reductions that much more intense is the simultaneous need to increase student financial aid investments to remain competitive in the Illinois higher education marketplace. It is not simply reduced student numbers and the concomitant reduction in revenue that has made the process difficult, but at the same time, we have been forced to increase student financial support from internal resources. At times, it feels like we cannot cut costs fast enough to keep pace with this double hit.

The ultimate challenge in realizing such reductions in Academic Affairs is to make delivery of the curriculum much more efficient. Without this, the mandates of the extant curriculum forces us to continue offering a multitude of courses which do not have sufficient students in them to be financially viable. I have talked about this for several years with my Academic Leadership Team, but to date forward motion has been modest – at best. As an economist, I am reminded that John Maynard Keynes asserted that wages were “sticky” in the downward direction. So too are personnel savings.

Like most recent years, the year before us should be both challenging and rewarding. I am reminded and heartened, however, by the continuing accomplishments of the University through the hard work of our faculty and staff and the optimism and enthusiasm of our students. Together, we can address the challenges successfully.