

TO: Dr. Steve Owen, President
Faculty Senate Executive Committee

FROM: Gwen Brown, Chair
Faculty Senate Curriculum Committee

DATE: November 19, 2009

RE: 7-17 Strategic Plan and Curricular Implications

The Faculty Senate Curriculum Committee was asked, as part of its agenda for the 2009-2010 academic year, to “identify and report to the Faculty Senate curriculum implications of RU’s 7-17 Strategic Plan.” However, the recent economic problems experienced by the state—and thus by the University—are likely to affect the implementation of the 7-17 Strategic Plan. Additionally, questions have recently been raised about the University’s Board of Visitors’ response to the 7-17 plan and their desire to revisit that plan. Therefore, the Curriculum Committee chose to review the 7-17 plan to develop a series of questions that will need to be addressed in any future iteration of the plan. Below you will find those questions. They are the result of our discussions as well as the Committee’s request for input from department chairs. We hope that these questions will be useful in any revision of the current 7-17 plan or in the drafting of a new strategic plan.

In general, the Curriculum Committee believes that periodic revisiting of any strategic plan ought to occur. This does not appear to have been anticipated in the 7-17 plan. A first and general suggestion, then, is that any future versions of a strategic plan include a prescribed process of periodic assessment of the plan and of the status and continued appropriateness of its goals.

A second general concern expressed by the members of the Curriculum Committee was the effect of economic downturns on the University’s ability to fulfill its strategic plan. A number of major goals are included in the current strategic plan, and even a small economic blip can affect our ability to meet those goals. The Committee suggested that any future versions of the plan contain some acknowledgement that goals are premised on the economic health of the Commonwealth and the University.

A third and related concern that the Curriculum Committee expressed focused on the vicissitudes of maintaining a steady or growing student population—that is, how does a situation such as our recent precipitous drop in enrollment affect our ability to meet the goals set out in the strategic plan?

Finally, and as important and likely more important than any concern mentioned above, is the issue of faculty involvement in the development and revisions of a strategic plan. In the current plan, changes of significant magnitude showed up in the final version of the plan without the knowledge of faculty or their Senate representatives. This cannot be allowed to recur. Faculty have primary responsibility in curricular matters on every campus; to develop, approve, incorporate, and institutionalize goals related to curricular matters without faculty input and oversight ignores accepted academic norms. Moreover, accreditation rules require that faculty be charged with making judgments about the curriculum. To sidestep the faculty is to put in jeopardy the institution’s SACS accreditation. To be specific, the fiasco of including specific

general education changes in the 7-17 plan without informing or consulting the faculty and the administration's acknowledged ignorance about the source of those major changes in the plan's language and content cannot be allowed to occur again.

What follows are specific questions related to Goal 1 and 2 in the 7-17 plan, the goals most clearly related to curricular concerns.

Goal 1:1

- Assessment clearly is a focus on this goal. Consideration should be given to how this assessment will occur, when it will occur, who will take charge of curricular assessment, what kind of support services will be necessary for conducting assessment in a meaningful manner, what criteria will be used for assessment, and how the assessment process and its outcomes might be expected to affect curricular matters
- Assessment after graduation is also a concern of the 7-17 plan. Focus is placed on preparation for careers. Consideration should be given to whether this is an appropriate standard. Often majors direct students toward specific careers, but they need not. Are there other ways to assess following graduation that do not depend upon career preparation as a criterion?
- Retention rates are mentioned. What affect does the need to retain students have on the development of classes with the goal of assisting students to remain at RU? Are remedial courses appropriate? What support services will the University provide in terms of academic enrichment and assistance that might be incorporated into a curriculum or specific courses? How will these retention efforts be assessed?
- A number of members of the Curriculum Committee (as well as department chairs) expressed concern about a seemingly new university goal of limiting undergraduate enrollment while increasing graduate enrollment. Questions related to this plan include: how will such a change in the balance of our students affect teaching (since graduate classes and graduate students require markedly more time, research experience, and commitment to individual instruction)? Graduate courses may well cost more to teach; is the University willing to invest in that cost? Is there an audience, a potential pool of students, interested in specific kinds of new graduate programs? Is there demand? With the heavy teaching load already in place, could faculty sustain additional graduate programs?

Goal 1:2

- A primary concern related to the second part of the first goal is the University's ability to provide "competitive packages" for faculty. In good economic times, the University may be able to give new faculty reassigned time to "settle in" and "learn the ropes" with a New Faculty Institute; when the economy takes a downturn, will we be able to sustain such programs?
- Will changes in teaching load or work expectations be necessary to provide faculty with the time to engage in more cooperative research with students?
- What steps are appropriate to insure a diverse faculty in all respects, including diversity of opinion?

- While each of the above focuses on faculty, the answers to those questions have implications for curricular development.

Goal 2:1

- See above for concerns regarding the development and assessment of General Education
- How will academic programs be reviewed? What criteria will be used? How often will this occur?
- Who will decide whether programs are deemed “not essential”? What criteria will be used? How will faculty be incorporated in the decision-making process?
- What criteria will be used to determine if the B.S. degree is inappropriate for a major? What impact, if any, will eliminating the B.S. degree for some majors have on course offerings?
- What impact will be felt in encouraging more students to take the B.A. degree? In terms of specific course development? In terms of faculty expertise in specific content areas?
- What impact is likely as a result of encouraging specific departments and programs to seek discipline-specific accreditation? Will development or new courses be necessary? Will revisions in courses be necessary? How will specific accreditation requirements relate to University requirements e.g., might a specific major require so many major-specific courses that it would become impossible for a student to graduate without taking more than the 120 hours or credit we now require? What demands might the accrediting organizations of individual disciplines make, e.g., teaching load, class size, course content?

Goal 2:2

- Most of the objectives in this section focus on expansion of graduate studies and seeking an increase in graduate enrollment. Concerns similar to those in the first goal were expressed regarding faculty workload, appropriateness of new graduate programs, demand for programs under consideration, etc. Additionally, concern was expressed about attracting potential graduate students without the ability to offer tuition waivers as most other Virginia universities do. Without such incentives, attracting graduate students to RU in some programs is very nearly impossible. How would this be taken into consideration?
- Any focus on expanding graduate education at RU will have immediate impact on undergraduate curricular offerings. How will that impact be addressed?