



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, DC

CORNELIUS KERWIN
PRESIDENT

MEMORANDUM

November 14, 2007

TO: Campus Community
FROM: Neil Kerwin, President
SUBJECT: Strategic Planning

Introduction

American University is ready for a new strategic plan.

Our existing plan was endorsed by the Board of Trustees in 2002. Various reports have documented our progress on that plan's key elements, and many of its goals have been met. A new plan will mark the start of a new phase of the institution's history and focus on achieving the next major measure of potential. The plan must also convince those with the ability to support our work that the university has set an ambitious, exciting course for its future.

A strategic plan must be developed through a disciplined process that engages our entire community. It must stimulate our best thinking about goals, encourage different points of view, and allow for deep, frank discussions where there is disagreement. The community should expect leadership from the president throughout the process and clear accountability for results when the plan is approved.

Planning Assumptions

Mission. The Statement of Common Purpose, our mission statement, is a touchstone for this effort and presents us with the opportunity to envision a future for AU within higher education that could be very different from our current reality. We should welcome that type of discussion. Indeed, the work will be much less interesting if we don't have unconventional or even radical ideas about how this institution might best pursue an admirable and compelling future mission. We are a much stronger institution today than when previous plans were drafted and our capacity is more robust. At the same time, our current operating reality has a number of important features that should be considered as we embark on this important work.

Resources. We will depend on tuition and related fees for the life of this plan, no matter how successful we are in fundraising, sponsored activities, and raising other sources of revenue. Prudence dictates we ensure that our academic programs and supporting environment continue to attract and retain sufficient numbers of highly qualified students. That supporting environment consists of many things, but an outstanding faculty, facilities, technology, and strong, dedicated staff with ample opportunities for professional development are especially important. The term “student centered” is used often in higher education; it should be given a precise meaning and a prominent place in this plan.

Undergraduate and Graduate Education. We have built distinctive approaches to undergraduate and graduate education. Both are elemental to our mission and future. At the undergraduate level we offer instruction and a setting that rivals the finest liberal arts colleges, while also offering the resources and opportunities of a national university located in one of the most important cities in the world. In our planning we should affirm this approach and strengthen it or make a plausible case for an alternative. Our recent reviews of graduate programs underscored the professional focus for our master’s degrees and research focus for our doctoral programs. Every graduate program we offer can have features that establish them as leaders in their fields. Our planning might focus on what is needed to move our existing programs to higher levels of performance and recognition. To be sure, there are alternative ways to think of our graduate programs and encourage that discussion. At every level of academic programming we must think hard about the future and whether we are providing all that is needed to ensure our success and prominence.

Faculty. A talented, dedicated faculty is critical to our ongoing success. Their capacity to deliver education of the highest quality, while creating an intellectual climate characterized by influential scholarship, professional contributions, and creative work, is a crucial element in the next plan. We must pay serious attention to faculty recruitment, support, development, and retention, as well as the conditions of work and the tools they are provided. This plan must set ambitious goals for faculty development and make it unmistakably clear that American University is committed to engaging a faculty of the first rank and will do what is needed to maintain it.

Global, National, and Local Commitments. We are a global university of considerable accomplishment and commitment. While we sustain this aspect of our character, we must further define what leadership means in the global arena. We also must be conscious of our capacity to play leadership roles at the national level and acknowledge the critical role that Washington, D.C. and its region plays in the life of the university. Our plan must state clearly the importance of this relationship, acknowledging that we have obligations to our home city.

Alumni. Alumni must play a strong role in this plan. Our alumni have grown impressively, both in numbers and stature, and are an essential asset in our future. I envision a plan with clear goals to promote the lifelong and substantial involvement of alumni in the life of the university.

Planning Framework

Based on our experience with the current plan and the extensive literature on strategic planning in higher education our planning framework might consist of the following elements:

- areas for which goals will be set and that collectively comprise the plan's scope but with the explicit invitation to think boldly and creatively;
- the best information on the current condition of the university and recent trends in the external environment pertinent to each area in the plan;
- a process that is both inclusive and disciplined, relies on existing governance and management structures, but also encourages and respects individual and group participation; a process that is open to dramatic changes of direction as well as incremental progress;
- access, as needed, to planning professionals and other experts in higher education trends;
- financial and other resources to accomplish goals and clear accountability for results.

Planning Process

I offer the following description of how our planning might proceed. The approach outlined below is informed by literature on strategic planning in higher education. We will post planning literature and key sources on a dedicated strategic planning Web site.

Phase 1 (November 07–February 08)

- Establish the scope of the plan through discussion and recommendations from campus constituencies on subjects to be covered.
- Compile and distribute information on the status of the university, trends in the higher education environment, and external influences that may be important to the plan.
- Convene a steering committee consisting of representatives of campus constituencies and other presidential appointees based on input from the university community.
- Submit the scope of the plan to the Board of Trustees for review.

Phase 2 (February 08–July 08)

- Discussion constituencies, organizations, and individuals consider available information, review areas included in the scope of the plan, develop proposed goals, and communicate goals (including broad themes) and commentary to steering committee.
- Steering committee interacts with key constituencies, groups, and individuals to clarify, discuss, and expand proposed goals.
- Board reviews and comments on progress of the plan.
- Steering committee develops a draft strategic plan, proposes metrics to measure performance, and submits plan to community for review and comment; responsible officials estimate costs and draft plan.

Phase 3 (August 08–November 08)

- Steering committee meets with key constituencies to hear comments, criticisms, and additional recommendations on draft plan.
- Steering committee completes proposed plan with commentary on major recommendations considered and rejected and forwards the plan to the president for review and action.
- Campus constituencies communicate their views on the proposed plan.
- President presents proposed plan to Board of Trustees for review and possible revision and approval.

Phase 4

- Implementation of the plan begins—by responsible university officials and governance bodies with board oversight, including regular reports to the university community.

It is important that you comment on this proposed process. Does it provide ample opportunity for participation? Is the time frame realistic? My goal is to have a draft plan delivered to the Board of Trustees at the November 2008 meeting. This will allow for close coordination with the next two-year budget proposal that will be considered by the board at their February 2009 meeting.

We will create a Web site on which we will post all ideas, comments, recommendations, and materials submitted by anyone who chooses to participate. All comments and recommendations related to the issues outlined above should be sent to the site. We also will post pertinent resources on planning and background information. The Web site will be a major resource as we move through the process to suggest, modify, and adopt goals and objectives, develop overarching themes and directions, and monitor our progress once the plan is approved.

Initiating Phase 1: Setting the Scope of the Plan

Based on the proposed framework, the following are broad subject areas that might be included in the plan. They are offered for illustration and a point of departure for determining the plan's scope:

Student Body

- Size and composition by degree level
- Qualifications
- Undergraduate distribution across schools and colleges
- Diversity and demographics
- Recruitment and retention
- Access and financial aid

Faculty

- Faculty size and composition

- Core elements of faculty work: expectations for teaching; scholarship, professional contributions, and creative work; service
- Compensation
- Opportunities for professional development and leadership

Academic Programs

- Content of curricula
- Instruction and learning
- Opportunities for innovation and growth
- Opportunities for leadership and distinction
- The library
- Assessment

Student Life

- Inclusive environment: social experience and community
- Leadership development and distinction
- Venues for social and recreational activities
- Orientation toward wellness

Alumni

- Student to alumni transition
- Lifelong involvement
- Forms of engagement
- Development and fundraising

Athletics and Recreation

- Intercollegiate sports: number and competitiveness
- Club and intramural sports
- Health and fitness

Staff

- Size and composition
- Opportunities for training and advancement
- Compensation and benefits
- Service
- Professional and community leadership

Management and Administration

- University finances
- Technology
- Administrative structure and organization
- Communication
- Performance

Facilities and Sustainability

Service and Social Responsibility

Reputation and Prominence

- Telling our story
- Measuring reputation

Review and comment on this list of topics. Suggest areas that may be missing or how the topic presentation might be improved. Does the list comprise the crucial topics and issues for our future? Can we manage a list this size and still produce a plan that is coherent and ambitious? Should one or more items be removed? For this phase and others I foresee discussions in the schools and colleges, the Provost's Council, the Faculty Senate, student government organizations, the Staff Council, the Alumni Board and chapters, as well as any groups, organizations and individuals.

The challenge we face is to develop a plan that is both comprehensive and inspiring—a plan that acknowledges and accounts for our complexity but is accessible to those who do not know us as well as they should. One way to accomplish this is through a tiered approach in which the many individual areas and goals build to a limited number of compelling institutional themes or messages (e.g., “intellectual leadership,” “the university and the world,” “engaged learning,” etc.). As you begin thinking of our next set of goals and objectives, you also consider larger themes or general directions for the university's future.

Conclusion

I conclude with a call for active, widespread, and serious participation in the planning effort. The process will be complex and time-consuming, and there will be bumps along the way. But I am confident the result will be worth the effort.

I look forward to receiving your initial comments, which can be sent to strategicplan@american.edu.