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William Paterson Faculty:

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Welcome to spring semester 2016!

The start of a new semester—especially spring semester—is a great time to look ahead to the promises and challenges that await us. And this spring, we can celebrate step one of the promise of a revitalized and renovated campus: we have opened and have already moved into our newest academic building, University Hall.

University Hall is just step one in the ongoing campus renovation project. Under President Waldron's leadership, and with the support of the state of New Jersey, we will be changing the look and functionality of two of our most heavily used buildings—Hunziker Wing and Hunziker Hall.

Universities, of course, are more than the physical buildings on a campus, and learning takes place in many settings and at many times. But these physical changes symbolize much: a new building this spring; redesigned academic buildings for Fall of 2017 and Fall of 2018. The concepts of new and redesign are key to keep in mind as we move into this term and think and plan ahead.

Challenges We Face

As we all know, we have faced and continue to face challenges in terms of enrollment, retention and funding. We are not alone in facing these challenges. New Jersey is currently in a declining pattern for high school graduation, and we have a few more years to go before the cycle shifts upward once again. Many of our two-year county colleges are experiencing significant declines in enrollment, as are many of the private colleges in the area. While our overall enrollment is not where we projected it to be or where we want it to be, we did grow our new entering student class this year, and we are growing graduate education. While we will continue to work on recruiting and admitting more new qualified students, retention of our current students is just as if not more important.

These budgetary and enrollment issues have made our work more difficult in terms of planning for and managing our academic offerings. I have asked the Deans to engage in more scrutiny concerning course enrollments and course offerings to make sure that we are meeting student needs as effectively and efficiently as possible, and have also asked that they more tightly monitor adjunct and overload expenses. It is a difficult balancing act: The Deans are asked to work with chairs both to meet targets for expenditures as a result of our decline in direct state appropriations and to ensure that students are able to get the courses they need so as to complete their education in a timely fashion. This is not an easy task, and I know that it makes for difficult conversations and difficult choices.

As faculty, you are also in the unenviable position of being without a contract. While we are all subject to the inactivity on this front, the cost is clearly being borne by the faculty. What we can do, we will do, and so we did continue the sabbatical process this year, and once again we have awarded sabbaticals for the 2016-17 year. We have continued to support ART, and the process is underway for awards for the 2016-17 academic year. Non-salary budgets across the university were decreased to help address the decline in direct state appropriations, but we did not decrease support for faculty travel and research. None of this makes up for the absence of a contract, but these are the ways the university can and will continue to support faculty.

I know that at times, especially when there is so much emphasis on what is not working with higher education in the media and from politicians, and when much of the emphasis in my messaging is about the need to do better with student success, it may feel as if we are not succeeding with much of anything. That's just not the case. At William Paterson we continue to produce excellent graduates. We continue to have dynamic classes, with students learning, growing and succeeding. Our students are engaged in research; they perform and create; they engage with the community and help others learn and grow. They do succeed. And they do so as a direct result of the work of faculty. People outside the University don't always see or understand all that faculty do for students, both inside and outside the classroom, and so it becomes easy to question the value of what faculty do.

But I know, and so do the Deans and Associate Deans, the Associate Provosts---and of course the President. We all know that we face challenges in terms of enrollments and retention, and that we are tasked with continuing to do our best with fewer resources. The value and hard work of faculty may not always be understood by the public in general, and individual faculty may not get that "thank you" from students until years after a student leaves—but your work is appreciated. My messages and pleas about improving student success and updating curriculum are not intended to come across as asking for "more, more, more" without acknowledging all the work that is being done. I am grateful for the work you do day in and day out with our students.

As we start the semester, I want to lay out some concepts and ideas for all of us to consider. We have a good university, with committed and excellent faculty and staff. However, in the last few years, we have, as a university, been somewhat at a standstill in some significant measures—enrollment, retention, program growth, development and redesign. There has been a lot of talk and discussion about how we can move back into a growth pattern, and that is what I want to write about here.

Student Success Activities

We have made some progress in some of our goals with student success. Our four-year graduation rate continues to improve, though we still have more to do. Our six-year graduation rate had been improving as well, but this past year saw a decline in that rate. Our retention rate has not shown a steady improvement, as we continue with a see-saw pattern—up for a year and then back down the next. We need to do more to build a steady growth pattern with retention. We have a number of support programs for our students, but that alone is not promoting steady growth in student success. And while we have implemented many of the recommendations about advising, there is still significant work needed to better support our students in this important area.

Last year and again this year we started a Linked Courses activity—packaging a number of first year students in shared courses so that students would take at least two courses with the same students.

Linked Courses allow students to take classes with familiar faces, and allow and encourage students to make connections with each other. We will continue this program for 2016-17, and see what we can do to enhance these connections for our students.

Curricular Innovation

While specific academic programs have seen growth, our enrollments overall at the university have been flat at best these past few years, while our sister institutions have grown. The colleges and universities in New Jersey are enhancing their academic and student support programs to be more inviting and attractive to new students, and we must do the same.

We have excellent academic programs here—some of our programs have national and even international rankings and reputations, and even those programs that do not have these rankings and reputations are strong—but we need to look carefully and thoughtfully at our existing academic programs. We need to consider how we can enhance current programs, and how we can develop new programs that are in alignment with our strategic plan, the needs and interests of our students, and the needs of the people and industries that hire our graduates.

Our disciplines change. The jobs and careers for which we prepare our students change. We need to be aware of these changes and work to redesign and develop programs that address these changes. Change is difficult, and can be frightening at times—but change is inevitable, whether through action or reaction.

With the hiring of our new Associate Provost for Curriculum and International Education, Dr. Jonathan Lincoln, we are ready to plan for these changes, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Our strategic plan provides a grounding for academic program review, redesign and development, and I have asked Associate Provost Lincoln to prepare a specific call for academic program review, redesign and development.

This means looking at our current programs to make sure they are in alignment with disciplinary changes and career changes. Curricular redesign and development is not just about adding on to what we have always done; it is also about looking carefully at whether we should continue doing what we have always done. We will not grow by just doing more; we can't—you are already as busy as can be and are working as hard as you can. We will grow by understanding the changes in our fields and disciplines, and the changes in what business, industry and advanced education are asking from us.

Let's be clear—this is not about closing down programs, but it could very well be about changing some of what we do: the courses we offer, and the degrees we maintain. We need to be leaders in academic development; we do not want to react after the fact to changes in our world and our disciplines.

As part of my job, I see all the new programs being proposed and being developed by the other four year colleges and universities in New Jersey, as well as the new 2-year degrees being developed at the county colleges. I see these new programs and I see that we have not been as active in development and redesign as our sister (and competitor) institutions. We do compete for students, and in order to be competitive, we need to be active in the development of new programs to recruit, retain and graduate students who are prepared for the changing world.

We know that academic disciplines are changing (they have always been changing) and we know that the skills, abilities and knowledge that our students need to succeed after graduation are also changing.

We will not change just for change's sake, but we do need to continue to review and redevelop what we do.

This important task at the undergraduate level is just as important at the graduate level. Graduate education is an essential element of who we are at William Paterson. We have developed and implemented two doctoral programs, and we continue to develop graduate programs at the master's level as well as evolve our existing offerings to meet changing needs. Given the high resource needs of graduate education, it is vital that our graduate programs are both strong academically and also effective in terms of how we use our resources.

These changes are important for the future of our university in terms of overall student enrollment. As high school populations decline, and as the number of students seeking an undergraduate degree also declines, we will need to grow our graduate education programs.

As we think about and plan for redesign and development at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, I also know that, from the Office of the Provost and from the Deans, we need to provide the support needed for this work. Faculty are the experts in their subject and know what is needed academically. The Office of the Provost can assist with concurrent needs to analyze employment trends, review job outlook data, and develop a recruitment and marketing plan. Faculty build the curriculum, but we can help provide data.

Mission and Vision – Who Are We?

The final issue I want to explore in this message is a little more general, but, I think, just as important. As we talk about student success and as we think about our curriculum and our academic programs, one of the questions that sits behind these issues is this: Who are we? Or perhaps a better phrasing: Who do we want to be?

Now, this may seem a little strange, asking this question. After all, we have a mission, vision and value statement (see it at <http://www.wpunj.edu/university/mission.dot>). We have a strategic plan (found at <http://www.wpunj.edu/university/strategic-planning.dot>) and we have been around for 160 years—of course we know who we are.

But at the same time, I don't think it is a strange question—I think it is an important question to continue to ask.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84>), as of 2012, there were 4,706 post-secondary degree-granting institutions in the United States, and of that number, 2,968 were four-year institutions. In New Jersey, as documented at http://www.nj.gov/highereducation/colleges/schools_sector.shtml, there are 78 post-secondary degree granting institutions, including three public research universities, eight state colleges and universities (our grouping), 19 county colleges, and 15 private four-year institutions.

Students in New Jersey have many options for post-secondary education, and as highlighted recently in an article in *Inside Higher Education*, New Jersey is second only to California in the number of students who leave the state for post-secondary education (<http://highereddatastories.blogspot.com/2016/01/freshman-migration-2014.html>). So students in New Jersey have 78 options in the state for post-secondary education, and a significant number of students leave the state, where they will have access to another 4000 plus institutions.

As we continue our on-going discussion about who we are, where we are going, and how we are positioning ourselves, I ask you to please take a look at our mission, vision and value statement—and acquaint yourself with the Strategic Plan. After all, we are in the midst of preparing our mid-cycle Program Review Report for our regional accreditor Middle States, and like all accrediting bodies, the main question they ask is: Are we acting to support our mission?

I think about this question a lot—that’s part of my job. The President thinks about this even more—that’s a great deal of her job. When I think about this question, and when I look at our mission, vision and value statement, and consider our strategic plan, I get at least a start of an answer.

Who are we? Well, we are not a public research university. We are not a small liberal arts college. We are not a massive multiversity with 1500 student lecture halls. We are not a “country club” university with multi-million dollar amenities.

We are a public regional comprehensive university—here to serve the needs of the students and the citizens of New Jersey. We are a comprehensive university—we offer multiple degree programs, a general education component, programs that are professional and tied to industry standards, and programs that are more broadly based in a traditional liberal arts model.

Our faculty are strong teachers, conduct and disseminate significant research, scholarship and creative work, and engage deeply in service.

Our students reflect and will continue to reflect the growing diversity, strengths and challenges of the region we serve. The number of first generation college students will remain high, and the number of students who speak English as a second language will also remain high. Almost 50% of our new first-time students enter the university needing at least one developmental course, but 75% of them complete that requirement in the summer before starting classes in the fall. A great number of our students are and will continue to be students with little personal or family experience with higher education and no one at home to help them to learn how to learn or how to navigate the often byzantine structure that is higher education.

Our students will continue to be a population that needs and deserves a great education, will challenge us inside and outside the classroom, and will require financial support, academic support and other student support as they learn what it means to be a college student.

To me, that is who we are—a university that serves students who know they want to better their lives but who need support and assistance in figuring out how to get the education they need.

Welcome to spring 2016. I look forward to discussion about these issues and working together to continue moving the university forward.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized first name followed by a long horizontal line.