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Background

The University of North Carolina at Pembroke is a regional, comprehensive university which prides itself on academic excellence. With a 125-year history that is as rich as it is unique, the university is older than most other public institutions of similar size. The University's eight name changes are suggestive of the evolution of its academic scope and mission over the years. From its beginnings as an institution devoted exclusively to training American Indian teachers, UNCP has blossomed into a dynamic institution with a wide range of degree programs and a diverse student body.

In the past decade, the most notable development has been the explosive growth in the size of the institution. Student enrollment almost doubled between 2001 and 2010, and similar growth occurred in the faculty ranks and in campus facilities. But the rapid growth of the past decade has recently leveled off, and most stakeholders do not expect nor desire for the University to continue to grow at the same rate. Instead, there is a collective belief that the focus should turn from quantity to quality. This new orientation will present challenges as members of the UNCP community attempt to translate this desire for enhanced quality into specific and tangible strategies in areas such as student development, faculty development, and academic programs.

Student Development

Lessons Learned

Data gathering across stakeholders yielded the following:

- Academic quality is directly tied to student success.
- To maintain high academic quality, student development plays a pivotal role.
- Ongoing student development is important to respond to changing economic and budgeting structures, changing technologies for higher education, changing labor market requirements for graduates, and more intense competition from peer institutions.
- More efficient, effective, and timely advising needs to be provided to all undergraduate and graduate students.
- Higher academic performance requirements for students need to be established to improve the retention/graduation rate in the long run.
- The raising of admissions standards must be balanced with a continuing commitment to offer access to a university education for the constituencies that UNCP serves.
- Stricter selection procedures are needed for recruitment of new and transfer students.
- High-quality faculty, with both academic and student advising proficiency, can help students achieve academic success at UNCP.
- More academic programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels, a variety of course delivery formats, and more flexible course schedules should be provided to meet student needs.
- More internship opportunities and better career services will enhance our students' competitiveness in their future careers.

Strategic Themes

From the data, the following strategic themes emerged:

- Higher admission standards will lead to the enrollment of new or transferred students who are better prepared academically.
- A strong student advising process can help students to experience a smooth transition into the university environment, to overcome academic challenges, and to make clear degree plans.
- Enrolled students should be held to higher academic standing requirements.

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- UNCP needs to continue to focus on improving student retention/graduation rate.
- Enhanced career services will increase students' competitiveness in the labor market.
- UNCP must continue to provide a sufficient number of high-quality faculty members.
- Small classes enhance both faculty and student engagement in the teaching-learning process.

Short-Term Tasks

- Review, and amend as appropriate, admission criteria used by the Undergraduate Admission Office.
- Restructure the advising process across the campus to provide more efficient services to all students, both undergraduate and graduate.
- Get faculty members more involved in one-to-one student advising by providing required training to faculty members.
- Offer tutoring for those undergraduate students with low GPA.
- Offer routine summer programs (other than new student orientation) to marginal applicants before they can be admitted into UNCP as undergraduates.
- Strengthen support services (including student advising) to help first-year and transfer students make a smooth transition to UNCP.

Long-Term Tasks

- Make more selective admission standards the norm.
- Strengthen the existing system for tracking and assessing the academic performance of enrolled students.
- Establish a good balance between higher academic standing requirements and student retention rates.
- Continuously increase the retention/graduation rate.
- Attract future students by pursuing/maintaining accreditations for academic programs.

Faculty Development

Lessons Learned

Data gathering across stakeholders yielded the following:

- Faculty members have a diversity of interests that can be realized as assets to the University.
- Small class sizes optimize faculty-student engagement and encourage faculty to be creative.
- Faculty talents and expertise have not been used consistently in vision planning and policy implementation.
- Low morale among faculty members prevents them from focusing energy toward creative teaching and reduces their inclination to take risks, either because of fear of ramifications of such actions or apathy towards the current budget situation.
- Faculty and students want to engage with campus diversity in meaningful ways.
- UNCP needs to attract qualified faculty interested in investing in the University over the long term.
- Faculty advising must be supported and rewarded.
- Communication/collegiality/camaraderie between junior and senior faculty needs to be increased.

Strategic Themes

From the data, the following strategic themes emerged:

- Faculty input should be solicited and valued, and it should be used in meaningful ways.

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- Faculty should be encouraged to be creative in their teaching.
- Faculty engagement in academic areas outside their individual classrooms should be encouraged.
- The University should optimize faculty talent by supporting faculty- and student-initiated outreach activities.
- The University should commit to high-quality, meaningful faculty development program(s).
- UNCP should recruit faculty who have an interest in and an understanding of the positive aspects of teaching at a regional university.

Short-Term Tasks

- Maintain small class sizes.
- Provide adequate resources to strengthen the faculty development program at UNCP.
- Revive the faculty mentor program.
- Strengthen the student advising process by providing faculty with appropriate training and support and by making advising a more important element in the faculty evaluation model.
- Increase faculty knowledge of and involvement in the Center for Academic Excellence and other student support services.
- Explore ways to increase incentives for faculty to teach Freshman Seminar.
- Provide appropriate mechanisms through which faculty input can be solicited, analyzed, and utilized.

Long-Term Tasks

- Create a faculty mentor program that will become a valued tradition at UNCP.
- Create a campus culture that attracts qualified, invested faculty.

Academic Programs

Lessons Learned

Data gathering across stakeholders yielded the following:

- Severe budget reductions in recent years have required every academic department and every support unit on campus to do more with less.
- This significant belt tightening has resulted in fewer faculty members to teach courses and fewer course sections being offered.
- A strong academic advising process is critical to assist students in navigating through their programs of study in a timely manner so that they do not experience unnecessary delays because of lack of relevant information (e.g., applicable academic policies; recent changes to programs of study; the sequence of course offerings in future semesters/terms).
- Internal University review of academic program offerings is critical for proactive planning (if not done internally, unwelcome mandates may be forthcoming from external sources, such as UNC General Administration).

Strategic Themes

From the data, the following strategic themes emerged:

- Historically, UNCP has provided access to individuals who otherwise may not have the opportunity to pursue a college education; this is a valued part of the culture at the University.
- Accreditation (e.g., SACS, national and/or state professional organizations) is a key element for marketing/promoting the quality of programs offered at UNCP.

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- The mix of undergraduate and graduate programs offered should align with identified educational, economic, and social development needs of the region/state/area/community.
- Academic program quality does matter to stakeholders (e.g., faculty credentials and experience; timely and individualized student advising; internships and field experiences; opportunities for faculty and students to conduct research).
- Rigor and high standards are expected in both undergraduate and graduate programs.

Short-Term Tasks

- Complete the current program review process by the Provost's Task Force and share results of this program review process with appropriate internal and external stakeholders.
- Obtain "buy-in" from broader University community on decisions made concerning the establishment of new programs and the continuation, consolidation, and/or elimination of existing programs.
- Refine the curriculum review process that falls under the purview of faculty governance.
- Refine the planning process(es) by which academic departments decide which courses to offer, in what format, and when, so that students are not unnecessarily delayed in completion of their degree programs.
- Strengthen the academic advising process to ensure that all faculty members understand and can communicate pertinent information clearly to the students that they advise and/or teach (e.g., University/department/program academic policies; requirements of specific programs of study; recent curriculum changes and how those impact student progression through their programs; availability of student support services relevant to particular students' needs).
- Create a meaningful and efficient quality review process for online programs and courses.

Long-Term Tasks

- Establish a process and timeframe for periodic quality review of all undergraduate and graduate academic programs that is aligned with relevant accreditation reviews, as applicable.
- Strengthen the process for marketing/promoting UNCP's academic programs, including both undergraduate and graduate programs.
- Realize the potential to make high-quality graduate education a hallmark of UNCP.

Conclusion

It is clear that academic quality is the dominant theme in the area of academics and size. One recurring idea is that of regional engagement. Whether framed by stakeholders as the need to "meet the demands of the region" or the need to cultivate "university influences on local areas," there is an expressed belief that UNCP needs to continue and expand efforts to improve the quality of life for citizens across southeastern North Carolina. The university's unique ties to the Lumbee Nation loom large in this discussion, and UNCP must partner with the Tribe to address issues of local concern such as health care, housing, and education.

This regional outreach effort need not exist as a separate current alongside the theme of academic quality. Instead, the two should serve as mutually reinforcing imperatives. Any expansion of UNCP's portfolio of academic offerings should serve the twin goals of quality and regional engagement. Moreover, a more focused approach to community engagement will create new opportunities for faculty and student research. These synergies will benefit the campus community, strengthen ties with local leaders, and underscore UNCP's role as the major force for economic and social development in the region.