

Notes for MSU Extended Cabinet Remarks - November 24, 2008
Dr. Gary Peer

Introductory Remarks: Let me first express my thanks to President Davenport and Provost Olson for inviting me to your campus this fall to provide a third party perspective on MSU's pursuit of its third strategic goal, the establishment of an "administrative structure and financial framework sufficient to provide quality distance education programs" to Minnesota citizens. As a recently retired provost, having completed 40 years in both private and public higher education first as a faculty member 13 years and an administrator for the past 27, I have been responsible both directly and indirectly for an important number of distance education initiatives, including the opening of Tarleton State University's new off-campus center in Fort Worth, Texas in 2006, an effort strikingly similar to your new site at 7700 France. Like your twin cities, the Fort Worth-Dallas metroplex is one of the nation's largest and fastest growing metropolitan areas, 70 miles northwest of Tarleton's main campus in Stephenville, Texas, a city of 20,000. Tarleton is one of ten four year universities in the Texas A&M University System, and with approximately 10,000 students, the A&M System's second largest campus, just 38,000 students behind the flagship school, Texas A&M University, College Station!

In any event, my purpose is to learn as much as I can about MSU's efforts with the distance education initiative in the short time (90 days) I will be with you, and offer Provost Olson my observations and recommendations for his and the larger university's further consideration as he so wishes. As one who has hired a number of consultants over the years for numerous purposes, and found the results "mixed" (!!), I trust I am sufficiently sensitive to the limitations of the outside opinions of interlopers such as me, to forward those observations and recommendations to Scott with appropriate humility. The challenge in that regard, and this is something you who may be approaching retirement will find relevant, there is a kind of inherent license to speak one's mind as a retiree that I only wished for as a provost!! Let's just say I have learned in this first year of retirement what Twain may have been trying to tell us when noting he was born modest, but it wore off!

That same Mark Twain also reminds us there is no worse death than to be talked to death, so in an effort to be concise, I have placed these remarks in written form and will provide Scott a copy for subsequent use as he wishes. Let me turn then, to a rather straightforward listing of selected observations to date, and upon completing the list, defer to the President and Scott on how they wish to proceed with questions or comments you may have when I am finished. Again, though, let me again thank President Davenport and Dr. Olson for inviting me to Minnesota, and also express my thanks to all of you for the numerous kindnesses I've been shown the past few weeks. Here then, is my list, in no particular order of priority.

1. Strategic Importance of Distance Ed Goal

Not to patronize but to recognize, allow me to first reinforce the University's selection of this goal as a strategic priority. Like many regional comprehensive universities located in rural areas, you confront certain demographic and economic realities that are creating important declines in high school graduates totally and high school graduates who can afford to leave their homes to attend a residential university. Consequently, there is increasing competition for new freshmen throughout both public and private higher ed. Left unattended, declines in the pool of entering residential frosh erode institutional capacity to sustain current faculty, staff numbers and lead to various levels of RIF'ing and institutional decline.

However, other demographic and economic forces are creating significant new student markets in higher education for those institutions willing to adjust their program delivery strategies accordingly. Among those realities are a predominantly adult student population who place access and convenience ahead of campus climate, student body characteristics or even academic reputation when making their post-secondary education choices. Consisting largely of working, place bound adults who for both practical and economic reasons, cannot realistically make a physical move to residential campuses in outlying areas to pursue their educational objectives, this group is one of the largest pools of prospective new students higher education now confronts. Private higher education, by both nature and need more market sensitive than the public sector, has moved into this "market" aggressively, and will continue as their successes multiply, **which they are**.

While it would be much easier as a public university to remain on the sidelines and concede these prospective new students to the private sector, we do so at our own peril, both financially and philosophically. Financially, if public universities do not strategically manage the changing enrollment trends away from high school graduates and toward place bound working adults, we place our campus resource infrastructures, both material and human, at risk. Philosophically, public universities have a certain civic responsibility to meet the higher education needs of their respective states, and the place bound working adult is one of the most rapidly growing of these needs. Because one can already see different levels of engagement with this new market among public universities, it is appropriate to speculate on the effects of these differences on the overall health, vitality of public universities in the next five, ten, twenty years. From this observer's perspective, those public universities who seriously and significantly manage this shift in the new student market by a combination of "outreach" strategies, including the delivery of academic programs at a distance, will be much stronger for it, both financially and philosophically, well into the future.

Twain also once noted every fool in town was on his side on a particular issue, and that was a big enough majority in any town, so I will go no further than he, in making the preceding claim. In sum, I think MSU is wise in pursuing this strategic initiative.

2. The “Values” Clash.

The delivery of academic courses, programs to a predominantly part-time, working adult population, in settings as varied as corporate classrooms, high school classrooms, the internet, community colleges and leased classroom spaces in corporate office buildings violates any number of our historic assumptions about higher education. You as academic leaders, must arrive at your own sufficient resolution of these differences to be a credible supporter, indeed a leader, of distance education initiatives. If you’ve not yet done that, I encourage you to begin, perhaps first by reading the book, “No Significant Differences.....”, followed by several official policy statements from regional accrediting bodies regarding best practices in distance education. You must first become absolutely convinced that significant student learning can occur in places and settings other than the traditional university classroom on traditional university campuses such as this one, and secondly, that you as deans, vice presidents, presidents, and academic leaders of this university, have definite quality expectations of what is required of the university, the faculty and the students engaged in distance learning endeavors.

3. On-line Instruction

Accentuating the previous point, what some predicted as few as ten years ago would be merely a passing fad in education, the delivery of courses, programs on-line, not only shows no signs of slowing down; if anything, it continues to grow by leaps and bounds, and not just in distance education, but in the delivery of courses, programs on campus as well. If you’re not yet aware of the Course Redesign Project headed by Dr. Carol Twigg and the Pew Foundation, I urge you to set aside a half day with Scott’s help and become thoroughly familiar with it as deans and vp’s. With data now from more than 30 widely different kinds of universities participating in the project around the country, Twigg and colleagues are demonstrating how on-line instruction can (a) increase learning, (b) reduce instructional cost, and (c) increase campus efficiencies, particularly space utilization. If you look carefully into this project, you will gain even greater appreciation for the importance of best practices in distance education, on-line instruction, and the power of evidence vs. opinion in assessing quality in education. Indeed, it seems perhaps all of us were born modest, but it wore off!! Projects like Course Redesign offer important lessons in humility.

4. 7700 France Avenue South

By taking the leap of faith inherent in any five year lease of off-campus instructional space, MSU has a leg-up on other public universities, a beach head if you will, which should serve the university well as a base of operations for pursuing a variety of new students in the place bound working adult market in the twin cities, particularly but not exclusively in the southern, western and southwestern portions of the metroplex. As you ramp up to deliver a AACSB accredited MBA there this spring, you will gain important

information regarding the amount of advance promotion, advertising, student recruitment necessary to establish viable cohorts of incoming students. However, the MBA has long been a staple of off-campus, distance education initiatives throughout the nation, some arguing the subscription levels to it should not be generalized to other programs. While there is truth in that argument, there are nonetheless lessons to be learned this spring such as how students became aware of the program? Key factors in their choice of MSU's MBA vs. any of several others in the metroplex? Level and kinds of student support needed for a new cohort of Master's Degree students (advising, library, financial aid) and so forth. I urge you to stay closely abreast of these matters and to share what is learned widely among you.

A matter of particular interest (and intrigue) in off-campus instructional settings embedded within larger structures (7700 France) is the strategic use of signage for both program promotion purposes and internal building guidance for foot traffic within the structure. I hope you can acquire more and better signage both outside and within 7700 France for these purposes. Closely related, I recommend aggressive and wide use of web site addresses first, phone numbers second and mailing addresses third, in promotional materials, external building, street or parking lot flags and billboards, as well as bus wraps, radio/tv spots, etc. Even more important is the need to maximize promotional outreach to residential and commercial business/industrial addresses in the immediate 7700 France "region".

A combination of factors lead place bound working adults to strongly prefer access and convenience in their choice of educational options. These preferences account for the proliferation of on-line programs, often at seemingly prohibitive costs I might add (!), and a factor I want to stress regarding 7700 France, - driving time to/from work or home to attend class. You will want to saturate the immediate 7700 France area with residential and business mailings and advertisements of MSU's presence in the area , and its proximity to them. PBWA's often express an "ideal" preference for F2F, classroom instruction vs. on-line, provided it is accessible and convenient to their personal circumstances at work and at home. 7700 France has inordinate potential in this regard for a significant number of PBWA's seeking master's degrees like the MBA, or baccalaureate degree completion programs such as the new program you are hoping to roll out this spring. I urge you to promote both aggressively, intensively and intelligently, i.e.- within a few (15-20 ??) miles of 7700 France.

To encourage you in these efforts, my former institution, after opening a similar site in Fort Worth two and a half years ago, with barely 200 students, enrolled over 700 students at that site this fall, expects that number to grow to 900 this spring, and has recently signed a second lease in the corporate structure for an additional full floor of space. When arguing for the initiative four, five years ago, I used the figure 2,000 additional students by 2012 as my personal projection, and I stand by that projection today. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, a branch campus of Northeastern Oklahoma State University in Tahlequah now enrolls over 2,500 students in three buildings, comprised of

approximately one-half master's degrees and one-half baccalaureate degree completion students. The main campus in Tahlequah has only 6,000 students, so the Tulsa (Broken Arrow) site is approaching enrollments half the size of the main campus and Tulsa is scarcely one-third (perhaps one-fourth) as large as the twin cities metropolitan area.

5. Pricing Distance Education

I will be both brief and direct on this item. It costs more to deliver instruction off-campus than on. Because the off-campus student market is highly competitive, giving students multiple options, viable distance education programs must continually reinvest in the quality, accessibility, convenience features of their program to remain competitive. As opposed as many of us in the academic community are to the treatment of education as a "business", successful distance education programs recognize the business context reality in which they exist, and accommodate it, not at the expense of traditional academic values, but to protect those values. Ex: "Smart Classrooms" on campus are often replicated in off-campus, distance education programs in order to insure comparable quality of instructional environments. Similarly, use of full-time, senior faculty is more expensive than adjuncts, but both accreditation requirements and program integrity issues require off-campus programs to use as many regular faculty as possible.

In addition, faculty travel costs, administrative staffing and overhead costs at the off-campus sites, lease/purchase costs of instructional space and numerous other operational costs of doing business off campus require higher tuition/fees than on-campus students pay. If you do not establish a differential tuition/fee structure for distance education, it will eventually drain your base campus resources. Most importantly, **COST, per se, is not the principal factor in the PBWA's selection of educational programs.** The key factors are accessibility and convenience. As "adult" consumers, they are seeking best value for their dollar, and that is not determined solely or even primarily by tuition/fees alone.

As an example, we now have five totally on-line master's degree programs at my former institution. Students in those programs pay \$350 per 3 credit hour course, **in addition to regular on-campus graduate tuition**, a total of \$3,500 more per student, per master's degree earned. Students, both undergraduate and graduate, who voluntarily take an on-line course at that same institution (as opposed to involuntarily, at the program's request) pay an additional \$40 per credit hour (\$120 per course) for the option of taking the course on-line. In our new Fort Worth site, all students, graduate and undergraduate, pay an additional \$28 per credit hour, which we call simply, our "off-campus" program fee. You should not adopt these same numbers, but you should in my strong opinion, set about pricing your off-campus programs above on-campus programs for obvious reasons; you are spending more to deliver these programs and can't afford to ignore that forever without undermining the financial base of both distance ed and on-campus instruction..

6. Two plus Two Programs in Metro 2 yr. Schools

In visiting presidents and provosts at most of the ten 2 yr schools in the metro region, I was consistently given three messages; (a) Metropolitan State University does not have the capacity or the trust to meet anything remotely approaching all of the 2 yr schools' needs or interests in partnerships with the four year sector. (b) Born of deep and enduring local community interests/needs, (as were the vast majority of American community colleges), these schools have no confidence in the majority of their students who have interests in four year degrees "driving very far" (more than 10 miles was mentioned frequently) to access a four year degree program, and (c) lack of a critical mass of prospective four year students in any one discipline is the norm, leading to considerable interest in an interdisciplinary, or "general liberal arts" type of baccalaureate degree completion program AND "2 + 2" programs physically housed on one campus but "inviting" or "open" to students from other 2 yr schools as well.

I therefore encourage MSU to encourage collaborative, cooperative efforts with a primary two year school willing to provide instructional space for a 2 + 2 program, but also willing to invite, include students from other 2 yr schools. This is particularly true for programs in STEM disciplines in science, technology engineering and math, where several of the 2 yr schools have rather extensive laboratory and equipment resources, but it is also a viable strategy beyond those disciplines as well. Beyond Normandale CC and one or two other two year schools on the western, southwestern side of the metro area, two year schools are skeptical that many of their students will drive to 7700 France to complete a baccalaureate degree.

7. MnSCU and the Metro Alliance Challenge

While there is clearly an awareness in MsSCU of the need for expanded delivery of baccalaureate and master's degree programs in the metro area, there are tensions within the system regarding Metro State's role vs. "other" MnSCU 4 yr schools' role. These tensions arise in part from Metro's legislative "mission", their record to date in pursuing that mission, and some of the contemporary "realities" I've touched upon in the above remarks, - particularly, the primacy of convenience/access in the PBWA market, and one I've not mentioned, Metro's current paucity of academic offerings. They rank at or near the bottom of both undergraduate and graduate degrees offered among MnSCU schools.

In my final report to Provost Olson, I will include a recommendation for his consideration, along with the President and relevant others, that could be passed on to MsSCU as submitted or modified, to address this issue. My concern is that, if the "system" does not come to grips with this issue rather quickly (3-6 months), the window of opportunity to seize a true leadership role in the Twin Cities will close as a result of private offerings primarily, or possibly, a new initiative U. of M. may decide to capitalize on for purposes of increasing local (and state) support. It is probably best I not elaborate

on this recommendation at this time, for two reasons; it's not finalized yet in my own mind, and both Dr. Olson and President Davenport will need to be comfortable with it before it becomes more widely disseminated. My final report is due to the provost on December 19. It will include this recommendation, and I genuinely hope it proves helpful not only to MnSCU, but of course to MSU as well.

8. Decentralized vs. Centralized Extended Learning Programs

This is the final item in my list and possibly one of the most important, for it deals with the question of administrative structure for delivering academic programs off-campus. The arguments for centralized structures include consistency of institutional messages and communications, both externally to prospective and existing students as well as internally, between and among university offices such as the library and the academic program, the office of admissions/records and the academic program, business office, registrar, public affairs and so on. Regional accrediting bodies are also a factor. Since they do not accredit individual programs, their standards, guidelines, etc., tend to favor a centralized structure for extended learning. Specialized, program accreditation entities, however, accredit programs vs. institutions, and are more likely to encourage a decentralized structure. Both have strengths and weaknesses.

At the time these remarks were prepared, I was just beginning to probe into this matter at MSU, and not prepared to say too much about it. Today, I'm only slightly ahead of that point, and will say only that it is important that Dean Lewitsky sit down with each dean who is delivering courses off campus, particularly those who are delivering degree **programs** off campus, and arrive at mutual understandings, dean to dean, of mutual expectations, needs and responsibilities. At risk of confusing you vs. helping you, the phrase "mutual understandings" (vs. agreements) is intentional. It is quite possible for any given **program** that the CEL Dean and the relevant college dean, will have to agree to disagree regarding the expectations, needs and responsibilities of each. However, they must arrive, disagreements and all, at a mutual "understanding" of these matters that both can support for the time being.

I consider this an important topic for any campus undertaking as one of their strategic goals/priorities, something as complex as distance education and will be saying more about it in my final report to the provost.

Closing

I hope these remarks give you a sense of some of the more substantive matters I've observed to date and at least my preliminary, if not necessarily, my final thoughts about them. In any case, my inherent modesty remains intact and has not fully worn off!

Thank you