



Feedback from website comment box

I was grateful for the opportunity to attend the meeting this morning with the strategic planning updates. I appreciate the enormity and complexity of the task that is being undertaken. I am fairly new to WOU and have two daughters that began here as freshman this year. I wanted to take an opportunity to share a bit about their experience as freshman. This may or may not be representative of other students, but I thought it might offer some insight to one segment of the student population. Both of my daughters are living at home rather than in the dorms for financial reasons. They would have loved to live on campus, but even with my tuition discount for one, did not receive enough financial aid to cover the costs of housing/dining. They both looked forward all summer to the week of new student orientation in order to meet some other students. Unfortunately, they found that the New Student Orientation week did very little to include freshman living at home in a meaningful way. They were grouped with "non traditional" students a number of times which made them isolated from the other freshman. It may seem like a small thing, but it got their school year off to a challenging start because, as they said, they felt like "outsiders." They felt that much of what happened that week was based on living in the dorms. Given the high cost of college, I would imagine that there are a number of students who are attending WOU and living at home in order to offset the cost. I just want to encourage those who work with students not to overlook this group and not sweep them in with "non traditional" students as an after thought. What can be done to engage local kids to attend WOU while living at home?

I was a little frustrated at the parent orientation to be told, humorously but very forcefully, that parents are meant to "stay out of it" as it pertained to assisting students with financial aid, registration or anything else. I do understand the need for students to have privacy as well as develop the skills to negotiate these systems. However, hearing the phrases "back off" and "stay out of it" multiple times during the orientation really were kind of offensive. I would be very open to hearing how I can support my students as they enter this world. I hope that WOU can be open to knowing that every beginning student has different needs and abilities in this respect and in some cases a parent's assistance and advocacy is both necessary and appropriate. Please do not lose sight of what an enormous transition this is for everyone involved. Please remember as well that, in many cases, it is the parents that are supporting the student's education in a variety of ways and wish to be treated with respect. We share the goal of our students having a transformative educational experience here. We also share our experiences with other prospective students and parents.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to share this. They may seem like trivial points of concern. I hope that there are efforts to engage all students as well as parents to share their experiences here at WOU. Those initial encounters, positive or negative, create a very long lasting impression.

Thank you for allowing the WOU community to contribute thoughts to the Strategic Planning effort. Before I begin, I'll say a few words about my background in this area.



Prior to coming to WOU, I worked in the technology industry for almost 20 years, and I was involved in numerous strategic planning efforts in various capacities. On some of these we also partnered with well-regarding consulting firms, and on one I worked extensively with McKinsey, often considered the world's premier business consulting firm. Whether or not McKinsey actually deserves that accolade, I think I can say that I have some significant experience in this area. In a number of these strategic planning efforts, we started out by articulating an aspirational vision for our organization. Here is my aspirational vision for WOU; it was triggered by watching the excellent PBS documentary "Declining By Degrees." "Declining by Degrees" includes a profile of Adriana Villalba, a community college student in Denver. Based on this profile, Adriana is an excellent student, and as a high school senior she had been accepted by New York University (NYU), a very well-regarded private school. Adriana was thrilled to be accepted by NYU, but later reluctantly decided that she could not go there because the \$40,000 per year tuition would place unreasonable demands on her parents. (The documentary describes her as coming from a middle-class family.) Although Adriana isn't asked about her educational plans after community college, I think it's reasonable to assume that she might well end up at a regional university much like WOU. For this reason, I believe I can use Adriana to illustrate my vision for WOU.

My vision is that WOU will become a university where students like Adriana can get a truly great and highly affordable college education. And when I say "truly great," I really mean it. My vision is that Adriana could attend WOU and afterwards go as far as her ability would take her. That might mean, for example, going on to get an advanced degree in law at Yale, in English at Berkeley, in Biology at MIT, in Sociology at Princeton, or in Business at Stanford. (These are all top-ranked schools in these fields.)

Another way to put it is that in my vision, Adriana's future options would not be limited by the fact that she received her B.A. from WOU instead of NYU. In my vision, she would have very similar opportunities as those students whose parents were able to write out \$40,000+ tuition checks each year for an undergraduate education at a school like NYU. (I am not saying that her undergraduate education at WOU would be just as good as the one she might get at NYU, but I am saying that it would definitely be in the ballpark.)

In the video, Adriana talks of her disappointment at being unable to attend NYU, noting at one point that NYU is an "awesome school." In the last part of my imagined vision, 30 years after graduating from WOU, Adriana says "At the time, I believed that NYU was an awesome school, and that in declining to attend NYU, I was missing out on a huge opportunity. But I found, to my surprise and my delight that WOU was also an awesome school, and WOU ended up fully supporting my educational and career aspirations."

That's my vision for WOU.

When I worked on strategic planning projects in the past, the aspirational vision served



to motivate and energize us. Then, we turned to “what would it take to get there,” which always involved some sort of SWOT analysis. I will most of my comments on the SPC’s SWOT elsewhere, but I’d like to make two major points here.* This may seem obvious, but I think both a current strength and future opportunity lies in the area of WOU’s low cost. Every single year I see private colleges raising costs at a higher rate than WOU, and off a much higher base. For this reason, I believe some families who had written off public universities will begin to seriously rethink them.

* I think a major weakness of WOU’s is what I’d call the lack of a culture of excellence. (This touches directly on my vision, in the message below, of offering the Adrianas of the world an education that really is almost as good as the one she’d get at NYU.)

I think WOU has many excellent individuals, and definite pockets of excellence. But in terms of my “Ariana vision,” we have a significant ways to go, and a major obstacle in my view is that WOU lacks a deeply-embedded culture of excellence. This includes lacking the attitudes, skills and processes that, for example, an organization like Google or Apple uses to achieve systemic excellence.

In my opinion, one key element of a culture of excellence is the ability to recognize and openly articulate one’s weaknesses, without resorting to euphemisms or other forms of obfuscation. This is the ability of an organization to take a good, hard, honest look at itself in the mirror, and of course that’s inherently hard to do.

I don’t think WOU has ever been very good at this. I think the underlying reasons for this are in a certain sense positive ones; these reasons include a sense of kindness that prefers to focus on the positive, instead of the negative. The WOU community is compassionate and idealistic.

Unfortunately, however, compassion and idealism don’t necessarily lead to effectiveness; if our students leave WOU without the skills they need to be successful, I doubt they’ll thank us 10 years from now just because we were nice to them. For WOU to achieve my aspirational vision, we’ll have to learn to assess ourselves honestly and objectively. We’ll also have to learn to share bad news openly and directly across WOU. The new emphasis on assessment seems to give us a great opportunity to start.

David, Rex: I know get a lot of e-mail, and I don’t plan to send you any more e-mails on SPC topics. I see my aspirational vision based on Adriana and my view that WOU currently lacks a systemic “culture of excellence” as probably the two most important ideas I have to contribute to the SPC’s effort. Any other ideas I have I’ll contribute through other channels.



Thanks for listening.

Below are some thoughts that I hadn't necessarily planned on sharing with the full SPC. However, I was motivated to post these comments to the SPC website by a conversation I had earlier today. I was talking to a parent about her child's recent college decision; her child had applied to WOU, was accepted, and was apparently offered a scholarship of some sort. (Her child had done quite well in high school.)

This parent told me that her child had picked another school over WOU. Since she knows I teach at WOU she was diplomatic, but it seemed clear from her comments that her child had crossed WOU off the list because of the perception that it had a weak academic reputation and would not provide a sufficiently challenging academic experience. These comments link directly to the points made below.

I believe that a major omission in the list of WOU's weaknesses in the SWOT analysis is what I call WOU's weak academic reputation. There are some other things I would add to the SWOT, but I think this particular item, academic reputation, is extremely important, so I will focus on it in this message. I also think the issue of WOU's academic reputation raises some broad strategic issues that WOU has historically failed to confront as directly, clearly, and openly as it needs to. I hope the SPC will address this problem.

What is "academic reputation?" Clearly different people would define the term in different ways, but I would say there seems to be a general consensus in the U.S. about which colleges/universities are "the best," which ones are "the worst," and which ones are in the middle. This is something that I think we are all quite familiar with. I believe we could say that the U.S. News Rankings generally reflect this consensus, with schools like Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Stanford, Amherst, etc. at the top of the list. (In general, the consensus would put community colleges, which of course are not ranked by US News, at the bottom.)

We all know that these rankings are controversial, but even if one believes they are absolute poppycock (and I happen not to believe this), I think it is still indisputable that they matter. As a rule, many parents want to send their kids to a "great college," and high-achieving high school students, in particular, want to go to a college with an excellent reputation. (In fact, many believe there is far too much emphasis on getting into a highly-ranked school, as reflected in Frank Bruni's recent book *Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be*, but I won't get into that issue here.)

A number of years ago, I took a few hours to explore WOU's US News ranking. WOU was placed in the "Regional Universities, West" category, and it was ranked #84 in that category. I believe this placed WOU in a tie for last among schools not relegated to U.S. News's ignominious "Second Tier," but I'm not 100% sure of that. At that time, I did a



back of the envelope calculation, and concluded that if all the various U.S. News college and university categories were combined, WOU's rank would be somewhere between 600 and 700 in the combined US ranking.

At roughly the same time, if memory serves, another magazine had an online article on the "Top 300 Colleges in the U.S.," and WOU was not included in this list of the top 300 schools.

In light of all this, I believe it is a significant oversight that the SWOT analysis does not include in the Weaknesses or Threats categories the perception reflected in the US News ranking, namely that WOU is an academically weak school. (Again, I think perceptions matter, even if they are inaccurate.) I did notice one "reputational" element, namely "Reputation/perception of us as a college for teachers, not everyone," but I didn't see anything about WOU's overall academic reputation.

If we stipulate that WOU has a weak academic reputation, at least in some quarters, then it seems the next question is whether this reputation actually reflects the academic environment at WOU, whether it results from a misperception, or whether the concept of "academic reputation" is perhaps too general.

In articulating my aspirational vision for WOU, I used the example of Adriana Villalba from the documentary film "Declining By Degrees: Higher Education at Risk."

I had intended to include the comment that this film is currently available on YouTube, but I believe I forgot to do so. Anyhow, it's at the following url:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcxDVYo2wH8>. It's also the first result if one does a Google search.

I know the members of the SPC are very busy, but I'd strongly suggest watching at least part of this film. It touches on a large number of issues that I believe are central to a strategic plan for WOU.

In watching the film, I found that seeing key WOU issues as they play out at other schools provided me with increased clarity. From my perspective, this was true with respect to both WOU's areas of strength and of weakness.

The film includes a strong emphasis on access issues.

Hello SPC,

I have three concerns about the strategic plan that was discussed in the Town Hall sessions last week:



1) There is not enough detail included in the current plan to allow much useful feedback and discussion. For example, although it is clear from the plan that we want to promote academic excellence with appropriate class size (strategic initiative II.1.1.1), the plan does not identify appropriate class size, and although we want to have a tenure-track based instruction system (strategic initiative II.2.2.2.), no mention is made of an appropriate "level" of tenure-track versus non-tenure track staffing.

Useful Strategic Plan feedback can only be obtained when the plan is fleshed out with relevant details, and the requisite actions needed to accomplish the desired actions are identified (e.g., "We think an appropriate class size for upper-level undergraduate courses is 20-25 students, so the Department of Business will need to reduce class size by 25-40%", and "We think an appropriate level of staffing is 70% tenure-track and 30% non-tenure-track, so the Department of Business will need to hire 11 new tenure track faculty to reach appropriate staffing levels).

Both the beauty (we want academic excellence and appropriate class size) and the gore (this goal would mean a huge investment in the Business Department) of a strategic plan need to be discussed, in order for the best strategic plan to be produced.

2) There is little (if any) competitive and environmental analysis in the strategic plan. How will the proposed strategic plan allow WOU to more effectively compete with other institutions, and what will be the competitive advantage(s) that will lead to WOU's success?

3) Several topics that would seem to be extremely important to a WOU strategic plan are either completely missing (e.g., WOU's faculty union, Athletics, specific academic programs) or only tangentially addressed (online/hybrid education, State of Oregon "needs")

What will WOU be in 2023? Where are we going? How will we be different in seven years? I haven't heard much about this from the strategic planning reports.

I ask this because our work so far focuses on the important task of clearly articulating our identity – who and what we are. But what will we be going forward?

The strategic plan identifies a number of action items. To what end? Where will these take us? We cannot simply be what we are now in seven years and thrive. The world around us is changing – our students, our market, funding environment, the economy. Ideally we would forecast what the world around us looks like in 5-7 years and proactively position ourselves to succeed in that world.



There's a heuristic about cultural orientations that I picked up from anthropology. It's not perfect but it's sometimes useful.

Cultures differ in their orientation towards: (1) Time, (2) Action, (3) Each other, and (4) Relationship to environment.

- Towards time, cultures may lean towards a focus on the past (e.g., celebration of ancestors, founding stories, tradition), the present (e.g., carpe diem!, impulsiveness) or the future (e.g., delayed gratification, saving, careful planning for the future).
- Towards action, cultures may lean towards (1) being, (2) becoming, or (3) doing.
- Towards each other, cultures may lean towards (1) hierarchical relationships, (2) communitarianism, or (3) individualism.
- Towards relation to environment, cultures may lean towards: (1) fatalism, (2) a sense of harmony with the environment, or (3) a belief in our mastery over the environment.

Often unspoken, these differences provide the framework for what is seen as “real”. At WOU, I have observed a strong orientation towards the past (as opposed to the future). But I have also seen a strong focus on “being” – as people here have often said to me, “keeping our doors open”, surviving – at the expense of becoming or evolving.

So my question about what we will be in 2023 really tries to get us past these cultural frames that seem pervasive – what are we becoming? What does the future look like for us? How will we – through intentional action – get there?

Because that is what I'm guessing the strategic plan pointing us to. But it would help me to hear this more clearly and directly.

Thanks. I really do appreciate all the work you all are doing. These questions come to me in discussions with SPC members, which are edifying!