

**MSU PLANNING AND VISION:
A White Paper for Your Consideration
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Last year I shared with you a definition of strategic planning—what strategic planning is, and what it is not. *“Strategic planning is people acting decisively and roughly in concert to carry out a strategy they have helped devise.”*

To follow up on that, I would like to share with you some of the information we’ve collected in our strategic planning work this past year, what we’ve learned from all of you and other stakeholders. I would also like to offer you this “white” paper describing what I believe are the next steps in developing an effective and powerful strategic plan for Minot State University—the first step of which is the critical need to articulate a specific vision for our future.

Literally, thousands of comments collected from our faculty, staff, and students on campus and from many of our stakeholders off campus were displayed in the Student Union Atrium in October. I hope all of you had a chance to come by and read about our perceived strengths, weaknesses, needed initiatives, our threats, our mission and purposes, and our future in 2013. At that event, our Planning and Budgeting Council collected hundreds of additional comments from faculty, staff, students, and community members. In addition to the careful study of that information, we have also paid close attention to our institutional and regional data, the results of various accountability measures, and our demographics and enrollment patterns. We have looked closely at our students, listened to what they’ve told us, and examined who they are—both traditional and so-called non-traditional students. I would ask you to recall the video shown in August that featured and was created by our students showing what they are expecting from us in the classroom. Those testimonials, incidentally, basically mirror recent research data describing student expectations, interests, abilities, and the like.

Guided by our primary obligation and focus on students, the Planning and Budgeting Council believed it would be useful and informative to find out from students, faculty, and staff what qualities our students of the future, particularly those who graduate in the year of our centennial in 2013 should possess. The electronic survey that was distributed asking each of you to send us your “top” three qualities of our future graduates provided a fascinating and revealing generalized portrait of our future graduates. Thanks to all of you who sent it your suggestions. They were all read and considered carefully.

The Planning and Budgeting Council believed that without a good sense of what the qualities and abilities of our future students, it would be frivolous to attempt to set strategic goals for the future. We have listened to you and have come to understand that the specific vision we set collectively for the university should be focused primarily on what we would like to see in our graduates in the future. It is that focus on our students that contributes to my own faith in our students, our understanding and commitment to their growth through learning, and our recognition of the need for engaged and motivated learning in all of its manifestations, from the curiosity and excitement of study and discovery in the classroom, to the growth accorded through interactions with others, their engagement in the life of a community, and the selfless work toward the common good. That’s why I remain committed to the concepts of faith, growth, and wonder.

The timing of all of this talk about vision, mission and goals, as I have suggested earlier, is convenient and propitious, in that we are beginning our self study for the Higher Learning Commission and their visit in 2008 under the leadership and direction of Dr. Ron Royer. We are furthermore focusing on our centennial in 2013—our first 100 years, and the opportunity to set a clear and powerful new course for our students and for the growth and success of Minot State

University. It is timely because for all of us who care deeply for our students and for Minot State University and its future, we have the increasingly obvious obligation to make sure that we remain competitive, forceful, and responsive.

SOME PROPOSED THOUGHTS FOR A VISION

Before we move on to set goals and objectives, attempt to identify funds to support various tasks, and begin to think in strategic ways about allocating our resources, we need to understand who we are, what our mission is, what are our true purposes are, and what is our vision. Based on what people tell us, we do know at this point that we're not sure what our mission is. Our purposes are clouded—not unexpectedly—in generalities. Our current mission, while nicely crafted, is generic, mission-like, but not particularly informative to us or to people who look at us and wonder who we are. We do not have clear statements that provide us a deep sense of unity, purpose, and cause. We are, as the Carnegie classification tells us, a “comprehensive” master’s 1 institution, which professes to offer a “good education,” as many of the focus-group participants called it. In my view and the view of so many of our focus-group participants and so many of you, being a comprehensive institution that offers a good education is not defining enough, it is not an expression that captures who we are and what we do now or our potential for future growth and development.

I am cognizant of where we've come since 1913, what many people have said about where we should go and become by 2013. Aware of that history, I am ever-more convinced that we now need to arrive at a powerful and intentional vision of how we get there. That vision must, I argue, express in strong standards: 1) high expectations for the qualities and abilities of our graduates, and corresponding high standards we set for their work and engagement; 2) a culture supporting a predominant focus on student success and achievement; and 3) an institution distinguished by a predominant focus on a stewardship of place and civic engagement.

1. High Expectations and Standards for the Qualities of Graduating Students

We received more than 300 responses and nearly one thousand suggested qualities to describe our future graduates in 2013. Our Planning and Budgeting Council examined the lists and combined similar characteristics to determine qualities that describe the potential new graduate of Minot State University. Those identified qualities anticipate that our graduate of 2013 will possess a strong character, characterized by ethical behavior, good judgment, and integrity. Confident and purposeful, the graduate will be learned, erudite, and possess a global knowledge and awareness. Having ability as an independent thinker, the graduate will be known for insightfulness, vision, creativity, curiosity, and resourcefulness. He or she also will be known for a caring and compassionate perspective, known for his/her tolerance differing viewpoints. In addition, he/she will be prepared for the workplace, empowered to succeed, and devoted to the common good.

It is predictable and reassuring to see that knowledge was valued, in that we hoped for learned, erudite and global thinkers. It is also particularly interesting to note that the vast majority of our suggestions revolved around personal qualities and character and around special skills, such as insightfulness, vision, creativity, and tolerance. Our graduate who walks across the stage in 2013 will possess, if we can synthesize the many suggestions, a strong character and commendable cognitive skills and personal qualities.

Using those terms and the comments by our Planning and Budgeting Council, I would propose the following statement to describe the MSU graduate of 2013:

An MSU graduate in 2013 will be of sound character, confident, learned, and insightful; he or she will be visionary, creative, compassionate, tolerant, and engaged actively in the life of the community, and he or she will be prepared well for his/her chosen career and engaged and focused on the common good.

Such a student with those qualities, I'm sure, would be most worthy of Being Seen, and Being Heard with the attention and respect they deserve.

2. A Culture Supporting and Ensuring Student Success and Achievement

In a recent study and report (Student Success in State Colleges and Universities, AASCU, September 2005), twelve state colleges and universities, known for their favorable retention and graduation rates, were studied to determine why they enjoyed such a high level of student success. Teams of evaluators visited those campuses found an interesting irony that “student success at these institutions is more a product of an overarching shared culture than it is a result of a more narrowly-conceived, deliberate ‘retention effort’” (9).

The report noted that while there is a remarkable diversity in this list of campuses, from “large to small, urban to rural, and specialized mission to general purpose,” there are three characteristics in their cultures that are common and distinguishable. Those are: 1) that there is a “pervasive attitude that all students can succeed, reinforced by a wider culture that is not content to rest on past success”; 2) there is “a sense of inclusiveness on the part of all members of the campus community frequently characterized as a ‘family’”; and 3) “there is a strongly held sense of institutional mission that recognized the campus as ‘distinctive’ or special” (9). These campuses were also distinguished by their “pervasive belief that demography is not destiny; all of the students they admit have the potential to graduate, and they should be held to high levels of expectations” (9-10). The study also revealed that academic programs and learning characteristics at these 12 institutions were: intentional, integrated, and collaborative.

The final section of the report discussed what presidents do and can do, and advised that they articulate a collective vision, assess well the current conditions, act strategically, invest in the culture of the institution, and walk the talk.

3. The University Distinguished for its Stewardship of Place

The final component of this vision is not as explicit as the others in the focus group results, although this component does manifest itself in frequent observations about the dynamics of the campus and place, community collaboration, the empowering and limiting characteristics of this region and the state, special cultural characteristics of the city, our demographics, and the obvious qualities of life in our city and region. Collectively, the discrete and repeated images and references to place reveal the omnipresent role our generalized “place” plays in our lives as educators, our work with students, and our responsibilities as stewards of region.

Wendell Berry, who is a well known bio-regionalist, claims that “if you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are.” He further explains: “With a sense of place, your identity is defined—to a significant extent—by the natural features of the place where you live.” Unfortunately, there are many around here in North Dakota who often joke or downplay the value of this place. We are often apologetic, strangely agreeable when one questions or criticizes us for living in North Dakota, or quick to underscore the intensity of the weather. And so on. I ran across a 1997 list of “you must be from North Dakota” characteristics (Tom Isern, “Plains Folk”), which included such things as “you must be from North Dakota if you can call the Capitol Building and the governor answers the phone, or you must be from North Dakota if you get claustrophobic driving through a wooded area. And then, of course, there is one that refers to the

weather: “you must be from North Dakota, if you consider the temperature “OK” down to 10 degrees F, “kinda chilly” from minus-10 to minus-20, “chilly” from minus-20 to 30, and “kinda cold” for more than 30 below.”

At an artist’s opening show in South Dakota, I recall the artist saying that he was devoted to revealing through his art the beauty of this place in the Great Plains. He wanted to counter artistically the simple and uninformed argument that our place and its vast plains is one-dimensional, drab, and boring. He was working to make the place and its beauty a reality and not a generality prone to misunderstanding and oversimplification. In many respects, I think that all of us in higher education and indeed in our state need to do what this artist did, and that is to counter that prevalent sense of what is lacking in this place by revealing what is indeed present, valuable, and distinctive.

Higher education in North Dakota has a monumental role to play, not only for the celebrated and popular and justifiable cause of economic development of the state, but literally for the development and understanding and appreciation of our place in this state. This is much more than simple education in the classic sense of the term; it is much more than merely accumulating knowledge about our world and its place. It’s a subtle but powerful educational distinction between teaching for education’s or knowledge’s sake and learning for the good of our students, their wonder and curiosity, and for the sake of our place and the larger global place.

Recalling again the responses gathered in our focus groups, you’ll recognize some reoccurring themes. If pressed to explain our purpose here at Minot State University, many respondents said that our purpose is to provide a “good education.” If further pressed, they would often mention terms like friendly, affordable, helpful, comfortable size, with a caring and knowledgeable faculty. And when asked to identify our weaknesses and the threats, they regularly pointed to limited resources, limited campus life, restricted and limited services, a lack of a distinction or niche, and declining regional population. Behind the frequent and strong recommendation to market the university is a reoccurring view about our lack of image, and our lack of focus or direction beyond just providing a good education at an affordable price. Infrequent comments specifying distinctive programs are overwhelmed by comments about our attempt to do too much. Calls for image, niche, distinctiveness, and special purpose are repeated often.

After listening to these voices, listening to you and others off campus, studying our history, and remaining particularly attentive to the factors that threaten our funding and our growth, I am convinced that we need to follow the good advice of any good writing instructor, which is to state clearly and specifically one’s purpose. And I suggest to you that our purpose is not to offer a good education at an affordable price in a caring atmosphere. All of our competitors who are growing and advancing continue to raise the bar on service, quality education, and value. We have the option to stay the course, address our list of fixable weaknesses, and hope that students continue to enroll and decide to stay long enough to graduate. Or we can choose to create a new and unified and distinctive vision, one that defines our purpose, raises the bar in our own practices and curriculum, and redefines our own central and notable presence here in northwest North Dakota.

I am convinced that the intellectual development we offer and engage our students in is inextricably tied to our local place, about how well we develop in them an appreciation and a sense of place. Remember Wendell Berry’s statement, “With a sense of place, your identity is defined—to a significant extent—by the natural features of the place where you live.” I believe that we have an obligation to teach students about the place where they live, and to understand the value and richness of our place, to use our economy, our arts, our history, our writing, our politics, our sciences, our environment and the other subjects of our university’s keen interests. We need to instruct them not in the abstract, not in a detached or generalized way, but as it is in our local place, in its reality, and in its real presence. Henry David Thoreau claimed that truth was right under his nose, not somewhere else in far off lands or places. Our obligation to our

youth in North Dakota is to allow them to know the truth of this place, its contrarities, its richness, its beauty, its diversity, its cultural sophistication, and its depth. We have a profound opportunity to show students from elsewhere those truths about our place, too. If we can't help students develop an appreciation, knowledge, and intellectual sense of this place in the Great Plains, in northwestern North Dakota, in Minot, then why should we be surprised and discouraged that some decide to leave?

Much of the curricula and teaching in higher education is necessarily universal, not local. A universal curriculum would allow us at Minot State University to pick up our campus, lock stock and barrel, and move it to Aberdeen, Crookston, Minneapolis, Cambridge, Houston, San Diego, Orlando, New Orleans, Hanover, Omaha, Milwaukee, Chicago, Salina, or anywhere else in the world and basically continue to do what we're doing. I suggest to you that Minot State University's premier and distinctive reason for being, indeed its future opportunity, is this place. Not everyone agrees, though. I've heard some say that our "rural-ness" is delimiting, our way of life simple, our culture lacking richness and variety. Jean Baudrillard claims that: "The local is a shabby thing. There's nothing worse than bringing us back down to our own little corner, our own territory, the radiant promiscuity of the face to face." To the contrary, the local is a wonderful thing, full of variety, culture, geography, history and wonder. It is an immense and rich subject with which to connect our intellectual subjects, and engage our students in the reality and experience of those subjects.

Why should anyone enroll at Minot State University and come to Minot in North Dakota? Simple, the experience will provide an extraordinary connection between academic subjects and the reality of life on the Great Plains. And from that local and close-up study, through service learning, through internships, through field trips, experiential learning, through an intense study of local ecosystems, and through the use of local issues and topics as the focus of study, student perspectives and wonder can and should necessarily grow and flourish. From such close focus comes wonder. With that is an educational philosophy all of us can endorse without compromising our own academic freedoms and perspectives.

The educational progression becomes clear: we extend spatially and intellectually from an intense study and knowledge of our local place, from not only an enhanced knowledge but an enhanced appreciation and sensitivity, to the realization that the world is interconnected and interdependent through our knowledge bases, through our geography, our economics, our literature, our music, our art, our science, and so on. From such an educational focus and study, would come moral and ethical convictions, qualities that develop character, integrity, creativity, and an understanding of our obligation to the common good. With an appreciation, understanding, and devotion to a place and its people, the motivation to think beyond one's self becomes much more pronounced and realizable.

I think it is critical that we define a unity of purpose. What we teach should not be fragmentation, disconnects, and generalized knowledge for knowledge's sake. What we should teach is wonder, excitement, curiosity, real presence, and respect based on the interconnectedness of our world. I'll repeat again William Butler Yeats' comment, that I think is particularly germane here, that education is not filling buckets, but lighting fires.

I am not maintaining that our education should be provincial, but it should start with an intensity focused on place. We do indeed have an obligation to teach our students about our relationship to our larger global place. One of the common but unfair criticisms of people on the Great Plains is our lack of understanding of the larger world, our close-mindedness, our resistance to change, and our ignorance of larger global and national forces. Hiding the outside world and resting on our faith in our local place doesn't do our students or ourselves any good either.

When I taught in South Dakota, I used to poll my students to see how many had ever visited Europe. Seldom, if ever, did anyone raise a hand. For Boston, I received the same lack of response. For Chicago, I'd get two or three, and for Minneapolis, I'd receive a few more. There were usually some who indicated that they had never left the state. Based on that

experience, it became clear to me that we have an undeniable obligation to help students broaden their perspectives, widen their knowledge of the world and its interconnections and interdependency, reduce their propensity for stereotypes and prejudice, and to produce students with character and with the interest and ability to contribute meaningfully to our society, the world, and our environment. In so many ways, the character qualities we seek come from the extent to which we are capable of engaging our students in the reality of local and global subjects.

CONCLUSION

What would this mean for Minot State University? A 2001 AASCU report, titled “Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place,” is particularly informative. It suggested that a primary responsibility of public higher education institutions is to contribute to the common good through what they called public engagement. In the report they outlined what institutions can do to be more directly involved in their communities’ and regions’ welfare. They conclude the report with this observation: “If public engagement is to thrive, campus CEOs must take the first step to challenge their institutions to be stewards of their regions, stewards of place” (35). The outcome from AASCU’s perspective is to build and strengthen local communities and regions through partnerships, faculty and staff involvement in community work, and increased awareness of local needs and problems. For students, the report explains, “working on community and regional issues:

- Provides a more substantial linkage between theory and practice than might otherwise be presented in a traditional setting;
- Helps to keep the curriculum more current and responsive;
- Brings critical thinking/problem solving alive, thus making the classroom experience more interesting;
- Allows for more effective and lasting integration of skills such as leadership that will contribute to ‘competitive advantage’ in the workplace and beyond;
- Brings ethical issues into the classroom;
- Offers a foundation for meaningful discussion about the responsibilities of citizens and the nature of dynamics of a successful community;
- Supports service learning initiatives; and
- Prepares them for a lifetime of informed and participatory citizenship.

I don’t need to go into detail providing examples of the strength of such curriculum and teaching, such as studying geology through field trips, studying literature by reading authors who are examining the human condition through regional life, or getting an in-depth understanding of the development of one’s state or city through the primary and secondary historical records, or understanding the impact of environmental issues through the study of local conflicts and problems. With such curricula and activities, an excitement and engagement in learning and an engagement in the local community and region can result. I strongly believe that through such curriculum and institutional focus, students will develop a strong intellectual sense of and commitment to this place.

Kathleen Norris, the author of Dakota: A Spiritual Geography, recalls a friend’s comment that the “size and gravitational pull” of the prairie actually holds people to the prairie and gives people their sense of the planet. Norris suggests that this sense “allows Dakotans to feel as if they are in the middle of the world rather than, as others would have it in the middle of nowhere” (128). Minot State University must become intentionally engaged in the life and future of this community, region, state, and the Great Plains by exposing students to the concept, or at least confirming their own vague sense that they are indeed in the middle of the world, and to be proud of it.

If they continue their studies with the nagging sense that we live in the middle of nowhere, then why shouldn't they and others be inclined to go to what might appear greener pastures? The knowledge, the understanding, and the appreciation of this place comes from an intelligent sense of place, which for me should be one of the primary and distinguishable and published purpose of Minot State University.

I would ask you again to recall the oft-made focus-group observation that people were not really clear as to what our purpose is, but are appreciative of the "good" education we provide. That's not good enough for me. I think we can create a distinguished reputation for an excellent education that is tied inextricably to the power of this beautiful, complex, and ambiguous place that is worth staying in, returning to, or coming into the country for for the first time. In the end I would hope that we develop and sustain people who are vested in this place and believe in it, that will be cautious not to accept proposals that will in the end destroy it and its quality of life, that defend it intelligently and constructively, and that contribute meaningfully to the public life. Those qualities we identified for our future graduates would be essential for someone who can do just that here in North Dakota and any place else they decide to go.

I can't imagine anything else that would have such a large and important role to play in what we call economic development. As Wendell Berry said in the quote I used earlier, with our institution's sense of place, its identity is defined. I think that works as well for an individual's sense of place and identity as it does for an institution's, such as Minot State University. With what we've learned from you and many others, we can articulate a vision that is empowering and defining. The new vision that I am recommending is focused directly on our high expectations for our students and their engaged learning, a culture created and sustained for the growth, wonder, and success of our students, and an educational commitment to place and its stewardship. From that, I suggest, would come the sound character and intelligence we expect from our students.