

## **Some WSU Problems and Preliminary Thoughts on What Can Be Done Differently to Address the Challenges**

### **Problem: Loss of tenure track research faculty has negatively impacted research capacity, and WSU's reputation, rankings, and enrollment**

A decline in the number of tenure track research active faculty, particularly in STEM disciplines, has negatively impacted many units over the past few years. As one stark example, the School of Molecular Biosciences has 30% fewer tenure track faculty than just a few years ago. Several other research active units have lost similar or larger numbers of tenure track faculty. The reason for this loss involves multiple WSU budget cuts, increasingly high startup costs for new tenure track faculty that have nevertheless not kept pace with packages offered to faculty elsewhere, and decreased priority and support for research. This has resulted in highly productive faculty leaving for other institutions, e.g., CVM alone lost 3 funded tenured research faculty members to the University of Vermont last year. In addition, many faculty members choose to retire because of the lack of research priority and support. Some quality research buildings, such as those in the Rawlins Research Center, are only slightly more than 50% occupied.

The decrease in tenure track research faculty numbers is also a result of shifting of funds from tenure track faculty to career track faculty (teaching faculty) who require little startup and command lower salaries, but who do not substantially support the R1 research-intensive objectives of the University. The lack of tenure track research faculty in turn impacts the overall reputation and ranking of the university which, among other things, has a negative impact on enrollment.

### ***What should be done differently to address this challenge?***

The administration should identify and vigorously solicit funds to hire a substantial number of high-quality tenure track research faculty, particularly in STEM disciplines, over a publicly prescribed period of time. Funds could be obtained from multiple sources including strategic reallocation of existing resources, requests to the legislature for supplemental funding, and raising development funds focused on expanding the research enterprise. Other universities have followed such a plan to fund and expand their research-intensive tenure track faculty, such as the University of Missouri and the University of Vermont.

**Problem – The reputation and ranking of a university depends mostly on its research productivity. WSU’s precipitous drop in ranking is largely a result of the neglect of leadership by underinvesting in and underprioritizing WSU’s research enterprise compared to peer universities. There are no clearly articulated strategies and goals for research at WSU. Moreover, most leading researchers at WSU consider the Office of Research to be ineffective.**

No one at the university appears to know what WSU’s strategic plans or goals are for research. A few years ago, a slogan was developed - “Drive to 25” – meaning that WSU’s aspiration was to be among the top 25 public universities by 2025. Unfortunately, the CMUP ranking of “top 25” was ill defined (e.g., we would have been among a group of 40+ institutions that could claim top 25 status rather than a clear ranking of 1-25 on an established scale, like the NSF HERD rankings). Moreover, no leadership was provided on how to accomplish this goal, nor were there significant resources directed in support of achieving the goal. Then there was a public retraction of this slogan without any replacement aspirational goal. WSU’s USNWR ranking of national public universities is now 107, well below the top 25.

***What should be done differently to address this challenge?***

- WSU should have a detailed strategic plan and vision for research, not just a vague goal. The stated goal of increasing R&D by 5% in the current fiscal year is below the rate of inflation, as well as research and development expenditures by peer institutions, thus contributing to a continued decline compared to our aspirational peer institutions. Specific goals relating to total research expenditures and peer reviewed research publications should be defined. There should also be goals for per capita research expenditures and publications.
- Each academic college (and departments, schools) should have goals that sum up to the university goals. Deans, department heads, and school directors should be expected to articulate these goals and be evaluated on them.
- Universities of the moderate size of WSU cannot be at the top research levels in all academic subjects. Administration should evaluate and document WSU’s research strengths and weaknesses and invest in the most productive research areas where WSU can compete with the best, say, top 10.
- The top research programs within the university should be expected to do more than publish papers and find funding (ALL 146 R1 universities do that). The top researchers should aspire to be national and international leaders who help set the national and international agenda for research in their field.
- Research is a competitive game – WSU need to reward winners; at the least, WSU should try harder to retain top performing faculty so that the university does not continue to be the “farm team” from which the better universities poach the ones WSU has trained and who have evolved into highly productive faculty. The complement of this is that WSU should seek to downsize those academic units that tolerate large percentages of non-research productive tenure track faculty.

## **Problem: Reinvigoration of the WSU research enterprise**

Over the last decade, the research enterprise at WSU has been stagnant. Although innovation and fundamental research occurs every day in WSU labs and offices, growth of the enterprise in terms of extramural funding, numbers of scholarly outputs and groundbreaking discoveries, and advancement of basic discoveries having public impact has been lower than expected for a leading high quality R1 research-intensive institution. This stagnation is evidenced by growth in research expenditures that are below current and aspirational peer institutions. This stagnation has had a negative effect on WSU's national and international reputation and a negative impact on undergraduate and graduate enrollment. Maintaining WSU's R1 reputation-influencing designation is essential for attracting students and recruiting and retaining top caliber faculty. In addition, the outputs of institutions with very high research activity generate fundamental knowledge that educates students and addresses major societal issues.

A multitude of factors have contributed to WSU's stagnant growth and declining research reputation, including insufficient institutional support of research in STEM disciplines, inadequate management and staffing of sponsored program services (e.g., HRS, inadequate pre- and post-award support, and purchasing), misdirection and lack of innovation in WSU's Office of Research, and declining numbers of research-intensive tenure-track faculty. A particular concern is how the WSU Office of Research proclaims what WSU should be investing in rather than having faculty define what WSU's actual strengths are.

Dramatic actions are needed to reinvigorate the research enterprise at WSU to meet a core element of our land-grant mission and support our reputation as an institution where ground-breaking discoveries are made. Some facts delineating fundamental problems afflicting the WSU research enterprise include the following:

- Over the last decade, research expenditures at WSU have grown at an average of 2.6% per year, which is well below current and aspirational peer institutions [1, 2]. The rate of inflation in STEM disciplines is estimated to be around 10-25% [3]. Thus, growth of research funding at WSU is far short of matching even the pace of inflation, let alone sufficient for growing the research enterprise. Because of this, the current system-level goal of increasing total R&D expenditures by 5% is fully inadequate for research investment at R1 institutions.
- Cost of *administration* for research at WSU has grown at a rate of 5.6% per year over the last 10 years [4], which is more than double the growth in *research expenditures*. This is misaligned and needs to be remedied.
- The WSU internal allocation of core funds to the Office of Research has increased by an average of 6.3% per year over the last 10 years, resulting in an 89% increase in support to the Office of Research for growth of *administrative* costs [5].
- The large majority, 70%, of the Office of Research budget is allotted to salaries of staff and administrators in suboffices [6], the effectiveness of which is not clear. Suboffice expansion over the last 8 years has included the Innovation and Research Engagement Office (IREO), Office of Research Advancement and Partnerships (ORAP), Office of National Lab Partnerships, Office of Clean Technology.

- Performance of Sponsored Program Services is insufficient for an R1 research-intensive institution. For example, the timeframe of award setup and final financial reporting to closeout awards is unacceptable and jeopardizes WSU's reputation and standing with awarding agencies.
- Infrastructure for supporting research and instruction at WSU is inadequate, resulting in substantial time delays in approvals that require redirection of faculty effort from productive activities (e.g., research, publication, grant writing) to administrative minutiae, further damaging the reputation of the institution. For example, full-time equivalent staff numbers at WSU substantially trail the 13 selected institutional peers across 'instructional', 'research', 'public service', and 'instructional support occupations' categories [7]. In addition, the number of administrative support positions at WSU has not grown over the last decade (1% change between 2013 and 2023) [8].

***What should be done differently to address this challenge?***

- Set a goal of becoming an AAU member institution within the next 10 years by strategic investment in the research enterprise to meet the membership principles and indicators.
- Restructure the Office of Research, including the administration of it, and increase core institutional (non-administrative) support substantially (e.g., 25% each year) over the next 10 years to bolster infrastructure, procure state-of-the-art equipment, and contribute to faculty hiring campaigns, with the overarching goal of increasing the quality, scope and impact of the research enterprise and enhance rankings assigned to WSU. If a 1:1 ROI for research expenditures occurred through this internal investment, WSU could potentially move to the top 10 of land-grant universities in NSF HERD rankings.
- Overhaul the administrative and staffing structure of Sponsored Program Services based on a detailed review of the effectiveness of operations, and adjust funding support to establish proper numbers, training, focus, and retention of personnel.
- Create centralized support processes for the development of highly competitive research infrastructure proposals and procurement of state-of-the-art equipment, including a central source of matching funds. Ensuring facilities and equipment are state-of-the-art in areas of core research excellence is critical and aligns with recruiting and retaining top caliber research faculty. In addition, innovation and grant proposal success are strongly associated with research infrastructure.
- Develop an Office of Research administration that supports both grassroots initiatives for strategic research growth and areas of research strength for WSU.
- Invest in a vigorous and robust faculty hiring campaign, especially in STEM disciplines.
- Launch a fundraising campaign that is focused on the research enterprise, including building a reserve of funds for supporting innovative high risk - high reward research. The ROI on intramural support for highly innovative research ideas that are likely to be too high risk for an extramural funder can be enormous and dramatically impact institutional reputation.
- Develop a WSU-wide strategy for rewarding and incentivizing faculty excellence in research to halt the exodus of top tier faculty in several core research strength areas. A focus on

recruiting and retaining strong researchers directly correlates with enhanced research proposal performance, thereby impacting extramural funding and research expenditures.

**Problem – Faculty and staff morale at WSU is low and declining, and faculty are feeling unheard and uninformed by senior leadership.**

According to the 2022 COACHE survey, objective ratings for topics relating to senior leadership (president, provost, chancellors) including pace of decision making, stated priorities, communication of priorities, pace of decision making, and several items related to trust, shared purpose, shared governance, and most measures of adaptability and productivity were on average 5-15% below the COACHE cohort. Survey questions and written comments focused on trust and accountability, shared purpose and mission, resources, recognition, work-life balance, and direct and indirect compensation. Senior leadership experienced a significant decline in satisfaction rating compared to the 2014 WSU COACHE survey, with an overall rating that was 15% below the COACHE cohort in 2022. The general negative view of senior leadership by survey respondents is echoed in both the 2023 Faculty and Staff Employee Engagement Survey and the recent Washington State University Quantitative Research Report commissioned by WSU and conducted by brand marketing partner BVK. Moreover, there is a perception of a top-down approach with decision-makers insulated from the faculty and staff who are doing the principal tangible work of the university.

***What should be done differently to address this challenge?***

Faculty and staff want and deserve accurate, timely, and honest information regarding challenges our institution faces. Platitudes, cosmetic solutions, and Pollyanna thinking are counterproductive and have contributed to the lack of trust and confidence in leadership. Communications to the university community should be forward and honest, and not attempting to convince the WSU community that things are going well when they are not (e.g., the communications suggesting that WSU had a “good year” that was issued before the 2023 summer break). This objective could be accomplished by a set of explicit policies for effective, transparent, and consistent communications from the president’s and provost’s offices. Robust goals should be developed – SMART goals – that address the key issues brought forward by faculty in explicit and tangible ways. Rather than treating the symptoms of WSU’s problems, the causes should be identified and addressed by bringing together system, campus, and faculty leaders to strategically define core foci for each campus and the system overall, and devise the appropriate alignment of resources and behaviors. A public schedule of administrator reviews should be maintained, and results distributed to the appropriate faculty and staff, including regular 360-degree reviews of deans, provost, vice and associate provosts, chancellors, vice and associate chancellors, and the president.

**Problem – The administrative structure of WSU has depreciated the priority and impact of university academic program leadership of the Deans of Colleges, as well as the Provost of the University.**

The leadership structure of WSU has evolved into a system where campus Chancellors and EVPs/VPs of support service units, together with the President of the University, operate in collaboration as a senior Executive Council to effectively direct and run/manage the university. The Chief Academic Officer, i.e., the Provost/EVP, currently has a dual role as the Chancellor of the Pullman Campus, a position which administratively presides over the operation of roughly 80% or more of the entire WSU enterprise. Effective and impactful academic (taken to mean inclusive of research) program leadership is lost in this arrangement because of the split responsibilities of the combined Chancellor + Provost position, and the expanse of responsibilities related to the Chancellor component. Having a limited part-time Provost is not congruent with placing high priority on the academic enterprise.

Moreover, even if there were a separate dedicated Provost/EVP responsible for leading the academic enterprise at WSU, the Provost is currently one lone voice in a broad array of upper senior leadership composed of numerous Chancellors and EVPs/VPs of support service units. The perspectives, requests, and needs of Deans must currently be funneled through an intermediary (the Provost), who is then but one of a numerous number of voices within a senior Executive Council that directs and runs the university, despite academic programming being the principal deliverable and rationale for the very existence of WSU.

***What should be done differently to address this challenge?***

The structure of primary leadership, and attendant leadership priorities, should be revised to reside with a dedicated standalone Provost/Chief Academic Officer, who would rank only below the President in WSU's leadership structure, in collaboration with the College Deans. Such a structure will find support from faculty, as evidenced by substantially more favorable and higher satisfaction ratings for deans compared to senior leadership, according to the 2022 COACHE Survey. The Provost/Chief Academic Officer/EVP and Deans would collectively be second in university leadership authority, as a Senior Leadership Council at WSU, with the Provost/EVP being effectively "second in command" at the university. Faculty voices and interests could then be conveyed through their Deans directly to the highest level of leadership at WSU. This places WSU academic programs rightfully in the position of primacy in terms of considerations and decision-making regarding strategies for programming and allocation of resources in support of that programming. This also appropriately repositions EVPs/VPs and their associated service units in the roles of providing critical services in support of the academic priorities and programming defined and instituted by the Provost and Deans. The role of Chancellors would be to oversee and ensure that both academic programming and university operations operate effectively and efficiently at branch campuses in support of WSU's academic mission, as directed by the Provost and Deans.

The above revision of leadership priorities and authority repositions high quality academic programming at WSU into being the overall primary strategic objective of the institution and ensures that service unit operations are appropriately aligned and exist solely to support the success of WSU's academic enterprise.

## **A Final Overarching Issue: A Perspective on Causality**

To determine what we (WSU) should be doing differently as we move ahead to address WSU's challenges, it would serve the university well to identify the many factors contributing to the current existential threats we face. Focusing specifically on the drop in rankings and national reputation, it is impossible to ignore the timing of WSU's shift from the "Drive to 25" aspirational goal to the "OneWSU" initiative. The cliché "follow the money" is apropos. Resources that traditionally supported WSU's STEM research strengths were shifted to growing the regional and global campuses, leaving research-intensive tenure track faculty positions unfilled in key areas and departments. Whether these changes were the result of a cost-saving decision to substitute away from tenure track faculty with high research expectations towards teaching-intense faculty positions, or if they represented an effort to staff regional campuses for political objectives, is not clear. Nor does it matter. What is clear is that a university's national reputation is determined primarily by its research productivity and standing, with STEM research having the largest impact. WSU's research enterprise has been deprioritized and neglected, underfunded, and mismanaged. The negative outcomes were predictable.

That resources have been directed away from those activities that matter most to our land-grant mission is clear. As is evident from figure 22 in the 2022 IPEDS [7], core expenditures per FTE enrollment for instruction, research, and public service substantially lag behind all 13 selected peer institutions. While the larger investments in academic support and institutional support compared to our peers might be thought of positively, it should come as no surprise that WSU has suffered so greatly in terms of reputation given we have failed to adequately invest in the fundamental components that comprise our land-grant mission.

## References:

1. NSF HERD Database.
2. Annual Performance Metrics for Presidents at Public R-1 Universities data provided by President Schulz's office, Attachment A.
3. Facing inflation: lab heads tighten supplies budgets, Nature.  
<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-00088-z>.
4. Annual Performance Metrics for Presidents at Public R-1 Universities data provided by President Schulz's office, Attachment E.
5. Annual Performance Metrics for Presidents at Public R-1 Universities data provided by President Schulz's office, Attachment G.
6. Office of Research Budget Sheet, FY21.
7. IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System) Data Feedback Report 2022, Figure 23.
8. Annual Performance Metrics for Presidents at Public R-1 Universities data provided by President Schulz's office, Attachment F.