



MEMORANDUM

To: Marty Dickinson, Chair, Board of Regents

Lisa Schauer, Vice and Incoming Chair, Board of Regents

Cc: Brett Blankenship, Enrique Cerna, Reanne Chilton, Judith McDonald, Douglas Picha, Lura Powell, Jenette Ramos, Heather Redman, John Schoettler

From: Concerned WSU Faculty and Current and Emeriti Administrators

Date: 4/24/2023

We are writing to voice our profound and growing concern about WSU's future under the institutional direction provided by the current leadership. We ask that you consider the concerns voiced herein, carefully review the administration's decisions, actions, priorities, and strategic goals, and critically assess the ability of current leadership to address the substantial problems facing WSU.

The overarching concerns that motivate the writing of this letter are summarized below, but a multitude of interrelated, more granular issues also contribute. Any or all of us stand ready to engage with you directly to clarify and/or elaborate on these issues and discuss potential avenues for positive change.

Our key concerns are threefold:

Under the current leadership, WSU's stature has been greatly diminished. This has been exacerbated by persistent budget issues that have steadily eroded the capacity and quality of WSU's academic enterprise.

The steep decline in our national status, substantial multi-year decreases in student enrollment, and persistent cuts to academic programs with concomitant expansion of the administration, prompted a letter from a majority of Regents Professors to the President and Provost voicing concern and raising questions about the underlying causes and actions being taken relative to them (see attached). The 24-page response (also attached) illustrates leadership features that we find concerning; meaningful answers were provided to some questions, answers to others were evasive, and some responses were indefensible or ill-conceived.

The issues facing WSU are substantial. Although this administration inherited the strongest enrollment and admissions program in the history of the university, WSU is the only PAC-12 school that has experienced a substantial enrollment decline during the past 3 years - indeed, the only Pac-12 school experiencing *any* decline. Recruitment of undergraduates has been substantially affected not only by reduced attention and effort, especially in recruiting from out of state, but also by precipitous declines in rankings both by popular media and



professionally respected sources. This diminishes WSU relative to its peer universities in the eyes of potential students and their parents. In addition, units are reporting increasing difficulty in recruiting graduate and post-doctoral trainees, citing as reasons our declining reputation and attractiveness as a high-quality R-1 university.

Lack of transparency, low visibility, minimal engagement, and insufficient accessibility on the part of the WSU leadership has created an atmosphere of growing unease, mistrust, and lack of confidence. This leadership style has led to failure on the part of the administration to engage the WSU community in identifying, understanding, and assessing both the causes and potential remedies of our precipitous decline in university rankings, stature, and attractiveness. This, in turn, has led to ill-informed proposed solutions, further eroding faculty trust and confidence in WSU leadership.

From the perspective of the faculty, the administration does not proactively seek input as a matter of course. The leadership style is perceived to be top down, insular within a relatively small group of second-level upper administrators, with little trust in or regard for faculty and their suggestions, concerns, or critiques. The newly created multi-campus administrative system structure has further reduced accessibility, focus, and campus visibility of WSU's most senior leaders.

This leadership style has led to a significant erosion of the *esprit de corps*. We are far from the only members of the WSU community who are concerned and affected, merely those who are willing or in a position to speak up. In faculty meetings, conversations with colleagues in corridors, and even chance meetings in town, our colleagues and coworkers voice their concerns and their frustration. *WSU does not currently have a healthy academic environment, nor is the institution healthy.*

Given the significant declines in both WSU's stature and student enrollment, *a university-wide call to action is needed*, including full engagement and collaboration with faculty and staff to identify effective paths for reestablishing academic and research excellence and redirecting resources in support of the same. We question, however, the leadership's understanding of the complexity of the problems facing WSU and of the actions required to address them. The President's recent message addressing WSU's troubling rankings and declining reputation exemplifies the problem: This leadership works in isolation, relies on rationalizations, and proposes cosmetic solutions to quell growing unease.

Specifically, in his message, the President attempted to diminish the veracity of the rankings, stating "rankings depend heavily on subjective measurements" and assigned fault to the mechanics of the rankings themselves because "methodology has adversely affected our placement in national rankings." Further, rather than addressing the core factors underlying the decline, the remedy unveiled was a 1.2-million-dollar marketing and public relations campaign to improve WSU's image. To faculty engaged in serious analyses of multiple



university rankings and facing the damaging impacts of a previous 10% budget cut and the current 6% operating budget cut, this demonstrates remarkable shortsightedness and underscores concerns about leadership priorities and the willingness to address the real and very serious structural issues facing the institution.

Research is underappreciated and not well supported. Resources devoted to high quality research and academic programs have diminished under the current leadership while administration has expanded significantly.

Strong graduate education and research programs are vital for a thriving and successful R-1 university. The current Associate Dean of Research in the College of Veterinary Medicine and the Chair of the Nutrition and Physiology Department in the Elson F. Floyd College of Medicine recently voiced their concerns to the faculty senate in a posted communication about “the stagnation of the research enterprise at WSU”:

<https://facsen.wsu.edu/2023/03/21/reimagining-wsus-research-enterprise/>.

Leadership has prioritized hiring administrative personnel at the expense of hiring tenure track faculty. Salaries and start up packages that are often not commensurate with peer institutions place WSU at a substantial competitive disadvantage and exacerbate the depletion of academic and research program excellence. Our decline in national reputation is an impediment to attracting post-graduate trainees. These factors have cumulatively contributed to the loss of faculty, and our inability to replace these colleagues has increased faculty commitments to teaching and concomitantly decreased the amount of effort they have available to conduct their research programs, further eroding the research capacity of the institution. This is one of the most serious symptoms of the decline of WSU.

In closing, the WSU faculty and staff embody the institution’s academic and research expertise and have the professional capacity to identify and enact effective solutions to the serious problems we face. The community, and the students it serves, deserve leadership that will listen, discuss, collaborate, and support changes in priorities and resource allocations necessary to reinvigorate Washington State University’s academic and research excellence, and restore the reputation and stature of the institution. Objective data can be provided that clarify and underscore issues raised in this letter.



Signatories in Alphabetical Order

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