

Memo

Wayne State University Law School

To: Jerry Herron
From: Michael J. McIntyre
Subject: Enrollment Estimates
Date: November 5, 2009

I am reviewing, on behalf of the Budget Committee of the Academic Senate, the budget premises implicit or explicit in President Noren's strategic initiatives. One major area of concern is the projected goal of increasing the size of the university enrollment to 35,000, which means adding something over 3,200 students. Of that increase, 60% is to come from improved retention. Another 10% comes from an increase in UG enrollees, and 20% comes from transfer students. These may be nice aspirations, but there is nothing in the slide material that you presented that suggests that they are realistic. The key to evaluating the realism of the goals is the methodology and data used for computing the projected increases.

What I am requesting is the supporting data and an explanation of the methodology used. In particular:

1. For students retained after their first year, what is the expectation for how long they will remain enrolled and what is the basis for that expectation? To get at this issue, I would like to see the retention rates, broken down by ACT scores, for 2^d, 3rd, 4th, and beyond over the past 5 years. I'm confident that your group has looked at these critical numbers. If they are available, please provide them.
2. Your chart showed an improvement in retention for this past year for first year students with an ACT of 17 or below. I would like to see a breakout of those numbers (raw and percentage) for (1) no ACT score at all, (2) ACT of 13 or below, (3) ACT of 14-15 and (4) ACT of 16-17. The reason is that the improved retention score for this past year may be due in part to the drop in the number enrolled students with no ACT or exceedingly low ACT.
3. Have any estimates been made of the impact on retention of the improved scholarship aid provided by the university in the past year? If so, please provide. My understanding is that we had a survey some time back indicating that financial difficulty was a significant reason for students to drop out of school.
4. As you know, the projected number of high school graduates in the tri-country area is expected to drop sharply in the coming years. There was a study prepared for the strategic plan of 2006-11 that gave the numbers. Can you get me a copy of that study? Has your group tried to update the numbers in that study? My understanding is that the projected drop has increased as a result of emigration from the area, due to the poor economic climate. If the numbers are dropping sharply, then the plan to increase enrollees by 10% may be brought into question, given the very high percentage of our students coming from the tri-county area. I also understand that the numbers are down for Michigan as a whole and for the region as a whole. Does your group have these state and regional numbers? If so, please provide a copy.

5. I have not heard in the past about expectations for a dramatic increase in transfer students. What is the basis for the projection that transfer student numbers will increase by 20%? Can you give me the numbers showing net and gross transfers over the past 5 years, broken down by level (2d year, 3rd year, etc.)? Those numbers at least would give us a start. Do you have any basis for a projection of a change in current trends?

6. What methodology was used to project the improved retention rates for the future? As best I understand it, we have had a deteriorating rate for some years, followed by a steady rate for three years, followed by the recent spike. What is the confidence level that the spike is the start of a new trend? That is, does the group believe that there is a 100% chance that the spike is the new level, a 50% chance, a 25% chance? The estimates for getting 2,000+ more students is based on some probability estimate. I'd like to know what it is.

7. As discussed above, there are three possible explanations, perhaps many more, for the current spike in the retention rate. Your group is not only assuming that the spike is "for real" but is the start of a new upward trend. What are proposed new mechanisms for achieving this upward trend. The scholarship money and the drop in low-credentialed enrollees are one-time measures. Adding learning communities of the current size is a one-time measure. They might have an effect in making the spike the new trend line, but they cannot justify a projected increase in the trend line. Do you expect the increase in the trend line to come from an expansion of the learning communities? Is there any basis for believing that an increase would not have diminishing returns?

8. I'm confident the members of your group, some of whom have far more expertise in the matter than me, have addressed these issues and many more. I would be grateful for any information I was not smart enough to ask for that would help me to understand the basis of their projected increase in the student population to 35,000.