I. Introduction

Western Carolina University (WCU) is in the unique position of developing a strategic vision and plan as the University of North Carolina (UNC) system experiences both unparalleled student growth and unprecedented reductions in state appropriations. As WCU’s 2020 Commission seeks to plan strategically for the future, the direction “Garner Support for Our Vision” will be the cornerstone upon which all goals and initiatives stand. What follows is a review of two specific contexts discussed in the formulation of this subcommittee’s four strategic goals and their corresponding initiatives.

Economic Outlook

Financial realities associated with a national recession have seriously limited state appropriations to universities within the UNC system. Accordingly, all constituent campuses have faced or are facing cutbacks specific to personnel and programs. Although these reductions seem contrary to North Carolina constitutional language calling for the maintenance of a quality university system, they are a reality that is unlikely to change in the immediate future. Most campuses, including WCU, have reacted to the loss of state funding with tuition increases that threaten student access to higher education, and reductions in faculty and staff that jeopardize the quality of that educational experience. For WCU, this is a particularly critical concern, as the Western North Carolina region has been affected significantly by the current economic environment.

For WCU to continue to grow as a source of quality higher education in the region, consistent and robust resource streams must be identified and accessed. It is this subcommittee’s opinion that WCU’s growth is not only vital to the provision of quality, but of critical importance to the economic development of the region. Simply stated, WCU is meeting the region’s needs for a high-quality, 21st-century workforce.

Opportunistic Synergy

This subcommittee repeatedly found itself discussing the incredible talent pool and amazing accomplishments of the collective WCU community. Even while operating under constraints such as those mentioned above, WCU has been and will continue to be a force in and beyond Western North Carolina.

Synergy can be defined as two or more things functioning together to produce a result not independently obtainable. Obviously, a synergistic event requires an informed collaborative effort.
The Garnering Support for Our Vision subcommittee clearly identified a need for WCU to experience opportunistic synergy with respect to financial and other support. This most often surfaced as a call for grassroots efforts designed to inform the WCU community about the institution’s shared vision and to enable all stakeholders to work together to make it a reality. It also resulted in discussions about the need for better coordination and collaborative efforts of internal structures critical to the generation of external and internal financial and other support.

The Garnering Support for Our Vision subcommittee used four meetings and regular electronic communication among members to generate goals that encompassed the 2020 Commission’s strategic directive specific to Garnering Support for Our Vision. Goals, rationale, and initiatives are provided below.

II. Strategic Goals

Strategic Goal #1 – Strengthen the campus’s shared understanding of, and commitment to, the institution’s vision of a preferred future.

a. **Rationale:** There must be an internal commitment to WCU’s mission and to its strategic vision. This requires knowledge of that vision and “buy-in” by all internal stakeholders.

b. **Strategic Initiatives:**

1.1 Develop a comprehensive communication plan for campus publications and other media outlets to share the vision with all campus communities/stakeholders (i.e., faculty, staff, and students).
1.2 Create a staff orientation (for new and current employees) in which the university vision is articulated and discussed.
1.3 Articulate and discuss the WCU vision in faculty orientations (new, department, etc.).
1.4 Coordinate vision messages from internal sources (including but not limited to Advancement and Development, Alumni Affairs, Public Relations and Communications, Marketing, and Regional Affairs).

Strategic Goal #2 – Build and maintain strong relationships with the community, political and governmental agencies, regional industries, alumni, and friends

a. **Rationale:** As an engaged institution, Western Carolina University should partner with regional and state government officials on topics specific to planned development and economic growth. In addition, students, faculty and staff should collaborate with public and private sector leaders to build strong communities and spur economic opportunity. Finally, building close relationships with alumni and friends also can create long-term support for the university as it seeks state appropriations.

b. **Strategic Initiatives:**

2.1 Create a structure and/or process to enable members of communities – including
individual residents, organizations, industries, businesses and others – to capitalize on university, UNC system and other resources to address regional problems. This could encompass establishing a new community relations person or office to serve as the primary point of contact for the university for the purpose of sharing campus information and resources strategically to all WCU constituencies; resurrecting the regional economic development assistance initiatives and other outreach activities formerly conducted by the university’s Center for Regional Development and its predecessors; or a combination of both.

2.2 Build partnerships with the county, local municipalities, regional councils of governments, and private sector organizations to address the lack of amenities on or adjacent to campus for our campus community.

2.3 Build public-private partnerships to help meet the growing need for educational and professional development opportunities of the people of Western North Carolina.

2.4 Create a central means of sharing campus information strategically to all WCU constituencies and create grassroots structures to link the WCU strategic plan to the larger community.

2.5 Engage and inform alumni through initiatives including, but not limited to, WCU clubs, program advisory boards, reunions, homecoming, and social activities in an effort to create a network for regional engagement and statewide advocacy.

2.6 Gather and provide service opportunities for campus stakeholders to be engaged in their communities (i.e., commission and board service).

Strategic Goal #3 – Refine and coordinate university marketing and communications messages to align more closely with the institution’s vision, and strengthen the university’s ability to successfully deliver those messages.

a. Rationale: There are many regional comprehensive universities in the state and nation. WCU, however, is unique by virtue of its physical setting, institutional priorities, quality product, and affordable cost. The special nature of this institution as a regionally engaged university in a location that offers an attractive and unique place to learn and live must be optimized in marketing efforts.

b. Strategic Initiative:

3.1 Establish a marketing position or office that would guide all university marketing efforts – including those currently occurring outside the auspices of official communication, public relations and promotional structures – to the wide spectrum of constituencies, remaining cognizant of the fact that those different target audiences will have widely divergent preferences in terms of message and delivery of message.

3.2 Monitor the WCU brand and messaging on a consistent basis to ensure they are effective and consistent with the university vision; and consider using faculty,
students or other internal resources to do so if funding for external expertise is unavailable.

3.3 Develop a “best-value” message stating that a Western Carolina University education – the institution’s product – is of high quality and that WCU’s costs remain relatively low.

3.4 In marketing and communications efforts, emphasize the university’s location, its myriad of outdoor activities, its high quality of life, and similar brand attributes to highlight the uniqueness of WCU and its offerings.

**Strategic Goal #4 – Maximize and optimize all funding sources in support of the university vision**

a. **Rationale:** The current environment of decreasing state appropriations and increasing tuition necessitates efforts to increase resources to fulfill the institution’s mission while addressing the important regional needs of access to a quality education. Rather than relying heavily on any one source, the university should maximize and target a healthy mix of resources that will sustain it in good and bad times.

b. **Strategic Initiative:**

4.1 Develop a comprehensive fundraising plan that encourages gifts at all levels in support of WCU’s strategic goals and initiatives.

4.2 Create a special focus on fundraising for merit- and need-based scholarships that enables WCU to recruit and retain the best academically qualified students.

4.3 Utilize current and developing technologies to tap broad-based funding for the university.

4.4 Create a framework to pursue expansion of resource development through research grants and technology transfer commercialization.

4.5 Advocate, through various constituency networks, for state and federal resources linked to WCU’s strategic plan.

4.6 Review and coordinate operating procedures and staffing needs for all WCU offices charged with securing and managing external funding, including all public and private sources.

**III. Conclusion**

The Garner Support for Our Vision subcommittee recognizes that advancing a strategic plan is both time consuming and labor intensive. Accordingly, the committee prioritized its four goals by their importance and manageability. Likewise, under goals, strategic initiatives were organized logically to meet immediate needs in each area while identifying and targeting longer term objectives.

The committee clearly identified the need for internal WCU stakeholders to understand and share the campus vision as the top support priority. There was strong agreement that current students, faculty, and staff have no consistent outlets to hear, or contribute to, messages about the university’s vision. Without such outlets, the committee felt any strategic actions will be undermined by a lack of stakeholder buy-in. In contrast, a focused strategic message shared and advanced by all stakeholders will support all initiatives, including those related to financial and other support.
The second committee priority was regional to statewide engagement with external constituencies, including governmental agencies, industry, alumni, and other university friends. Again, the committee agreed that, once consistent support was established internally (with campus stakeholders), external support would be more easily obtained. Consistent focused messages regarding campus priorities and needs and critical listening to and engagement with constituents should create the synergistic opportunities mentioned earlier in this report. The committee envisions a broad network of internal and external WCU partners who will work on shared priorities, advocate for resources, and project a unified and positive voice about WCU.

There was agreement that the marketing message for WCU has received considerable attention, but continues to need refinement. A primary concern was optimizing what the committee viewed as unique qualities about a WCU education, e.g., cost for value, location, and instructional attention. There also was concern about the lack of ongoing review of the WCU brand. Strong support existed for the use of internal assessment mechanisms (e.g., student or faculty in WCU’s marketing department) to determine the current brand’s effectiveness, especially if funding for external consultation is unavailable.

The final priority was the need to optimize and maximize all funding sources. In sum, the committee saw this from both short- and long-term perspectives. That is, success with goals 1 through 3 will inevitably increase financial support through the creation of focused support networks. This success, however, may take years, if not decades, to obtain. In contrast, there are certainly operational and staffing needs in current WCU offices that can be adjusted to increase efficiency with existing resources.

Respectfully Submitted,

Billy T. Ogletree

The Garner Support for Our Vision 2020 Subcommittee
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