Notes from college meeting with Chancellor Bardo and Provost Carter

After departments and programs in the college briefed the Chancellor and Provost on recent and ongoing success stories, there was an exchange consisting of several questions and answers. The discussion focused on issues of adequacy of computing resources, class sizes, student numbers in the humanities, and the number of women in the STEM disciplines. At the beginning and end of the conversation, the Chancellor and Provost also stressed that they want to continue to increase the quantity and quality of flow of information between faculty and administration, and want faculty to continue considering how we can do this.

Bardo: The formal reporting of positives is and has been important, but we also need to know the kinds of problems that you are experiencing, and what we can do to help you deal with them. Are there particular problems, concerns, or questions that the faculty has?

We currently have an NSF grant targeting underrepresented students, chiefly ethnic minorities. What is or could WCU be doing to target more underrepresented students?
Bardo: to begin with, we are already far more diverse than UNCA and Appalachian State. We have about a 16% minority campus currently, with about 6% being African American. Interestingly, we are seeing a major growth in self-reporting of mixed-race students: we are currently at about 7-8% there. There are three big areas we can focus on, though, in terms of underrepresented students: 1) 1ˢᵗ generation college students. We have Project Care and some other projects going on now on this front; we're working on this a lot. 2) The traditional Appalachian native population, and 3) Ethnic minorities.

Bardo: What other kinds of challenges and issues are you struggling with? We'd really like to know.
Carter: Sometimes departments have been more willing to share issues in the past. For instance, we heard from some that that for new faculty, some small grants would be very useful, and we're in the process of putting these together.
Bardo: Is there a way to group departments and meet in clusters, perhaps? We're certainly not trying to split the College up! We would just like to have more interaction. This is easier to get with the other colleges, because they're smaller. There may be some things we can't do anything about, but others we may be able to address.

> We do have some cross-disciplinary super-computing needs that are not currently being met by IT.
Bardo: We're currently getting access to some resources elsewhere (MCNC). How can we help you do that?
Carter: How many of you have computers more than three years old? [Substantial number of raised hands.] We may be able to work with the Deans this year, despite the continued budget shortage, to partially address this.
> Additionally, we have some computer labs on 4-5 year old computers.
Bardo: We're having a lot of discussions right now about what we can actually offload, computing-wise.

> We also have some issues in terms of writing applications for ipods – the money for this.

Bardo: I want to see some things from Kyle while we're moving forward. We're starting to grow in enrollment again. The state budget remains bad, though we probably won't see any additional cuts next year, from the short session (2010). But what we're worried about is the next long session (2011): the stimulus money will be gone at that point, and we don't really see where it could be replaced from at this point. We're seeing another major application increase this year, and the state has agree to fund our enrollment growth. But this money comes in too late in the year to hire. We will have some additional E&T funds; while this is not like a standard source of revenue, it is helpful, and we will see some of this.

Carter: We will see some additional funds in E&T. Some money is left over after allocating to deans. Craig Fowler, the new CIO, came from the corporate world, and has had a helpful perspective. We will see a much better technology plan in the next few years.

Bardo: Basically, we made the judgment that we were better off trying to keep the maximum number of people employed (even though we had to let some go), and so we shorted equipment to preserve faculty and staff positions. Next year we expect to see 9600 students, and the year after perhaps 10,000.

Carter: We've got two classes of around 1200, but classes of 1550 or so coming through the pipeline, and when they're all in, we're going to be looking at 10,000 to 10,500 students.

Bardo: According to Dean Railsback's analysis, calling prospective honors students makes a huge difference.

> The English department has been talking about is engaging in external recruitment [calling students], but we feel very disconnected from the recruitment strategies at that level. This relates, in part, to being in the humanities. We have some concerns that in difficult economic times, students become more interested in disciplines with a clear economic path laid out in front of them.

Bardo: We're not really spending much time in high schools at all anymore. We can't really talk to people since No Child Left Behind. The most effective techniques for generating applications have been direct mail and email, connecting them at home. We have contracted most of that work out to an external group. We also know that some departments are being very aggressive in calling people in their fields. Some departments are in touch with admissions. We might be able to get more aggressive in getting the admissions info. pushed out. In general, however, we're just getting an overall better grade of student now. And these kinds of students don't all go to professional programs, but to the humanities and social sciences as well.

Carter: We're just not doing as much in high schools as before, although we are sending promotional materials to counselors. We want to drive this to the web. But we also have to know whether the web presence we have is getting 18-year-olds interested.

Bardo: Yes, sometimes the website is saying something very different to 18-year-olds than we think that it's saying, or than it's saying to us!

Bardo: Here's an example of an issue just recently raised by faculty (through the Faculty Senate steering committee). We have a Coulter Teaching Center, but not a scholarship/research center (that might assist faculty in learning to write grants for funding). What would a model like that look like? We don't know, but it's a good question and one we should be exploring, because extramural funding will become increasingly important.

> A lot of faculty are frustrated with pay for print.

> This is a big issue for everyone, but in the English department's experience, the increased class sizes have hit hard.

Carter: On the class-size challenge: we probably will never go back to where we were, class-size wise, because we were too far under where we should be, at about a 13 to 1 student to faculty ratio. (Appalachian State is around 19 to 1.) But we will be able to make adjustments in critical areas such as composition courses. There may be some enrollment growth money (perhaps up to a million dollars, or enough for roughly 16 positions), but I'm certainly not going to allocate all of this, because we know we have to have some reserves.

Bardo: One thing we are concerned with, as more and more women move into higher education (they make up a higher percentage of the college population than men now), is the lack of women in STEM disciplines. Anything we can do to change that will be to this institution and the state's advantage. WCU joined the rest of the country this year in having a significant number increase in female applicants.
> (Associate Dean Dave Butcher) Actually, all of the STEM programs at WCU have more than 50% women except for computer science.
> And in computer science, we are working on this concern. In middle and high schools, work with computer applications has replaced programming, and you cannot get mathematics credit for this kind of work. So, the key point here is that we're not getting credit for CS courses in high school. We need a way to get programming back in as a 4th high school mathematics course.
> There is also an issue with women in STEM disciplines going on to graduate programs: 21% of new mathematics Ph.D.'s are female.
Bardo: I did some work on some of these issues at one time, and the sociological literature suggests that the interventions have to occur by the 5th grade level, because at that point gender roles regarding mathematics not being "feminine" are beginning to become important, so you have issues of socialization and identity going on there.
> But we do also need to focus on women in the sciences now. There's a big drop off from the numbers of women in undergrad programs to those in graduate programs. So we have to do more with the students we have now to encourage them to move in that direction.

Bardo: So, to repeat what we said at the beginning, one of our real concerns (and this led to the issue of considering changes to the college structures) is that we really need to find ways of faculty getting their interests on the table, whether those flow through normal, established channels, or not. We want a better free flow of information. We would really like you to consider how faculty interests are going to be expressed, understood, and considered as we move forward. How can we best do this as a university?