

Bruce Shepard
President

516 High Street
Bellingham, Washington 98225
(360) 650-3480 □ Fax (360) 650-6141

To: Planning Unit Leaders

From: Bruce Shepard

Date: April 22, 2011

Subject: The Next Hundred Years

Trends in Higher Education funding, both in Olympia and around the nation, make it clear that Western Washington University and state universities generally are confronting a dramatically different landscape than the one to which we have grown accustomed. When the final 2011-13 Washington State Operating Budget is passed, Western will have had over half of its state funding cut in under three years, and the state-funded portion of our total operating budget will have dropped from 60% to 30%.

Much of this unprecedented reduction is due to a struggling economy, but the past thirty years of steadily declining state support for public universities makes it clear that the portion of our budget funded by the state is unlikely to increase as the economy improves. The entire Western community has been and will continue to be strong advocates for public support for public universities, but we must now engage in some very clear-eyed planning for the reality of our future. In doing that planning, we have two choices. We can continue to stretch and erode all of our programs in an inexorable march toward mediocrity, or we can rethink and rebase our university in a way that will protect and strengthen the excellence of our core mission and allow Western to remain an outstanding academic institution in the future.

I want to be very clear that I am fully committed to the second option. Too many faculty, staff, students, alumni, and trustees have worked too hard over the last hundred years for us to choose to do anything but everything we can to ensure that Western's excellence will grow over the next hundred years.

The legislature is about to head into a special session and it could be weeks before we have a final budget allocation for Western. But, based on the proposed budgets that have already been released, we have a ballpark understanding of where our final funding will be. We must begin now to seriously plan our rebasing so that we will have ample time to discuss it before the academic year is over. Events have forced us to proceed quickly, but we will not proceed in haste.

"Rebasing" is another way of describing the difficult and perhaps painful program reductions, eliminations, and mergers that we will have to consider in order to ensure that Western goes

forward in the strongest possible way in our new environment. Our processes require that we begin consideration of these actions in confidential discussions with vice presidents, deans, faculty leadership, student leadership, and the UPRC. Those discussions have been underway for a while now. Given the approaching end of the academic year, and with the concurrence of every constituency that has so far been involved, we are now ready to engage the whole campus in those discussions.

In the discussions we have had so far, these are the principles that have guided us and will continue to guide us:

1. In evaluating what to suggest as options, we have consistently and for years placed protection of core mission as the top priority, followed by the commitment, within areas of equal centrality to core mission, to protect quality. With the extensive work on several initiatives over the last year, “core mission” can be further fleshed out to include:
 - a. The mission, direction, and core values of our new, one-page [strategic plan](#) including the vision to build a stronger Washington.
 - b. What our research shows to be the distinctively Western approach, what I call our promise to students. We summarize it with the phrase, “Active Minds, Changing Lives,” thereby trying to encapsulate the basic reasons students choose Western: academic rigor in undergraduate programs, close engagement with faculty in the classroom and beyond, and a commitment to living a purposed life.
2. Nibbling at the edges or temporizing solutions to budget cutting may be briefly necessary as ways to bridge to other, identified options but are not acceptable as proposals for the long-term.
3. Where the decision is made to eliminate an academic program, commitments to current students will be fulfilled as the program is phased out over several years.
4. No tenured faculty will be laid off. They represent the core strength of this fine university. While it would be irresponsible to make firm commitments until we see final budget numbers from Olympia, we do currently expect to be able to protect occupied tenure track positions. Our younger, tenure track faculty are a critical investment in the current and, particularly, the future excellence of Western.
5. In the preceding and all other matters, the set of mutual obligations contained in our collective bargaining agreements will be met.
6. Simply moving current programs to other revenue sources (e.g., academic programs to delivery via Extended Programs) is no solution at all. Any such proposal must not reduce revenues now associated with the program and, consequently, that are a part of the university’s current operating budget. That is likely to be the case only if one of the following pertains:
 - a. The program largely meets the needs of non-traditional, non-residential students.

- b. There is unmet demand, in which case *net* revenue increases may be helpful, coming either from program expansion or a different tuition structure.
7. Through rebasing, we strive to sustain the teaching and learning conditions for our faculty and students that nurture the faculty-student interactions and collaborations that have become the hallmark of Western. This, in particular, challenges all of us and requires our very best thinking for we also will continue to serve the same number of students. We will not take on additional students without state support for that would negate our basic purpose: to provide access to quality. So, too, would serving fewer students: with tuition now making up most of our instructional budget, reducing student enrollment would seriously compound the problems we are seeking to address.
8. Central to our planning of rebasing are the facts that we must soon address our currently uncompetitive compensation and we must soon again begin to hire new tenure track faculty. Ours is a talent-based enterprise and we must continue to be able to recruit and retain the best faculty and staff who will in turn attract the best students to our campus.
9. When it comes to rebasing, there are many matters to critically consider including revenue strategies, efficiencies, commitments, and current practices. It is not just about making program cuts – strategically deciding what will no longer be in the base – so that the new base can be adequately supported for the longer term. Over the past few months we have been confidentially considering exactly that question – what should the program cuts be? It is surprising how often the “cut,” when looked at differently, allows a reconfiguration of expertise and responsibilities that strengthen areas that have been weakened through past temporizing steps (e.g., grabbing vacant positions). That is, most certainly, rebasing, and at a deeper level than just deciding what will not be in the new base.

These are the principles that will guide us as we look for ways to find the new base that will allow us to sustain our current strategic direction and promise to students.

The Process Modifications

Our process must now proceed thoroughly but expeditiously. The entire campus must carefully consider the options, but by the end of the academic year, the entire campus must also have a very clear understanding of the actions we are going to take. Fortunately, our confidential process has been underway for some time. We will now proceed to broaden our process:

1. Each Dean will have an additional meeting with direct reports (directors, chairs) to again review and discuss options for rebasing both within the planning unit and within the university.
2. Each planning unit leader will have an announced schedule of office hours during which individuals within their unit may meet individually with the planning unit leader to share ideas about rebasing options. These are to be one-on-one meetings in order to foster candor.

Both of these steps are to be completed by the end of the day, Thursday, April 28th, 2011.

Over the weekend and through an extended meeting the following Monday, the president, provost, deans, and vice presidents will develop the final list of options for further campus decisions. That list will be shared with campus on Wednesday in order to allow a day for planning unit leaders to provide those possibly affected to be given advanced notice.

We will all then know what is on the table. And, what is off. So, that is also why it is important for you to consider taking advantage of the opportunities for discussion with your planning unit leader before we take the step of determining what will be further discussed.

Thereafter, discussion and evaluation of the identified options will take place. The broadly representative University Resource and Planning Council will be a critical venue for such discussion. While additional details will have to be worked out over an extended period, final decisions will be made by the end of the current academic year and, if the legislative action is complete, in time to have our Trustees consider our recommended operating budget for 2011-13 at their June meeting.

Conclusion

The search for the new base on which our university will go forward is not going to be easy, but I have every confidence that our talented and dedicated faculty and staff are up to the challenge. We will find the best way to keep Western strong and create the conditions for it to grow stronger. We did not create the problems we now face, but we will face them and we will overcome them.

I thank you all for all the hard work you have done and continue to do to make Western such an outstanding university.

My best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Bruce".