

Minutes: Reinvention Center DC Regional Network Meeting  
March 2, 2001

The first DC network meeting of research universities sponsored by the Reinvention Center took place on March 2, 2001 at the Club Quarters Hotel in Washington, DC. It was attended by 35 faculty and senior administrators from 19 public and private institutions. A list of attendees is attached.

Wendy Katkin, Director of the recently-established Center, opened the session by introducing herself, and providing background on the Center's founding and on the factors leading to this meeting. The purpose, she explained, was to explore the merits and feasibility of creating a regional network made up of faculty and senior administrators from research universities within the same broad geographic area. In addition to the Washington meeting, the Center held a similar meeting in December in New York City and will be holding meetings in San Francisco and Chicago later in the spring.

Dr. Katkin explained that when the Reinvention Center was created a year ago, she was given three years to determine whether a Center focusing exclusively on research universities made sense and, if so, what its role might be. After a year of visiting campuses, talking with colleagues at universities, professional societies and government agencies and attending meetings of education-oriented organizations like the AACU, AAHE and Project Kaleidoscope, she determined that indeed such a Center could fill a critical gap and have many functions. Her reasoning was based on the observation that most existing organizations focusing on undergraduate education are geared primarily for four-year colleges. These colleges, however, start out with different assumptions and have needs and interests that are quite different from those of research universities. As a result, the organizations have generally failed to engage administrators and especially faculty from research universities. A forum made up exclusively of research universities would be able to concentrate on issues specific to their environments and to the demands and expectations of their faculty. Dr. Katkin envisions the proposed networks as small communities made up of colleagues from institutions that face common challenges and who might benefit from working together and sharing experiences. Her model is the group of ten research institutions that received the NSF RAIRE (Recognition Award for the Integration of Research and Education) awards in 1997. Over the past three years, faculty and administrators from these institutions have met informally on numerous occasions, have come to know one another personally and with reference to many of their programs, and they have become valuable resources for one another on a wide variety of issues. Dr. Katkin expressed her hope that the regional network would function in the same way.

Following the opening comments, a representative from each institution present was asked to provide a brief overview of the institution and to identify a pressing issue or educational aspect that the Center network might address. The introductions revealed the diversity within the group, which included small and large, and public and private universities, as well as ones in urban, suburban and rural locations.

Based on the introductions, it appears that most of the universities represented have definitely been giving more attention to undergraduate education in recent years than they had previously.

Most now offer special programs such as honors programs and learning communities, have introduced enriched first-year experiences for students, expanded research opportunities, and established programs to improve teaching and learning on their campus. Other activities have included increasing and extending the writing requirements beyond the first year, revising courses to promote active teaching and learning, and revamping academic advising,

Despite the considerable activity, however, at most institutions many of the efforts are still relatively fragmented, they typically are not well-coordinated across divisions and disciplines, they often rely on a small cadre of people, and, most critically, they do not affect ALL students and faculty. For the most part, participants estimated that between 20% and 50% of the students at their institution benefit from recent innovations.

The challenges remain enormous. Several major common issues were identified:

#### Administrative

- Balancing faculty roles and commitments
- The persistent shortage of resources at every level: financial, space, and faculty and staff. A related issue is competing priorities, particularly in allocating staff to teach general education courses, courses for the major and in special programs
- Institutional rigidities that prevent innovation: these include inflexible curriculum requirements, the semester/quarter structure that defines most academic offerings, state imposed mandates, and existing facilities which are geared for large lecture formats.
- The need to increase the number of faculty involved in educational innovation so that they comprise a substantial core and to find ways to “get them to walk in the same direction.”
- Maintaining a focus on undergraduate education in light of the goal at most research universities to elevate their national rankings; such rankings are typically based on research productivity and external funding
- A need for greater cooperation between Student and Academic Affairs.

#### Curricular

- Finding ways to incorporate inquiry-based and active teaching and learning into a range of instructional environments, and especially into 100-level courses
- Institutionalizing innovations initiated with external funds
- A need for more flexibility to open the curriculum to genuine interdisciplinary study and to teach critical thinking and creativity, as well as create more opportunities for genuine student research and scholarship.
- Addressing the lack of preparation of many students
- Using ongoing research and scholarship to enhance teaching
- Determining the best venue for promoting skills development—perhaps through the context of majors rather than general education courses.
- Fostering interactions between professional schools and undergraduates

Dr. Katkin raised two questions around which to frame discussion of these issues:

1. How can institutions “pull the pieces together” to create a more comprehensive experience for students?

2. How can we, as research universities, define what our undergraduate experience should be? If the research university is not simply a large liberal arts college, then what is it?

### **Value of the Research University:**

Two members of the Reinvention Center Advisory Board, William Green, Dean of the College at the University of Rochester, and Don Bialostosky, Head of the English Department at Penn State, provided some background to these two questions. Dr. Green noted that research universities are one of the United States' "major national resources," representing the values of free inquiry that ideally should "flood down" to all levels of education, including primary and secondary schooling. Through their research and scholarship, research universities play a critical role in preserving, nurturing, defining, and articulating our culture. We have enormous potential to involve undergraduates in these activities, and that is what makes us unique.

Too often, in an effort to meet competing demands, we, our students, and the public (including legislators and other external constituencies) lose sight of the research universities' core values. Dr. Green urged the group to consider how universities can structure patterns of learning so that the maximum number of undergraduates can understand what is at stake in the kind of learning represented by research and scholarship. The public (including elected officials) often does not understand the value of pure research, but because of the significant number of students we graduate, we have the potential to educate a large percentage of the population in a different way.

Modeling ourselves on four-year colleges is not the answer because of the differences in scale and diversity among our students, as well as in the nature of the institutions themselves. Such modeling also does not reflect the distinctiveness of research universities, with their vast array of resources and opportunities. Our challenge is to build intellectual programs that draw on our strengths and can work on campuses of thirty thousand or more students. Dr. Bialostosky suggested that sometimes institutions need to reexamine the notion that all undergraduates should take the same course or courses, which can prove unfeasible at a huge institution, and/or can only be implemented at a cost to other programs. By reexamining certain premises, we can find multiple ways of accomplishing good things without losing other elements.

It was estimated that about 90% of undergraduates at a research university do not understand the value of attending such an institution. A first step therefore is to expose students early to the kind of activity that takes place there. This may be done, for example, through an exercise in which first-year students read a common book, perhaps written by a faculty member, or read a series of essays on the value of research (to counter the books like *ProfScam* and its "siblings" which attack research universities). Or, each institution could compile a list of "10 things the world would not know if not for research done at our university." In more advanced classes, faculty and student research and scholarship can be brought into class discussion to exemplify themes under study. There was a general consensus that research universities need to do a better job of communicating what they do, why what they do is important, and why, as a result of their research emphasis, they are good *teaching* institutions. Moreover, they need to communicate this message to different audiences: people like ourselves, prospective students, parents and political constituencies.

Research universities might take a clue from professional schools, which traditionally have given greater weight to teaching than do the typical Colleges of Arts and Sciences. We also ought to celebrate the presence of graduate and professional schools, which offer resources, expanded curricular opportunities and good mentors for our undergraduates.

### **Pulling the Pieces Together:**

There are many pieces, all interrelated. The ways research universities are changing are to a large extent being shaped by factors beyond their control. These factors include: the easing of K-12 standards, which is reflected in declining student performance in the freshman year; the growing presence of transfer students, particularly from two-year colleges; and the goal of most research universities to rise in the NRC and other rankings. Unfortunately, undergraduate teaching and learning is not considered in these ranking. It was suggested that, as a group, research universities can meet with the NRC and suggest that it add a dimension to its evaluation to take into account the extent to which undergraduate education is enriched by the strength of an institution's graduate and research programs.

### **Conclusion:**

There was a consensus among those present that they have many common issues and that a network made up of research universities offers a valuable opportunity for faculty and administrators directly responsible for undergraduate education to share experiences and learn from one another. The question is: how can we work as a network to address these issues, both on our own campuses and on a national level? Before deciding on an organizational structure for the network, we need to know what we would like that structure to accomplish. The group agreed to determine the issues on which it would like to focus on, select goals and outcomes to work toward, and at that point decide how best to reach those goals. The approach might vary by issue. Possible strategies are:

- To create similar small groups or “institutional teams” on individual campuses
- To work with other network members on “break-out” issues
- To foster dialogue through a list-serv
- To organize working groups around topics or functions, rather than regions
- To have a national meeting on a focused topic, perhaps in association with a larger national organization meeting.

Dr. Katkin asked all participants to send her a list of five or fewer issues that they would like to see the networks focus on in future meetings and activities. The following issues emerged:

#### General Education / Core Curriculum

- What does “general education” mean? How is it defined at different institutions? Are there other, better ways of naming/defining what we believe may work best for our students, both in terms of crucial intellectual skills and in terms of helping them to understand and relish their experience of undergraduate education at a research university?
- How can institutions integrate general education with the major and departmental curricula? How can study abroad and other co-curricular experiences be incorporated?

- How does a research university build a sense of common purpose among the faculty who teach general education courses? How do you engage research faculty?

#### The unique nature of research universities

- How can research universities capitalize on their unique qualities for both marketing and learning purposes? How might they identify and promote these advantages in a public forum?
- How do research universities develop programs that benefit all students, not just a select few? How can institutions address both the “threats and benefits” of professional and graduate degree programs to undergraduate education?

#### Interdisciplinarity

- How can research universities promote interdisciplinary learning and deliver a more “dynamic” experience in the context of a university organized into disciplinary units? How can they address the rigid conception of the major curriculum in individual disciplines
- How can oral and written communication and foreign languages be integrated into the curriculum? How can study abroad be integrated into departmental curricula? How are research experiences integrated with classroom learning?

#### Instructional Technology

- How can instructional technology be used to improve teaching?
- How can it be used to improve delivery of student services?
- How can faculty make their students think critically about how and when to use information technology in pursuit of real learning? There is a need to build into the curriculum ways for students to develop skills to look critically at the social, moral, and intellectual impact of technology.

#### Assessment

- What is the purpose of “outside-imposed” assessment, especially in states where it is mandated? How can research universities respond effectively to externally defined criteria for “assessment?”
- How can research universities facilitate “real” (vs. political) assessment?

#### The freshman year (and beyond)

- How can research universities use the freshman year more fruitfully to introduce students directly and concretely to the “added value” of the education they offer?
- How might freshmen and seniors alike be engaged in projects that stretch their minds and capture their interest, as well as give a clear shape to their education?

If anyone has suggestions for “background reading” related to these topics, please let us know. Also let us know of experiences and/or effective practices on your campus

The group agreed to have a second meeting in the late fall. Information will follow.

In the meantime, the Reinvention Center invites short descriptions of first-year programs at your University, to be included on its Web site in the Resource section. Please send your descriptions

to: wendy.katkin@sunysb.edu. The Center also welcomes suggestions for subjects to be “spotlighted” on the Web. If you are interested in writing a short essay for the Reinvention Center Spotlight, consult the Web site ([www.sunysb.edu/Reinventioncenter](http://www.sunysb.edu/Reinventioncenter)) or contact Wendy Katkin.

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