

## Data Gathering Session

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**Group:** External Stakeholders and Experts (i.e., academics at other institutions nationwide)

**SPT Partners:** Morton, Coble

**Date:** November 4, 2014

**Design:** Virtual Focus Group

**Attendees:** 7

Note: Attendees were tenured faculty (n=6) from the University of Florida, University of Maine, University of Minnesota, University of Montana, University of Wyoming, West Virginia University, and research program managers (n=1) from the National Park Service's Cooperative Ecosystems Study Unit.

### Key Data:

*Note: The virtual focus group results recorded below should be considered in light of the following opportunities and threats identified by the Envision SFA Strategic Planning Team in September 2014.*

### Envision SFA SPT Top 5 Opportunities

- More articulation agreements
- More alumni engagement and support
- Take advantage of our Independence and relative lack of constraints
- Grow graduate education
- Capitalize on athletic success/enhanced recognition to introduce new academic programs and marketing

### Envision SFA SPT Top 5 Threats

- Unfunded state and federal mandates
- Inadequate state funding
- The impact of growing online programs on our residential culture
- Insular thinking
- Declining enrollment and competition for students

**QUESTIONS:** What are the key strategic issues facing universities that offer undergraduate and graduate student education? What do we need to know about these key strategic issues?

High cost to students to pay for their education

Students' lack of communication skills

Faculty lack the capacity to teach all the courses needed within a program

Teaching undergraduate courses is emphasized over teaching graduate courses, thus reducing graduate program offerings

Funding for graduate students

*"We tried to have our graduate school separate, but we couldn't support a grad school with tuition alone. Graduate education is so costly. Also, research project managers are tending to bring in post-docs because there's less hand holding. That means fewer grad student spots/less support for graduate education."*

University funding models (i.e., state formulas) that are based on time in the classroom and/or student credit hour generation; this leads to large classes and a "limited impression" of what education is all about

*"Administrators and the legislature always want more undergraduate numbers. At NCSU we had over 700 students in our department. So I hired "teaching professors." That's also problematic because students want professors that have research experience and up-to-date knowledge regarding current issues and how to address them. Students may not get that up-to-date know-how with only teaching professors."*

University funding models do not adequately account for faculty research time, the teaching of independent study courses, etc.

*"Balance is hard. Legislative funding is oriented around undergrad numbers rather than graduate research. When push comes to shove, it seems that student numbers drive funding and perhaps research suffers."*

Helping students find the programs/areas of study that meet their needs and/or for which they are best equipped

Faculty are being challenged to show local, regional and global impact

Some universities put pressure on their faculty to be "preeminent." This can translate into more Ph.D.'s finishing more quickly and getting jobs at prominent institutions

Universities should focus on improving the value of masters degrees, e.g., through better integration with undergraduate and Ph.D. programs

Provide bachelors and masters degree students with the opportunity to do a "unique" project that would give their degrees more value

Undergraduates need internships and capstone courses--are they required of students?

Limited funding for graduate research assistantships; increasingly graduate students must "self-fund." If grad students work off-campus, this can diminish their experience and/or reduce mastery

*"The masters degrees are the most threatened degrees in the whole line up."*

Incorporating distance education into field-based courses; incorporating distance learning into courses that seek to develop practical, field-based competencies

Becoming a global campus

For students to see knowledge in action they have to have one or more of the following: internship, capstone course, undergraduate research project, or a study abroad/overseas experience.

*“A small percentage of our students had a learning abroad experience.”*

University endowments have uneven financial returns and are not immune to trends in financial markets

The need—i.e., pressure—to increase enrollment

The need for innovative thinking regarding effective teaching and the use of distance learning technology

Flipped classroom methods - we need to take class time to get out in the field and do stuff.

Flipped classrooms allow faculty to use more class time to apply critical thinking, work through planning scenarios, and address real world problems. However, it puts more pressure on students to use their time well outside of class

Employers need more knowledgeable, more skilled employees

Students need guidance in how to apply learning (from classes and life experiences) to their future profession

Many legislators don't have higher education degrees (in Wyoming)

Emphasis on creating more distance education programs

*“To address the challenges associated with online masters programs, we strived to be known as the premiere masters degree online in our area. For premiere level implementation, we required 2 years of field experience prior to getting into the online program.” (refers to online masters program development at NCSU)*

The need for or possibility of 5-year M.S. degree programs

Students who enter without meeting the pre-requisites do not finish the program (but sometimes they are still accepted)

There's a need for “middle-level scientists”

*“We need highly trained scientists in the Bureau of Land Management, Natural Resource Conservation Service, etc., for example. We're seeing folks who graduate from Environmental Studies programs and such without minimal qualifications.”*

*“We tend to focus on inter-disciplinary...but if we don't develop disciplinary science knowledge and mastery, graduates won't have the knowledge to address some of the problems that are on the horizon.”*

In some sectors, agencies aren't hiring like they used to. Depending on who's hiring in the future, students might need a different package of skills. Is our curriculum adaptable?

### **QUESTION: What are the trends and drivers?**

Growth in the community college environment; growth in 2 + 2 matriculation programs—but it

usually takes more than 2 years for transfer students to finish

*“Some community colleges are starting to offer professional associate degrees (e.g., in water quality monitoring). When universities like ours engage with community colleges on degrees and curriculum, what are the implications for management?”*

*“When the average student is taking 6 years to complete an undergraduate degree, 2 + 2 (or 2 + 3) doesn't make sense.”*

Student retention

Anti-science political agenda

*“All of science is becoming politicized, so instead of being knowledge it's just ‘your own point of view.’”*

*“Anti-science across the country is huge -- even with the push for STEM from above. Since so few people know what that really means, it is just a buzz word, not a viable concept or initiative.”*

Legislatures are NOT putting money into higher education.

*“Forestry is a public good. In Montana, we've had decreased support for public goods...down 20% from the state. The money they provide is just enough for them to be able to control what we do, but perhaps we should get rid of it. E.g., if the university research were to threaten mining, for example, state funding could become an issue.”*

The implementation of new knowledge in the field, and the proper testing/vetting of new programs is lacking

Students need to learn how to market themselves

*“I had a student who developed their own professional social media website. The student got hired during their job interview because of that social media website. Students need knowledge, marketing, and professional demeanor.”*

Career-ready grads are desired by industry, but curriculum standards haven't kept up.