

MUW 20/20: Envisioning our Future, Fulfilling our Promise
Report of the MUW 20/20 Task Force
March 14, 2008

Historical Background

History of MUW

When Mississippi University for Women (MUW) was chartered in 1884, it made educational history as the first state-supported college for women in America. Originally known as the Industrial Institute and College (II & C), the institution was created by the Mississippi Legislature to provide a unique hybrid: a high-quality collegiate education for women coupled with practical vocational training. Mississippi's bold action recognized that young women must be not only capable of thinking for themselves, but also of supporting themselves.

Throughout its history, MUW has always shown an ability to adapt and change with the times. In 1920, the Industrial Institute and College became Mississippi State College for Women (MSCW). This name more clearly reflected the institution's merging of professional training with four-year collegiate degrees. By 1974, as all eight universities in Mississippi began adding and strengthening graduate programs, MSCW became Mississippi University for Women. Admitting men since 1982, MUW has built upon its historical emphasis on women's education and leadership development to provide high-quality liberal arts and professional education for all women and men who enroll in its programs.

MUW's Vision Statement

Building on its long tradition of excellence in liberal arts and professional education, as well as its historic focus on academic and leadership development for women, Mississippi University for Women will continue to be a university that prepares both women and men for successful lives by providing a high-quality education in a personalized learning environment.

Overview of the MUW 20/20 Process

In August 2007, the university undertook an envisioning process called *MUW 20/20: Envisioning our Future, Fulfilling our Promise* in preparation for the development of a new strategic plan in celebration of our 125th anniversary. This multi-step, highly collaborative process included broad participation across institutional constituencies through a series of internal and external scans. In August, a consulting firm conducted interviews with a sample of university constituents to determine the format for the envisioning process. The assessment report recommended opportunities for open and honest communication, discussion of key issues, representation by all constituent groups, and action-based recommendations for growth and change. These recommendations guided both the external and internal scans. A professionally-facilitated, two-day,

comprehensive scan was conducted in October and included university faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, and local and state business and civic leaders. In January and February, twelve internal focus groups comprised of faculty, staff, administrators, and students convened for 90-minute sessions. A similar process was used to gather input from alumni across the state in five regional meetings. The guiding questions for all of the external and internal scans were designed to identify strengths and challenges of the university, to recommend goals and action plans, and to elicit innovative ideas for moving the university forward.

Current Status

The 20/20 scanning process provided a framework for understanding the current status of the university by identifying its perceived strengths and challenges. MUW is viewed by its constituents as a small, beautiful, and historic campus that provides students with a high-quality academic program in a personalized learning environment, opportunities for involvement and leadership, and quality interactions with dedicated faculty and staff at a reasonable cost. Supported by a strong alumni base, MUW's history is unique, its reputation is strong, and its graduates are among the most accomplished leaders and professionals in the region and state. Perceived major challenges to the university are the lack of unification, a poorly defined identity, the difficulty in recruiting and retaining students, and financial concerns. To a lesser extent, communication, collaboration, community involvement, morale, name of the university and resistance to change are other challenges facing the university. In late February, a task force convened to analyze and interpret the data gathered throughout the 20/20 scanning process and to identify the major themes and issues that emerged across groups. The purpose of this paper is to present the major challenges currently facing the university and recommend strategies and actions.

Major Challenges and Suggested Actions

Unification

The university community is weary of conflict and controversy. There is a sense of isolation and fragmentation among constituents. Individuals want open and honest communication within and between constituent groups. There is a need to build unity, consensus, and community around the issues that have divided the university.

Perceived inadequate communication among constituent groups and a desire to be more actively involved in decision-making processes have led to discontent. Current mechanisms for internal communication (i.e., council and committee meetings, email announcements, open door policies) have been implemented, but constituents continue to report being unaware of accomplishments, new initiatives, decisions, and problems. In addition to expressing dissatisfaction with the dissemination of information, faculty, staff, and students also vocalized a desire for increased and improved communication across the entire campus and for opportunities to work more collaboratively. Suggestions for action include: (1) evaluate current mechanisms for internal communication to determine

how they can work more effectively; (2) as often as possible, provide information regarding potentially controversial issues prior to public announcements, so that individuals can be appropriate representatives of the institution to members of the community; (3) rebuild a climate that fosters a safe and secure environment for communication; (4) provide transparency in university decisions, processes, and procedures; (5) provide opportunities for faculty, staff, and students in different departments to interact with one another; and (6) develop a regular schedule of professional development for faculty, staff, and administrators.

Alumni relations have been strained by long-standing internal conflicts among alumni members and by disagreement with administrative officials regarding institutional priorities and direction. The institution faces many challenges and opportunities in this area. Alumni deeply value the institution's historical traditions, and some are resistant to changes that have been proposed to meet these challenges and opportunities. Alumni seek to be recognized by the institution for their contributions and their records of personal and professional successes, but lack clear direction regarding how to best apply their enthusiasm for the institution and their experiences as accomplished professionals to meet the needs of the university and to support its continued growth and vitality. To build a foundation that will unify alumni in support of institutional goals, MUW must clarify the role of alumni and identify strategies to promote positive engagement. Five suggestions for action are: (1) develop additional mechanisms to honor and to promote alumni contributions and successes; (2) support alumni involvement in promotional activities; (3) promote mentorship/internship programs that pair current students with successful, accomplished alumni; (4) provide regular updates to alumni regarding the changing nature of MUW and higher education in general; and (5) implement strategies to support active engagement of all alumni, to include women and men, long-standing alumni members and recent graduates.

While the university-community relationship was perceived by many constituents to be positive and strong, more than half of the groups involved in the 20/20 scanning process reported a disconnect between the university and the community. Specific issues included inadequate public relations and communication with the community, the need for greater community outreach, the need for sponsorship and promotion of events open to the public, and the perceived uninvolvement of the campus with major issues facing the community. Suggestions for action include: (1) enhance relationships with the community by partnering with local businesses and community/civic groups; (2) promote and publicize collaborative efforts between the campus and community; (3) increase community awareness of the economic impact of MUW and its involvement with local economic development efforts; (4) develop service learning initiatives to address community-identified problems; and (5) work with the community to identify mechanisms for demonstrating support of the university; (6) expand and enhance the work of the university's centers; and (7) increase collaboration with the Columbus Air Force Base and the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science.

In order to maintain the rich tradition of academic excellence and create dynamic connections, effective communication and relationship building must take place among all constituents. MUW must develop a shared vision to promote a sense of purpose and unity. To move forward, constituent leaders must work together to realize this vision.

Identity

The 20/20 scanning process revealed a consistent belief that MUW lacks a clear identity, leading to difficulty in recruiting and retaining students, faculty, staff, and administrators and to difficulty in planning and making decisions. Common issues surrounding identity included not knowing who we are, not having a clear direction, and not strategically focusing our efforts to meet common goals. There was widespread consensus among constituents that MUW must define its niche and ultimately target recruitment and programs appropriately. Most importantly, MUW must learn to balance its history and rich tradition with innovation and openness to change. The university must remain dynamic in order to sustain itself in the 21st century. There is a perceived disconnect between how the university is known (liberal arts institution) and its most well-established and popular degree programs (professional programs). There is also a disconnect between how the university is known (historic women's institution) and its current student population (which includes both women and men). The institution's historic women's emphasis must be clearly defined and refined to ensure that while it continues to promote women's academic preparation and leadership development it also promotes best practices in academic preparation and leadership development for all students. Seven suggestions for action are: (1) identify a unique niche; (2) use a branding process to clearly define institutional identity; (3) enhance strategies to promote academic excellence in teaching and learning that will attract well-prepared, motivated students; (4) promote and enhance the emphasis on leadership development; (5) develop a process to clarify what the women's emphasis means to university constituents and to determine how to best to incorporate the institution's historic commitment to women's education within its current mission; (6) work with an outside consultant to guide the identity development process; and (7) ensure that the process is collaborative and inclusive.

Important areas of emphasis to consider when shaping MUW's identity that emerged across constituents include commitments to maintaining academic excellence, enrolling well-prepared students, integrating our historic women's emphasis, promoting leadership development, supporting liberal arts and professional programs, building a strong connection to the community, producing highly employable graduates, promoting effective communication, and creating unified constituent groups.

Identification of an institution is generally established by its name. The 20/20 scanning process documented that the current name implies female attendance only and does not reflect the co-educational status of the institution. This situation raises questions for prospective students, parents, and the general population. Constituents expressed that explanations provided to these individuals do not always correct the confusion created by the name. Many constituents recommended that a name change be explored and seriously

considered in order to increase enrollment. MUW's long and rich academic tradition of offering education for women is validated by the current name. However, this established academic legacy is being continued by dedicated women and men. Changing the name could bring a renewal and a blending of interests in honoring our past and building our future. Five strategies for action are: (1) appoint a task force to explore the possibility of a name change that would reflect the past, acknowledge the present, and envision the future of the university; (2) create a transparent process; (3) begin the process after the identity has been clearly defined; (4) involve all constituent groups in the process; and (5) follow legislated procedures for institutional name change if indicated.

The 20/20 scanning process overwhelmingly showed that the name of the institution must be re-examined. The concern expressed consistently was that the identity should be determined first so that if a name change is made it would accurately reflect the university's vision statement. In order to move forward, MUW must clearly define its identity, and this process must be fully collaborative and seek to build consensus among all constituent groups. The group leading this effort must be prepared to discuss controversial issues, make difficult decisions, and be able to fully defend and support recommendations.

Recruitment and Retention of Students

The small size of the institution was consistently viewed as a strength by constituents. However, the institution must recognize the need to increase enrollment to respond to statewide IHL initiatives to increase the number of baccalaureate graduates in Mississippi and to reduce MUW's average cost of attendance to align more closely with other IHL institutions. These competing pressures make the determination of an ideal enrollment a complex decision. Clearly, demands for enrollment growth will need to be balanced with strategies for maintaining MUW's campus climate which emphasizes personalized learning. An initial enrollment goal of 3000 students is appropriate; however growth beyond that initial benchmark may be required to ensure financial sustainability. To increase enrollment to meet these goals, the institution must address challenges in both recruitment and retention of students.

Concerns about recruitment include the lack of a comprehensive marketing strategy for the institution, changing student demographics (i.e., a decrease in traditional age, residential students and an increase in students who may be under-prepared for college-level work), limited geographic recruitment, competition from area community colleges, and turnover in the recruiting office. While an overall increase in recruited students is desired, faculty members are particularly interested in recruiting students who are well-prepared for college-level work and who they believe will be successful in meeting program requirements and in graduating from the institution. However, the university also must address its mission as a state institution by serving and meeting the needs of all students. Suggestions for action include: (1) implement a targeted marketing/recruitment strategy once identity has been clearly defined; (2) develop recruitment strategies to attract well-prepared students; (3) redesign the university website so that it can serve as a more effective tool for recruitment and marketing; (4) strengthen relationships with high

schools and community colleges; (5) create a climate in which student recruitment and retention are shared responsibilities of all constituent groups; (6) strengthen general recruitment by sponsoring targeted recruitment through academic affairs and other university offices; (7) develop strategies to minimize turnover in admissions and to ensure that staff have adequate information to effectively promote all programs; (8) work with IHL and the Mississippi Legislature to provide tuition reciprocity for out-of-state students in bordering counties; and (9) refine efforts to recruit students beyond the immediate geographic area.

Concerns about retention include inadequate resources and strategies to support the success of under-prepared students, limited early intervention programs for students who perform poorly on initial exams/assignments or who have excessive class absences, a relatively high percentage of students who have difficulty successfully completing general education coursework, few options for assisting students who are experiencing academic difficulty in developing the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful, limited opportunities for students to participate in learning communities, and no clear pathway to a degree for students who have a large number of transcript hours, but who have been unable to meet degree requirements. Suggestions for action include: (1) develop additional strategies to support the success of under-prepared students; (2) develop a comprehensive early intervention program; (3) adopt course redesign and other strategies to promote student engagement and active student learning; (4) develop an effective alternative to academic suspension which would build students' knowledge and skills to support their successful completion of college-level work; (5) design additional learning communities; and (6) develop a general studies major to support students' degree attainment.

Funding

Funding is a major and ongoing area of concern for all university constituents. The recruitment and retention of highly-qualified faculty, staff, and administrators rest largely on the university's ability to provide competitive salaries. Reduced state appropriations, rising operational costs, current enrollment, and restrictions in tuition increases pose financial challenges. Areas in addition to salaries that are particularly affected by a lack of adequate funding include building renovation and maintenance, library holdings, technology upgrades, marketing and recruitment, and the development of new and innovative programs. Five strategies for action to increase general funding include: (1) increase external funding; (2) increase enrollment; (3) conduct a capital campaign; (4) collaborate with other IHL institutions to petition for greater flexibility in setting tuition; and (5) conduct an academic program review, which examines program enrollment and program development. In addition, specific recommendations for generating grant funding include: (1) grant writing workshops for faculty and staff; (2) clear and consistent communication about the availability of grants; (3) dissemination of resources for locating and managing grants; and (4) additional staffing of the grants office on campus.

Final Thoughts

The 20/20 scanning process provided insight into opportunities and challenges that MUW should consider as it moves forward. The suggested actions presented in this paper offer a starting point from which the university may begin the journey toward unification, identity formation, enrollment growth, and increased funding. A collaborative effort, which focuses on making choices that are best for the future of the institution, is recommended. The hope of the constituents who participated in the 20/20 scanning process is that their voices are heard, their concerns are addressed, and that they are included in the planning and decision-making processes as appropriate, so that this effort will ultimately lead to the growth and sustainability of the university.

MUW 20/20: Envisioning our Future, Fulfilling our Promise Descriptive Phrases from the MUW 20/20 Task Force March 14, 2008

Vision for the Future

Reputation for academic excellence
Student-centered educational experience
Engaged learning environment
Unified constituent groups
An historic women's emphasis
Leadership development to respond to real-world problems
Highly employable graduates
Balance of liberal arts and professional programs
Strong connection to the community
Effective communication and collaboration
Stable financial outlook