

Forum - #2: Texas A&M's strengths and inhibitors, both internal and external

Tuesday, February 26, 2015

601 Rudder

Hosted by Faculty Senate & Council of Principal Investigators

Moderators for Forum #2:



Mary Bryk, chair, Council of Principal Investigators
Department of Biochemistry/Biophysics
College of Agriculture and Life Sciences
bryk@tamu.edu



Teresa Wilcox, executive committee, CPI
Department of Psychology
College of Liberal Arts
twilcox@tamu.edu



Dale Rice, executive committee, Faculty Senate
Journalism Studies Program
College of Liberal Arts
dalerice@tamu.edu

Forum # 2 Details:

Dr. Mary Bryk welcomed more than 150 participants to the second Strategic Planning Open Forum, held from 11:30 am – 1:00 pm in Rudder 601. In addition, more than 50 participants joined the discussion online via LiveStream viewing.

The dialogue included comments and questions from nearly 30 participants, including three who participated remotely by sending emails to (vision2020@tamu.edu).

Forum #1 Dialogue: Highlights of Questions & Comments (Q/C) Expressed by Participants

Dr. Teresa Wilcox, Executive Committee of CPI, moderated the Q&A with Dale Rice, Executive Committee of the Faculty Senate.

Dr. Wilcox made an initial statement on the rules of decorum for the Q&A and then opened the dialogue inviting participants to present and discuss Item IV of the “Draft Working Document,” which reads:

IV. If these are appropriate objectives and metrics, what are the primary obstacles that will inhibit our attainment of our objectives and thus our vision? What are the opportunities that we should capitalize on to achieve our objectives and visions.

[NOTE: These are offered as summary of comments/questions. For fuller understanding of context and content of the dialogue, please view the video of the forum by visiting the Strategic Planning website: <http://stratplan.tamu.edu>]

Q/C: Before we talk about the strengths and hindrances to each of the goals, I was wondering if we could look at why objectives 6 and 7 in Item II of the Draft Working Document can't be combined into one.

–Dr. Helene Andrews-Polymeris, College of Medicine, vice chair of CPI

RESPONSE: (Dr. Watson) They could be. The Draft Working Document is open for discussion. We welcome suggestions about how the objectives should be organized. People have various ideas about how they might be organized. If you have suggestions send them in electronically.

Q/C: If someone is writing, I suggest that 6 and 7 go together.

–Dr. Helene Andrews-Polymeris, College of Medicine, vice chair of CPI

Q/C: I was asked to bring up--Are we trying to emphasize specific areas and make them extra strong at the cost of some others? Are we trying to build everything? What is the outlook; is that faculty driven? I know the CPI has some funds for some big projects in certain areas.

–Dr. Clint Magill, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Faculty Senate Planning Committee

RESPONSE: (Dr. Wilcox) I will answer as best I can from my perspective. In terms of how we go about this, we want your input about what our opportunities are. The research development fund and how that gets distributed is certainly one way. The distribution of those funds will be faculty driven.

(Dr. Watson) Yes. We are a university not a research institution. Through the strategic planning process, we need to determine how to focus our resources. But we can't do that in such a way that we are no longer a university. In the strategic planning process we need to decide what we need to do and just as importantly what we can't do. We also need to establish priorities; what needs to be done first. We have to decide what needs investment first. In the next forum we will talk about strategies to overcome obstacles and strategies to take advantage of opportunities. The purpose of strategic planning is not to just develop a wish list, but to make the hard decisions about what has to be done first.

Q/C: I would like to get into the weights of these metrics. It is my understanding that the university-wide Ph.D. completion rate for Texas A&M is only 50%. That is a significant problem if we want to be competitive. We need a comprehensive plan that gets good students to apply, gets them admitted, and gives them the resources they need to succeed. Manage the whole process.

–Dr. Jorge Alvarado, Dwight Look College of Engineering

RESPONSE: (Dr. Watson) What you are talking about is getting into the strategies and that's what we'll talk about at the next forum. But, I think, what you are suggesting is that our ability to attract and retain high-quality graduate students is an obstacle. Is that right?

Q/C: Yes it is. And it's not all about funding. It's about the mindset—how we deal with graduate students from day to day.

Email Q/C: I'm concerned that the discussion on the metrics was so abbreviated in the first forum. Particularly give the discussion the goals, which highlighted the need for redefinition of some and potential addition of other goals, the metrics need to be revisited and discussed in depth. It is critical that the metrics truly capture the defined goals and are not chosen just for ease of data collection.

–Dr. Luciana Barroso, Dwight Look College of Engineering

Response: (Dr. Wilcox) I can appreciate that we are not all in agreement about the metrics. Focus on metrics will come later. For today, we need to look at obstacles and opportunities; it is important to know what is in our way so we can move forward and to know what opportunities we have.

Q/C: Item IV begins "If these are appropriate objectives and metrics . . ." Suggestions about additional objectives were made at the first forum and the Draft Working Document has not been revised to incorporate those suggestions. Does that mean that those suggestions will not be included? Or are we going to take all the notes and fit them in at the end and not have an opportunity for comment? I'm just curious about how this will work. Many of the objectives that were suggested merit discussion today, and at the third forum and the fourth forum. But if the plan stays static throughout the process, that cannot happen.

–Dr. Gene Hawkins, Dwight Look College of Engineering

Response: (Dr. Wilcox) It is my understanding that they eventually will be included, but I will let Karan talk about the process. (Dr. Watson) There's a lot of mixed opinion about whether people were suggesting strategies that can fit under those objectives or if they were truly other objectives. For example, one of your objectives—highlighting the undergraduate experience—is for many of us one of the reasons our graduates are so successful. So, would we be having that as objective for its own sake or would it be a strategy contributing to one of the other objectives? I would encourage you to keep sending us ideas for refinement. The ideas are being discussed. We are going out to other forums. But we need to reach a level of agreement before we revise the document. If what you're suggesting doesn't fit under why our students are highly sought after, you need to help us understand why. It's not that we discounted that.

Q/C: I agree with all of that, but I feel the process would be strengthened if we could have a feedback loop as we go through. It's important for people to see that their comments are contributing to the process.

–Dr. Gene Hawkins, Dwight Look College of Engineering

Q/C: I believe the nine objectives are fantastic. The tricky thing will be the metrics and, of those, the qualitative indicators will be really tricky. Dr. Watson characterized strategic planning as an exercise in tradeoffs. You can't really do all of this. There have to be tradeoffs. I think that's what we are here to talk about today. A lot of these objectives are carried out by faculty. And, we all know our job descriptions; we wear a lot of different hats. So, I think the focus today needs to be on the set of incentives flowing down from the top that influence us in how respond to the various tradeoffs that are inherent in this list.

–Dr. Kirk Winemiller, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences

Response: (Dr. Wilcox) That's a great question. Do you want to offer a suggestion?

Q/C: I'm not smart enough for that. But, I think it is the crux of the issue here.
–Dr. Kirk Winemiller, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences

Response: (Dr. Watson) That is both an obstacle and an opportunity.

Q/C: For instance, I think it's a great goal for us to want to educate the masses in the growing state of Texas. But, can we solve that by ourselves? If we try to do it by ourselves and turn into a massive community college, we can't achieve the other objectives on the list. There's a tradeoff. The hard part is to figure out the balancing act. What are the criteria that tell us how much is enough?
–Dr. Kirk Winemiller, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences

Q/C: Graduating an increasing number of undergraduate students in a timely manner, who are high quality and satisfied with their experiences, presents both an obstacle and an opportunity. The obstacle is that as we increase the size of our undergraduate student body, we are limiting what we—faculty, staff, and administrators—can do. The opportunity is to invest in better advising. Improve advising to make sure students get the classes they need, are well prepared for the careers they are looking forward to, and graduate in a timely manner. So, I think having a plan for enhancing the advising capabilities of staff, faculty and administrators is important.
–Dr. Mary Bryk, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, chair of CPI

Q/C: We haven't hired enough into the faculty ranks in recent years. If we are going to accomplish these things we are going to do it by hiring rising stars. We need new, younger faculty in the ranks. It's both an opportunity and a challenge. The question is how we come up with the funds for that.
–Dr. Mike Arnold, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences

Response: (Dr. Wilcox) That's an intriguing issue because we have invested a fair amount of resources in hiring people who are more experienced and well known in their fields. And perhaps it is time to start thinking about ways to hire new people and stealing away people early in their careers. There are models at other universities for doing this.

Q/C: To continue, I see retention of our rising stars as an obstacle. We have had rising stars, but we're not very good at keeping them around. We hire them, we invest significant resources to make them productive faculty members, and then we allow them to be stolen away.
–Dr. Helene Andrews-Polymenis, College of Medicine, vice chair of CPI

Q/C: Talking about obstacles and inhibitors, a lot of people seem to be inhibited by questions of available budget. For example, we have only found out in the last few weeks about summer funding for teaching. Why couldn't we have found out earlier so that we could have done more planning? I think the monies are there. My general concern is, how many things could we be doing with money that exists? But the budgeting process is not letting departments—therefore faculty and graduate students—be able to plan out the academic year in a timely fashion.
–Dr. Stephen Miller, College of Liberal Arts

Response: (Dr. Wilcox) Yes. I don't think that you have had a unique experience. I've heard of this in a number of places. Maybe Provost Watson could speak to the issue.

(Dr. Watson) Since we told them three years ago that that summer money would be available every year, I don't know why it's a problem. But we can look at the deans' level and ask why it was a problem.

Also, to address some of your comments about investing in junior faculty. We are. In the last three years, more money has been put into the colleges that are seeing growth in their teaching loads. But, I think there is a difference in what you've been talking about that's important to understand. The senior hires have been miniscule compared to the resources that have gone to the colleges to compensate for growth. The colleges have invested those resources in mid-career and junior faculty hires. Consider that we have invested roughly a million and a half in senior hires, and we've invested about five times that amount in other hires. What I think some people are talking about is overall growth—net new growth in faculty—not recognizing that some of the hires have been replacement faculty, which does not increase the total number of faculty. I will also say that in the last ten years, the deans' and provost's offices have put a similar amount into retention. We actually call it "pre-retention" because the worst time to try and retain somebody is when they have an offer. We are trying not to have people feeling that they have to go and get an offer. But, I'm not saying we're as good as we need to be at retention.

I understand the problems that units face when they don't know about resources in a timely fashion and we need to be better at communicating about available resources. But in some cases, we don't know and can't give money away until we know what our revenues are. During years when the legislature is in session, the State budget is not known until the summer. So when we are trying to plan for the fall semester, we don't know until 30 days after the end of the session what we will have. In July, we will be able to come back to you and say this is the amount we will receive from the State. We can tell you what we think; but, we don't want you planning on an amount that we may not get. The complexity of funding sources makes the budgeting process difficult. I understand the frustration, but there's not a lot we can do about it.

Q/C: Websites are an important point of entry for recruiting graduate students. We have an opportunity to improve websites at all levels across the university.

–Dr. Beverly Irby, College of Education & Human Development

Q/C: My question is, do we understand how people see us? We know how we want to be seen. But, how do people see A&M and do we like how they see us? How can we change that? We know how we view our aspirant peers, but are we known for our football team? Or as a university that makes fun of UT? Or as a university of tradition? What is College Station? What does it mean? Is the view that this place may be a little too conservative a problem? Is the perception of Texas A&M a detractor for talent, academically speaking? Have we done surveys? We may not like what we hear, but until we know we can't improve.

–Dr. Ricardo Gutierrez-Osuna, Dwight Look College of Engineering

Response: *(Dr. Watson) Yes, we have annual surveys of: other academicians, students who are accepted but said no, faculty to whom we offered positions but said no, or from faculty who were here but left. Our Division of Marketing and Communication has just initiated a nationwide survey to learn about the general public's view of Texas A&M. When those results are in, we will have even better data than we have had in the past. But, every president—including the current interim president—has said that people don't know us. Speakers and visitors to campus are always favorably impressed with all that we are doing. Interim President Hussey has noted that a lack of focused communication has been a hindrance to us, but now provides an opportunity to strategize about how we communicate to a multitude of audiences instead of overly communicating to just one kind of audience.*

Q/C: How do we maintain our reverence for traditions but project an attitude of modernity?

–Dr. Ricardo Gutierrez-Osuna, Dwight Look College of Engineering

Response: (Dr. Wilcox) I want to add that in conversations with research teams, it is clear that many of us, internally, don't understand what A&M has to offer. We have amazing programs, departments and resources that many of us don't even know that we have—some of these are even top in the nation. All of us need to become better educated ourselves about what A&M is so that we can become spokespersons to our colleagues around the country.

Q/C: Addressing Texas A&M's strengths and inhibitors

Strengths: Diversity, high quality faculty, and student pool.

Hinders/obstacles:

1. Texas is a large state where students from rural areas get here and have difficulties adjusting. Major emphasis on mentoring to help students succeed.
2. Space: Space Classroom space, transportation, dorm, etc.
3. Staff support/training
– **Phuong B. Huynh, M.Ed., School of Public Health (by email)**

Q/C: Following up on what Ricardo was saying, I think one of the obstacles we have at A&M is that we are kind of insular, kind of isolated in what we are doing, we have too many silos. I think it has to do in part to leadership, we get messages from our deans to be careful about preparing our students. But when it comes to our research, we work with our students by ourselves. At other universities, they work in big centers, they work together. We need a consistent message coming from the top that we need to work together toward certain ideals.

–**Dr. Jorge Alvarado, Dwight Look College of Engineering**

Q/C: When I bring in visitors from other institutions, they are impressed with what A&M has to offer and they leave with an incredibly positive experience of what's going on. We do great with undergraduates. But, we don't do such a good job with graduate education. I think there is a failure in this document to separate graduate from undergraduate education. As faculty, we are a product of our graduate students. We just had a great recruiting push in my department. A challenge is that we can't put together packages that are competitive with other institutions. There are some great fellowships available here, but a lot of them are short term. Really good graduate students are getting four- or five-year packages from other institutions. Also, I don't see that we are doing a good job of placing our grad students in faculty positions. One other point-I see some interdisciplinary program people here—historically, graduate recruiting and education has been departmentally driven. What graduate students want is to have flexibility in degrees now. I think our traditional degrees may be holding us back.

–**Dr. Spencer Behmer, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences**

Response: (Dr. Wilcox) Can I ask you a question? I think I heard that you said two things that may be inconsistent. One was that we don't place our graduate students in faculty positions at top research institutions and the other was that we need to offer more flexible graduate degrees. So are those two things inconsistent? I don't know what you mean about flexibility and where those students are going to go or what they're going to do.

Q/C: So, for my department, we offer a degree in entomology; that's a very traditional and taxonomically based degree. The best students in this country may have a hard time taking that degree because it's nearly defunct. By offering a degree that's broader, it provides them more flexibility—doesn't pigeon-hole them as much. In our department, of our last seven hires, six have not had degrees in entomology. So a Ph.D. in a specific program is

not a requirement. In addition, I think many of us would agree that an interdisciplinary degree attracts higher quality students. So, no I don't think the two are incompatible.

–Dr. Spencer Behmer, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences

Q/C: On item 8, outreach to students. We have an opportunity to have the colleges work with the Prospective Student Centers to bring disadvantaged students to Texas A&M to participate in summer programs. An obstacle is the cost. We need to offer more funding opportunities. We particularly need to reach out to teenagers in Bryan and College Station.

–Roy Lopez, Brazos Valley Prospective Student Center, Office of Admissions

Response: (Dr. Wilcox) So, I want to recap, one of the opportunities we might take is to be more engaged in outreach in our local community and we might want to target recruiting resources to first generation and at risk students to help them succeed when they get here.

Q/C: An obstacle is a lack of staff support. We have decreased the number of staff at the same time that we have increased the amount of administrative work. My efficiency and productivity would be increased significantly if I could delegate some of the administrative activity to a permanent staff members. Additional staff could help a lot.

–Dr. Gene Hawkins, Dwight Look College of Engineering

Q/C: How can we make the connection during the tenure & promotion process for those who excel in teaching and service/extension? How are we going to provide for those faculty members who really excel in teaching and really excel in services and extension. More focus needs to be given to these missions. Tenure and promotion are critical to the success of our university

–Dr. Raphael Lara-Alecio, College of Education and Human Development

Response: (Dr. Wilcox) I think there are a number of people in the audience who agree with that. There are a number of ways we could be strategic in supporting these missions.

Q/C: I want to build on a couple things that have been said about staff support, which I agree with. The university has a lot of red tape and that's an obstacle. It's frustrating that we have to fill out so many forms and go through so many systems. Our staff has to deal with a lot of red tape rather than doing the real work of supporting students and faculty. We have an opportunity to improve financial management and purchasing processes. There is a big disconnect between the "boots on the ground" and the centralized departments that that create processes. They don't see what actually happens when users work with the processes. The users would benefit from understanding the laws that require processes. The opportunity is to have better communication between the users and the process creators.

–Faith Stringer, College of Architecture

Response: (Dr. Wilcox) It sounds like one of the ways your suggesting that we deal with this is to have enhanced communication.

Q/C: I have a few general, big picture comments and then some specific ones. We have an opportunity related to our location. We are in the center of 80% of the population of Texas. At every college level, we should probably do some brainstorming to decide how we can take advantage of our location. I don't think our local leadership in the community understands this.

Several concerns that fall into the category of obstacles.

- We are not thinking out of the box with the metrics in the working document; considering that we only have five years, can we make an incremental advance toward our goals?
- In item 8.2s-- fill in the values for “x” and “y”.
- Red tape is an obstacle. I feel that pain myself. Rules preventing the conversion of a grad student to an hourly employee during semesters when the student is not enrolled is an obstacle.
- Can we set a metric for fundraising goals at the university level?

–Dr. Debjyoti Banerjee, Dwight Look College of Engineering

Email Q/C: Coordination of efforts – this seems to be both an opportunity and an obstacle. Objective 3 and 4, as examples, can be something that many groups work on across the campus (faculty, staff, administrators, and students), which is an opportunity because it encourages diversity of perspective and energizes many people toward achieving the objective. However, how do we take advantage of the tremendous energy and diversity of ideas to advance progress toward those objectives and simultaneously facilitate synergies where groups can be aware of what others are doing to allow for partnerships where it makes sense to have them?

–Dr. Suzanne Droleskey, Public Partnership & Outreach

Q/C: 95% of our undergraduate students come from Texas. This may be an obstacle to attracting high-quality graduate students.

–Dr. William Clark, College of Liberal Arts

Response: (Dr. Watson) *I think this is worth addressing. Three points.*

1. *If you look nationally, 80 to 85% of the enrollment for virtually every public university like us is from somewhere within a radius of 250 miles of the campus. In most states, that distance takes in bordering states. We are disadvantaged by the size of the state.*
2. *In addition, the State prohibits us from spending State resources to recruit out-of-state undergraduate students.*
3. *Finally, UT and A&M have caps on the number of out-of-state undergraduate students we can enroll; we aren't approaching our cap. In this case, point 2 disadvantages us. We don't really have system to attract out-of-state undergraduates. In addition, we don't make a lot of money off of out-of-state students. We could increase what we make, but that's something that would need to be discussed.*

Q/C: I'm a graduate student in Sport Management. I'd like to present a graduate student's perspective on some of these topics. I can say what attracts us—especially out-of-state students—to come here. It's because of the top faculty that are here. The articles we read and seeing that Texas A&M faculty are on those articles. I agree that we need to both bring in more rising stars and create more rising stars. Speaking to the discussions about the completion rate among Ph.D. students and the quality of graduate students, I think that a more rigorous application process would help attract higher quality graduate students. In addition, I think that qualifying exams should be earlier—perhaps after the first year.

–Zachery Damon, College Education and Human Development

Q/C: As an observer, I believe the tenure and promotion process needs to be refreshed to attract new faculty. Although I am a non-tenured faculty member, I have watched for years as colleagues go through what appears to be a very painful process. I blame the mentors and the tenure committee at both the department and the college. There also seems to be a lack of mentoring about what tenure means.

–Marcel Erminy, College of Architecture

Q/C: One of the obstacles is very explicitly rewarding interdisciplinary work. When someone comes up for tenure, the dollar value of research grants limits the credit that faculty members are given for multidisciplinary

work. Because we don't consistently reward and recognize multidisciplinary work across the university, it becomes competitive.

–Dr. Angie Hill Price, Dwight Look College of Engineering

Response: (Dr. Watson) The departments set the guidelines for tenure and promotion. I don't believe that is an obstacle for the university as a whole. Do you mean that the obstacle is that we need to centralize tenure and promotion or that the obstacle is senior tenured faculty at the department level who haven't changed standards to appropriately reward and recognize interdisciplinary work? Which part are you referring to?

Q/C: I think it varies from department to department. But as an example, an issue came up at the engineering department heads council about counting/double counting publications.

–Dr. Angie Hill Price, Dwight Look College of Engineering

Response: (Dr. Watson) I don't understand this, but I would be willing to talk with you about it.

Q/C: We need to do a better job of internationalization, particularly in providing funding opportunities for international postdocs and infrastructure that would allow us to take advantage of Fulbright support, such as the Fulbright scholars-in-residence program.

–Dr. Jyotsna Vaid, College of Liberal Arts

Q/C: I have a comment about this term called "quality" being used as a barrier. I think it is also an opportunity when we recognize our land-grant mission of preparing high quality graduates.

–Dr. Leonard Bright, Bush School of Government and Public Service

Q/C: This is a wonderful university. We have many wonderful attributes here. We need to think about what our objectives should be . . . being good at research . . . being good at teaching? It is unrealistic to believe that we can be at the top in all.

–Dr. Tim Hall, College of Science

Q/C: We have a great opportunity with our new president Dr. Michael Young and his leadership in the upcoming Comprehensive Capital Campaign. We need to prioritize and get behind our highest priorities. Not everyone will be 100% satisfied.

–Dr. Karan Watson, provost and executive vice president

Closed by Dr. Wilcox.