

CHAPTER VII

MOORHEAD STATE UNIVERSITY: AN ACTION PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

The chapters of this self-study present evidence that Moorhead State University meets each of the five criteria for continuing accreditation by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Each chapter concludes with an assessment of the institution's strengths relative to the criteria, and ends with a list of the challenges and opportunities that MSU must face in the future. Rather than simply restate those conclusions in this last chapter, we conclude our self-study with an analysis of what we value, what kind of students we serve, and where we should be heading as an institution.

As described in Chapter I, the Self-Study Steering Committee involved 148 faculty, staff, students, and community members in a number of focus groups to discuss MSU's values and suggest priorities for the institution. The information gathered through the focus groups was summarized and presented during the 1996 President's Summer Planning Retreat. This chapter summarizes the focus group discussions and the outcomes of the summer planning retreat.

Focus Group Discussions

What Does MSU Value?

Nearly every group said that this was a difficult question to answer because our values are in flux or are not clearly articulated. General trends did emerge, however, and they are described below.

We value the Liberal Arts. Nearly every focus group indicated that MSU has historically viewed the liberal arts as important to a college education. Some felt that the message, so well articulated by former President Dille, has been abandoned by President Barden. Others suggested that the emphasis on the liberal arts had been replaced by an emphasis on career preparation or professional education.

When pressed to define "liberal arts," a few suggested it meant majors in arts and humanities; however, almost everyone agreed that the liberal arts provide a broad base or a common general education to all, no matter what their majors. Various groups mentioned the benefits of a liberal arts education as providing training in critical thinking and/or problem solving, understanding the history and traditions of our culture, learning to value cultural diversity, encouraging independent thought, and providing students with specific skills in areas like mathematics. The student focus groups articulated these definitions as readily as the faculty groups.

While most groups ultimately agreed that MSU says that it values the liberal arts as a basis for education, some groups felt that we do not clearly articulate the importance of the liberal

arts to future careers. Others feel that we fail to make the importance of the liberal arts explicit to students. Some groups concluded that advisors and instructors need to discuss the connection between the liberal arts and professional majors with students.

We value career preparation. Discussions in this area were often related to the discussion of liberal studies. There is a belief that our commitment to professional programs is growing. Some see the education and business programs as growing; others pointed out that we have always been a teacher education institution and used to be known widely for that area of study. The community focus groups suggested that we are known primarily for our business programs.

At least two groups spent some time discussing the fear that, as our students focus on narrow career preparation, they will actually narrow their future options. Given that most adults will change jobs multiple times in the future, are we hurting our graduates by not insisting on a broad-based education rather than professional specialization? Many agreed that the abilities to think critically, write well, communicate effectively, get along with other people, exercise initiative, work with computers, and know how to find new information are more important than specific job skills.

We value good teaching/quality education. Most focus groups cited "good teaching" or providing a "quality education" as one of MSU's stated central values. However, a number of groups questioned whether we are living up to this value. Everyone agreed that there are a large number of excellent teachers at MSU. However, groups reported that there are some poor teachers, as well. (Student groups and community participants were actually more positive with respect to the quality of teaching at MSU than were some of the faculty/staff groups.)

Concerns raised by the various focus groups about teaching included (1) lack of a standard or universally-applied system of evaluating teaching, (2) a belief that retention/ tenure/ promotion decisions do not always include quality of teaching as a major criterion, (3) lack of opportunities, resources, and/or encouragement to improve teaching, (4) a sense that some faculty stop working on teaching after they attain tenure and rank as full professors, and (5) a concern that all faculty say they are good teachers but many over-estimate their own capabilities.

Students were very positive about the instruction they receive in their majors. Nearly all negative perceptions of teaching quality were held about the introductory level courses. Students reported a strong sense that faculty devote more time and energy to upper division courses than to lower division, liberal studies courses. They further suggested that several introductory classes are taught in large lecture halls and offer few opportunities for students to interact with each other and with professors.

We value research and professional development of faculty. Opinions in this area were mixed: some faculty reported that the institution values and rewards research, scholarship,

and professional development, while other faculty report that these things are not valued or rewarded. ("Rewards" include favorable retention/tenure/ promotion decisions, financial support of activities, honors and awards, and release time.) Many faculty report that they want to do more research, but the heavy teaching and advising loads make it difficult.

Negative reactions to a perceived administrative push to increase research activity came primarily from two areas. A few participants suggested that the move for the business programs to become AACSB accredited has put pressure on faculty to publish rather than focus on teaching; other faculty cited administrative pressure to complete terminal degrees and/or do more research or creative work to attain tenure or promotions. These faculty feel that the messages from the administration are inconsistent with past practice or with demands for quality teaching and service to students.

We value our students. We demonstrate that we value students in the following ways: (1) we value independence and treat students as adults, (2) "we mean well," (3) many faculty value student contact and give significant amounts of time to students, (4) many of our departments nurture and encourage student interaction with faculty through departmental activities (academic and social) for majors, (5) those faculty who use student course evaluations to improve teaching demonstrate that they value student opinion, and (6) our better students feel as if faculty have been good mentors.

However, while we say we value our students, our actions occasionally say otherwise. Both student and faculty/staff focus groups suggested that (1) the institution makes students jump through too many hoops; (2) some employees are not accommodating or pleasant to students who have questions or problems and some act as if they don't have time for students; (3) admissions counselors encourage and nurture students to get them to come to MSU, but support does not continue when they arrive on campus; (4) we fail to offer sufficient numbers of sections of the classes students want to take; and (5) some advisors act as if the advising process is unimportant or an intrusion.

One focus group suggested that we may not require that students "hold up their end" of our mutual responsibility. Various groups asked some of the following questions. Do students expect too much from faculty? Are their expectations realistic? What should the student be responsible for in interactions with faculty?

We are more concerned with student numbers and with budgets than with quality education. Given the financial concerns of the past few years, several faculty and students reported feeling that the administration is more concerned about "headcount," "FTE," numbers of students, and the state of the budget than about providing a quality education. There is a perceived pressure to "be nice" to students and accommodate them, which some faculty interpret as a message to reduce standards, provide easy assignments, and give high grades.

A number of the focus groups (faculty/staff and student) discussed the need to challenge and motivate students. Some suggested that expecting students to work hard and learn in college

classes will aid retention and lead to better prepared graduates. Some participants added that helping students understand what college is all about and how college expectations differ from those of high schools is critical to achieving quality education and retaining students.

We value our disciplines but not a sense of common community. Nearly all groups discussed some aspect of this conflict in values. The general sense seems to be that both students and faculty are connected to their disciplines and to departmental activities but not to the MSU community at large. Faculty/staff groups often talked about this as a lack of collegiality or sense of community, while students and community groups interpreted it as a lack of school spirit. Nearly every faculty/staff group commented that the chance to get together in these focus groups and talk for an hour was appreciated and needed.

How Do We Perceive Our Students?

Common descriptions of the students who attend MSU included the following items. Students are primarily drawn from the region surrounding Moorhead-Fargo. Most are from small towns, although the number from the Twin Cities metro area is increasing. The majority of our students are within the "traditional" age range, but we attract a growing number of older students and students with families.

Faculty perceive that MSU students work many hours each week, and that some students appear to put work ahead of school and/or spend too few hours studying because of their work hours. A number of the faculty/staff groups noted that students are stressed due to balancing the demands of college with the demands of a job.

Many groups described students as unmotivated and ill-prepared for college. Some groups mentioned poor skills in writing, problem-solving, mathematics, etc., while others focused more on a lack of understanding of the culture of college as a learning environment. A growing number of students appear to have no idea what they want to do or why they are in college. Some student groups suggested that many freshmen don't know what to major in and are more interested in partying than in studying. Both students and faculty wondered whether some of these characteristics might be reflective of generational differences.

There is a recognition among the faculty that a large number of our students are transfers from other institutions. Some faculty suggested that transfer students are poorly prepared for the academic rigor at Moorhead State.

Finally, a number of people suggested that students don't feel particularly connected to Moorhead State as an institution or as a community. The term "suitcase college" was mentioned in several of the focus groups. Students from beyond the immediate region find this particularly troubling as the campus empties out nearly every week-end, leaving them feeling stranded.

Where Should We Be Going?

As the various focus groups talked, a number of future directions for the institution were identified. Some of these emerged from the discussions of who our students are and of what we value; others came in response to the questions "What kind of institution would you like for us to be?" and "What will we need to do to move us toward the ideal?" While each of the items below is important to the future of the university, they are not arranged in any particular order; the task of establishing priorities is left to other groups.

Maintain the liberal arts as a base for education at MSU. As described in the section above, most focus group participants value the liberal arts base and believe that the importance of the liberal arts to the education of our graduates must be reinforced by all members of the academic community. MSU graduates should be committed to life-long learning; demonstrate a spirit of inquiry; have skills in using technology, solving problems, adapting to change, and communicating; and think across disciplinary boundaries.

Focus on majors that we have traditionally provided, and perhaps add new ones; but make sure that majors maintain the connection to the liberal arts. Participants suggested that we have a number of very strong majors at MSU; these should be promoted as such. Other majors are viewed as weaker. Some groups suggested that those majors which do not live up to the university standard of excellence should be improved or dropped. Finally, we should be forward-looking and add new majors as appropriate.

Continue to focus--really focus--on excellence in teaching and learning. Since excellence in teaching is one of our primary institutional values, we need to focus resources and energies on the continuous improvement of teaching. One thread woven through the discussions of all the student focus groups was the perceived difference between the teaching provided to lower and upper division students. Faculty are perceived as doing a much better job when teaching upper division courses which have more opportunities for discussion, applications, and writing.

Improve the advising of students. Both faculty and students recognize a need in this area. While we say that advising is important, faculty do not feel that good advising is encouraged or rewarded; it is simply one more thing for which faculty must find time. Both students and faculty suggest that good advising must go beyond course selection and that student-advisor contact must take place more frequently than once a semester. There is a need for training in advising and for developing a system that reinforces faculty for taking their role as advisors seriously.

Really put students first. Our recruitment materials suggest that this is a strength of MSU. The faculty/staff and student focus groups report that we do not always live up to our promises in this area. Two issues related to this priority are discussed above: the apparent focus on learning rather than teaching and the need to improve advising. One group suggested that we be honest with students, respect them, provide them with information and

guidance when they need it, make time for them, and get involved in things that are of interest to them.

Other suggestions provided by the focus groups include (1) improve our responsiveness to student problems and questions, (2) evaluate and streamline the processes we require students to go through (e.g., registration, fee payment, financial aid, etc.), (3) do more to assist the student who is underprepared for college, (4) make sure that the classes students need are available at times that are convenient for them, and (5) encourage and support student efforts.

Involve faculty and staff in real decision-making processes of the institution. The concern about involvement centered around two different kinds of issues. First, faculty report serving on numerous committees, many of which have no real, identifiable function to perform. The proposed solution involves reducing the number of committees, giving committees specific charges, and making committees responsible for actually accomplishing something. Given that all committees are currently "advisory," there is a feeling that committees have no real power or mission. As a result, most committees do not feel ownership for actually solving problems or taking actions.

The second concern is related to the first: faculty, staff, and students all reported that they are asked for input, which they provide readily, but that "nothing ever happens" as a result of their involvement. There is a genuine desire to share in solving the problems of the institution. The conclusion drawn by several of the focus groups was that the administration needs to either demonstrate that participation is truly valued or not ask for participation in the first place.

Strengthen our sense of community. As noted previously, faculty and students report feeling strongly connected to their departments and majors, but not to the institution as a whole. Those students who have not declared or been admitted to a major have no base connection. Many groups talked about the need for improved communications across campus--from administration to departments, from departments to students, and from department to department. Some expressed a fear that the administration's recent move to decentralize will only exacerbate this problem. In addition, there appears to be something of an "us-them" mentality that pits faculty against administration, teaching faculty against administrative and service faculty, and faculty against students.

The problem with "community" or "spirit" seems to be a circular one, and the solution may also be circular. If faculty feel connected to the institution and convey that sense to students, then perhaps the students will be excited about MSU while they are here and after they graduate. Nurturing the connection that alumni have to MSU through activities and communications will help to build their financial commitment to the continuation of MSU. Someone suggested building an ethic of "reaching back to help others" among alumni.

Also included in the development of a sense of community is the need to improve civility on campus; diversity must be both valued and nurtured. Diversity refers to racial and ethnic

differences, age differences, diversity in values and preferences, and diversity in major areas of study. Several students talked about the need to nurture a campus climate that values and supports both “athletes” and “artists.” A student of color noted that there are very few students of color on campus and that they feel isolated and under-valued within the MSU community.

Strengthen our connection to the Moorhead community. Many view MSU as something of an island in the middle of the city. Members of the Moorhead community are certainly invited to participate in campus events and do attend theater, arts and music events; they use the Regional Science Center, and attend the Fourth of July celebration. Moorhead State faculty, staff, and students participate in community activities. However, the feeling of connection seems tenuous. There is room for closer cooperation between Moorhead (and Fargo) businesses, the city, the Chamber of Commerce, and the University. These suggestions were stated most strongly by the community focus groups, but other groups noted the problems, as well.

Publicize our accomplishments within the University and within the city, region, and state. Nearly every focus group mentioned our lack of a strong, positive public image as a significant problem. Faculty and students are often unaware of what faculty and students in other departments or areas of the university are doing. We would enhance internal community building by sharing and celebrating accomplishments. We would enhance our public image and our recruitment of new students with a more potent public relations effort outside the University.

We need to clearly articulate a vision for the institution. While many believed that the President must take the lead in articulating the vision for and the values of the institution, most groups agreed that it must reflect the values of the members of the University community. Members of the community must then carry the message forward in their work and their personal sense of mission. The vision should be repeated often and should be reflected in decisions about resource allocations.

Decide what kind of students we want to attract and then focus on being the kind of place where they want to be. Comments such as "Be honest about who we are and what we do"; "Don't make promises we can't keep"; "We can't be all things to all students" were expressed in many of the focus group discussions. As our student body gets more and more diverse (age, ability, wants, etc.), our ability to meet student needs erodes. There was some sentiment for being more proactive in determining what kind of student body we want to teach rather than waiting for those who come to Moorhead State (and stay) to define our mission for us.

Actively acculturate students into university life. It is clear to all who participated in the focus groups that increasing numbers of students are coming to MSU ill-prepared for the academic demands of college. The changes we have made in orientation and the establishment of the First Year Experience program are designed to start students on the right

track. However, we may need to do more to assure that the majority of our new entering students (both freshmen and transfers) are successful. This is the responsibility of the entire community and not just a few faculty and staff. Changing faculty attitudes and providing them with the skills they need to effectively teach these students are critical to student success. In addition, students need to be encouraged to participate in the broad range of activities and opportunities available within the university.

Improve the quality of equipment and the availability of technology on campus. As we move rapidly into a new century with increasing demands on the technological competence of our graduates, we must find ways of catching up and then keeping up.

Summer Planning Retreat Outcomes

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the focus group outcomes report was distributed as part of the information for the 1996 President's Summer Planning Retreat. Excluded managers, directors, department chairs, and leaders of bargaining units participated in the retreat which was led by consultants from Boyd and Company. Participants were first asked to list and then to prioritize strengths, threats, opportunities, and weaknesses of the University. The results of this discussion are summarized below. (The full consultant's report is in GD-119.)

By far the greatest strength of Moorhead State University lies with its people who are variously described as being experienced, possessing a strong midwestern work ethic, of high quality, efficient, involved, and committed to the University. Other strengths include being a public institution that provides a quality education at a good price and being an institution engaged in looking forward with an eye to improving how we accomplish our goals.

The two most pronounced weaknesses of the institution are our limited resources and our external public relations. Student retention and overall morale were also cited as weaknesses, but were viewed as less significant than the first two. The threats that the University faces are related to these weaknesses: increasing competition for state resources, a public attitude which is becoming more negative about the value of higher education, increasing competition for students, and new or rapidly changing technology.

Other critical issues which emerged during these discussions included dissonance between liberal studies and other degree programs; making conscious efforts to streamline processes and responses to requests; rebuilding the neighborhood surrounding campus and adding commercial enterprises; and expanding the traditional walls of the classroom by using non-traditional methods, field experiences, and technology in more effective ways.

As a final exercise, the Boyd and Company consultants gave participants play money and asked them to distribute their dollars across each of the action plans that had been developed during the retreat. In this way, priorities for the distribution of institutional resources were established. The following were the top priorities:

1. Develop a comprehensive marketing plan for the University.
2. Develop at least one event to convey the University's message to the media, local governments, public schools, business leaders, etc.
3. Increase freshmen success, and improve the rate of retention from the first to the second year.
4. Increase student enrollment and community support by offering a division I hockey program.
5. Increase the number of faculty who are focused on the success of students and who understand the students who now attend MSU.
6. Assess the feasibility of developing a university mall to meet greater university and community needs.
7. Develop a training program, focusing on customer service and customer relations, for front-line employees.
8. Reduce the number of university committees by 25%.
9. Develop and implement a comprehensive budget request and allocation process to be used for FY98 budget planning.
10. Increase contacts with potential funding sources and raise additional dollars so that reliance on state funding is decreased.

Responding to the Priorities

Already this fall, the University is responding to these priorities. A marketing plan is being developed (priority #1), a proposal to restructure committees has been approved (priority #8), Administrative Affairs has purchased a Total Quality Improvement training program for its employees (priority #7), and the Vice President for Administrative Affairs presented a development plan, that includes a mini-mall, to the Moorhead City Council (priority #6). The Assistant to the President met with the local media to discuss ways in which they can help improve our public image (priority #2); several feature stories have appeared in the newspaper and on television highlighting contributions that the University makes to the community. President Barden has hosted a series of dinners which bring administrators, students, and various external constituencies (media, legislative and local government officials, athletic supporters, etc.) together. The Strategic Planning Committee has utilized the two reports reviewed in this chapter to develop a working plan for the year. Morale seems to be better on campus this fall than it has been in several years.

Moorhead State University is a fine institution with a long history of providing a quality education to the people of our region. While the past few years have been filled with change, we are looking forward to a bright future; we are prepared to meet a variety of new challenges with grace, dignity, and pride.