October 2, 2009

Dear faculty and staff colleagues,

The last two months have been extraordinary in many ways. Experiencing these events with the Stetson University community, I have observed many distinguishing features of Stetson University that further my belief that this is a special place that is poised for national distinction –

- Faculty and staff who focus so generously on facilitating personalized student learning and success.
- Accomplished faculty who are engaged scholars and learners, contributing to campus enrichment, disciplinary advancement, and social progress.
- Students with refreshing intellectual curiosity, social conscience, and openness to personal and professional growth.
- Campus communities characterized by commitment, compassion, and constructive critical dialogue.
- A vibrant extended community of trustees and advisors, alumni, professional partners, and neighbors and friends who continue to inspire, celebrate, and support us.

I have also learned – and will continue to learn – about aspects of the University for which there is concern, need for revision or redirection, and opportunity for improvement. Even in these areas, examples abound of thoughtful critical analysis, healthy awareness of the need for change, and eagerness to research best practices and consider different approaches. It is on this strong foundation that we chart our path forward.

The University Plan

I have learned about the thoughtful efforts of various groups, across the years, to chart a path for advancing Stetson’s excellence. The University planning process is our opportunity to bring these visions and plans together to crystallize our aspiration, and to collaborate on defining priority goals and actions. President Libby and I are committed to leading this planning process in a collaborative, thoughtful, and strategic, but efficient manner. Moreover, we are firmly committed to leading the deliberate action directed by the resulting plan. The ad hoc actions that the institution has made in recent years to stabilize the University’s budget were critically important at that moment. Going forward, however, we want a deliberate plan to stabilize our fiscal situation, remove our financial insecurity, and to energetically move the University forward toward national prominence.

Our core identity is as a liberal arts university, complete with a diverse set of arts and sciences programs and select professional programs at the undergraduate and graduate level. As you have heard from President Libby, the leading question that will drive our University planning initiative is “What will
distinguish Stetson University as a national liberal arts university?“ This clarification of identity and vision will help us to define and prioritize key goals for moving the institution forward. For each goal, we will define strategies and set forward a specific action agenda. This plan will guide the strategic allocation, reallocation, and generation of university resources.

Necessarily, this plan will guide our work in all areas of the University. Just as necessary is our immediate attention to strengthening the University’s operations, so that we are poised to act on the University plan. I will turn now to beginning a conversation with you about our work this year in our academic programs.

The Academic Plan

Within the scope of the University plan, our main project this year is to develop a deliberate academic plan for the University – a plan for academic programs (inclusive of majors, minors, and certificate programs, and including contributions to General Education and other “service” courses) that are well-aligned with the University mission, that help advance the institution toward our aspiration, and that we can support as excellent programs within allocated University resources. While I am aware of a few proposals concerning academic programs that have been in discussion for a long time and now must be brought to a decision, there is much forward planning for the academic programs that must be undertaken. Our efforts this year will form the foundation for a living plan that we analyze and adapt on an ongoing basis, and that will guide our annual and longer-range curriculum, staffing, and financial decisions. Just through our work on developing this plan, we will identify many immediate ways in which we can strengthen the effectiveness and efficiency of our academic programs. Moreover, developing a sound academic plan will help us move toward providing appropriate compensation and support to our faculty and staff, realizing even greater excellence in our academic programs, and maximizing the success of our students.

Clearly, the academic plan must be guided by the vision, goals, and priorities defined by the University plan. But we can begin work now on forming the key building blocks – analyzing various metrics that help us to understand how our programs function in terms of University recruitment and financial systems, clarifying and defining various components of our academic programs, developing guiding principles and a process for program strengthening, restructuring, closing or initiation, and identifying and studying programs that represent national benchmarks and best practices.

In the pursuit of excellence, we must value and invest in programs. Right now, Stetson finds itself with a variety of academic programs, and there is deep concern among our community that we are spreading ourselves too thin so that we cannot sufficiently invest in any of them. This creates a culture of frustration, devaluation, and insecurity, and threatens to create and perpetuate mediocrity. With the best of intentions, programs have proliferated over the years, often with great success. And, indeed, the rich array of expertise at Stetson is a special characteristic of a small university. At the same time, as new programs have proliferated, few programs have been discontinued. Thus, our resources are stretched thinner and thinner.
Programs vary significantly in the number of majors and minors. The student-to-faculty FTE ratio is highly variable from one program to the next. Course enrollments, as well as faculty “enrollment loads” vary considerably. Some variability is appropriate, but it should be by design, with student learning goals as the purpose and thorough understanding of the resource implications as the guide.

Another critical factor is the financial model for our diverse programs. Naturally, our programs will differ in the cost/revenue balance, with some breaking even, some generating significant University revenue, and some – while central to the institutional mission – having costs that exceed generated revenue. Such variety is necessary for fulfilling our mission, and must be defined as part of an overarching academic plan with overall financial and programmatic integrity. Several additional issues relevant to the conversation include the degree to which academic programs attract high-quality students, contribute to the University’s national reputation, lead to student success in post-graduate study and employment, and have the potential to attract gifts and other fundraising for the University.

In this context, our academic planning will include the following key components:

1. **Curriculum plans** for both General Education and for majors and minors that embrace the following: (a) defined learning outcomes, (b) incorporation of high-impact pedagogies (including making effective use of technological innovations), (c) definition of realistic target course enrollments that match and maximize the effectiveness of those pedagogies and overall program excellence, (d) developmental sequencing of courses and other learning experiences that maximize students’ potential for success, and (e) assessment and reflection on student learning outcomes in an effort to continuously strengthen program excellence. (What an exciting opportunity we have for this work this year as we continue implementation of a new cutting-edge General Education program, and as the Colleges and Schools continue with forward-looking curriculum reinvention!)

2. **A financial plan**, as part of the overall University financial plan, that sets the parameters for the scope of programs that can be supported by available resources, and that strategically distributes resources so as to maximally support program excellence. The financial plan also includes strategies for generating additional resources.

3. **A staffing plan** that is both efficient and effective in achieving excellence, and that provides guidance for the allocation and reallocation of faculty lines, including planning for adapting to anticipated retirements. As we work on constructing this plan, we need to make staffing decisions for 2010-11 carefully, relying on as much information as we have at the time, so that timely decisions can be made. Our decisions need to be based on substantiated programmatic need and careful allocation of resources. We will place a hold on tenure-track searches until we have sufficiently developed the academic plan to guide our careful allocation of these precious resources.
4. A dynamic plan for introducing new programs, growing or contracting programs, strengthening programs, and phasing out programs that can no longer be sustained, or programs that are no longer related to the University mission.

Initial Work Groups

We need to work together to study our academic programs, and to develop the tools we will use to build a deliberate and supportable academic plan, as guided by the vision and priorities set forth in the University plan. We will start this work by forming work groups, as defined below. Each work group will include faculty, administrators, staff, and students where appropriate. Provost-appointed work groups will be composed by October 15, in consultation with the Deans and Faculty Senate Executive Committee. These work groups will begin as soon as they are formed. Each group will receive a charge and timeline for its work. I will work closely with each group so that the work proceeds as swiftly as possible.

Here is my current thinking about some of the key questions that should guide these groups’ work.

I. Defining key indicators

A work group will be charged to define key indicators and analyses that can be used by academic leaders in the College, Schools, Departments, and Programs to study the “economies” of our academic programs (e.g., course and program enrollment distributions, student-faculty ratios, faculty workload, major and minor counts, change of major paths, program costs, net revenue). This group’s work will be supported by the Office of Institutional Research and will work with the University Finance staff to define useful financial indicators and analyses. By the end of the Fall semester, this group will present a definition of key indicators; Institutional Research and Finance will work to create a data warehouse of key indicators and associated reports.

II. Defining curriculum parameters

A work group will be charged with guiding and working with academic leaders to define key curriculum parameters (target enrollments, the weighting of different types of courses in faculty workload, course unit minimum criteria, etc.).

Stetson University holds academic excellence as a central value and goal. Our collective aim is to facilitate rigorous learning experiences through high-impact engaged pedagogies – approaches to learning that require significant interaction among students, faculty, and staff, as well as personalized mentoring to guide students in forming and fulfilling learning goals and a values-inspired life. Curricula are composed of a variety of pedagogical strategies, at their best arranged developmentally so that students build upon successive learning experiences. Our challenge is to create curricula that are maximally effective in achieving learning goals, while also using our human and other resources efficiently and responsibly.
What are the different types of learning experiences that comprise our curricula? What is the optimal number of students for the different types of learning experiences that compose our majors/minors/programs? Sometimes learning can be facilitated best with 30 students; sometimes with 1 or 2. Some of the most high-impact engaged academic learning is currently happening outside of the curriculum, and on top of assigned faculty workload. Since such learning is so important for our students, we must plan this into student curricula and faculty workloads.

Just as learning experiences must be factored into faculty workloads, so too must course type be factored into faculty workloads. While most courses will be weighted as 1 unit in faculty teaching loads, there may be some courses that are weighted differently for faculty (e.g., Independent Study, Individual Instruction, Internship, laboratory sessions). We must determine our guiding principles about faculty course and enrollment loads (e.g., combination of lower and upper level courses, target enrollment ranges, advisee loads, overload parameters).

We need to determine what we mean by an optimal average course enrollment for our resources and goals and what such an average target means. Target enrollments will likely vary by pedagogical approaches, both within and across programs. For purposes of illustration, let’s say that we target for a particular program an average course enrollment of 18 – 20 students. This target could be achieved with a “diversified enrollment” approach wherein some courses, based on the pedagogical approaches employed, have an enrollment of 30, and some 10. Or the target enrollment could be achieved with most courses having 18-20 students.

A related question is the definition of the minimum criteria for a course “unit”. The traditional metric has been “seat time.” But seat time has become insufficient as a primary criterion for defining learning experiences. Most contemporary learning theory and research has clearly shown the relative effectiveness of engaged pedagogies that require students’ active interaction with learning materials and challenges, with each other, and with faculty and other “experts,” both in and out of the classroom. How will we define these minimum standards – and, indeed, an optimal standard for our courses?

The work of this group and of academic leaders across all programs will be ongoing throughout this academic year.

III. Program closure and program initiation criteria and process

A work group will draft criteria or guiding principles that will be applied by academic leaders in evaluating whether a program should be discontinued. By what process will we consider and implement the discontinuation of academic programs? Likewise, what criteria or guiding principles should be applied in evaluating proposals for new programs, and by what process will this be conducted? Such policies typically include guiding criteria that include centrality to the University mission, effectiveness, and efficiency; student demand; an evaluation of resources impacted by program initiation or closure; and the articulation of a process for analysis,
deliberation, and decision. The priority whenever possible is to maintain tenure-track and
tenured faculty as our central resource in most areas. A draft policy will be completed by the
end of the Fall semester that will then move through the appropriate policy approval steps.

IV. Faculty Role

The deans will work together, and with faculty where appropriate, to propose guidelines to the
Provost for faculty role and workload expectations, including defining, for example, criteria for
reassigned time, parameters for overload, a reasonable and equitable compensation structure
for administrative work, and a more equitable structure for adjunct faculty compensation. The
deans will provide a preliminary proposal to the Provost by the end of the Fall semester, with a
final proposal by February, 2010.

A carefully developed academic plan will help us to tighten and focus our curriculum so that we can
move toward strategic investment of our resources and appropriate support for our commitment to
excellence. With the guidance of the University plan and critical analysis of various metrics and program
components, we will define the scope of Stetson University academic programs. How many, and what
composition, of academic programs can we support in achieving excellence? What programs are most
integral to our mission and to our stature as an excellent, nationally-regarded 21st century liberal arts
university? How do we create an academic enterprise that is both solid and nimble -- a defined
combination of well-planned and supported academic programs, as well as flexibility in both initiating
and discontinuing curricular initiatives?

I look forward to further developing this plan through open dialogue, and to advancing this plan through
active collaboration and shared commitment.

This is an ambitious agenda. This is an agenda that will lead to action and change. I ask you to explicitly
face natural apprehensions about change, and embrace the opportunity to create a stronger and more
dynamic Stetson University.

Thank you, in advance, for your active engagement in this challenging work, your compassion and
grounding in Stetson’s core values, and your courageous eye to the future. My promise to you is that
this work will be transparent and will lead to decisions and action being taken.

Beth Paul

Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs