Thursday, January 31st, 2013

Brian Charette, Chair
University Planning Team

Nick Langridge, Supervising Division Head
Sharon Lovell, Co-Chair
Rick Larson, Co-Chair
Internal Analysis Prep Team

To the Members of the University Planning Team and Internal Analysis Prep Team:

The undersigned members of the Department of Integrated Science and Technology (ISAT) have strong reservations about the validity of the SWOT analysis about which their feedback was solicited two weeks ago. We strongly urge you to reconsider the timetable and process by which this feedback is gathered and incorporated into our university’s strategic planning process.

We are grateful for the time, effort, and thoughtfulness of the members of the Internal Analysis Prep Team, and we also recognize the severe constraints placed upon you. The Team was charged to produce this SWOT in a very short period. All Team members have demanding schedules, and we recognize that a weekly commitment to the SWOT over the past three months represents a major investment. By all accounts, this was an intense process, and given these constraints, we believe that the SWOT distributed to the faculty represents an honest and sincere effort to see the university grow and thrive. Again, we thank you for your effort. Even so, we have some significant concerns.

To start, we’d like to establish that the ISAT faculty are not trying to avoid putting in the time and effort needed to provide the internal Analysis Prep Team with the feedback that they need. In fact, we have a history of being committed to and enthusiastic about strategic planning and continual improvement. It is counter to our culture to “punt” on an opportunity to engage a chance to improve the university in which we live.

In that context, we feel it important to stress that the reservations we express about the current SWOT process are not made lightly. We are more than willing to provide reasoned, considered, and practical feedback to the Internal Analysis Prep Team, but the context of the current round of discussion has made this very difficult for us. While some of us have taken the time to express their thoughts, and this feedback is attached, the Team is missing out on what could be a much more productive conversation.
Specifically, our reservations can be summarized as follows:

1. **The items in the SWOT should be accompanied by supporting data.**
   Requiring that every item in the SWOT be accompanied by supporting data will greatly reduce the degree to which personal opinion biases the trajectory of our strategic plan.

2. **Why each SWOT item was included in each category should be addressed.**
   Sometimes a threat or a weakness can be an opportunity when considered in the context of strengths. That nine of eleven pages of the SWOT were devoted to weaknesses and threats speaks to the need for more careful consideration of the classification of items.

3. **The variation in the JMU community should be more accurately captured.**
   Once clearly articulated and supported by data, the entire faculty should have the opportunity to respond to a survey asking them to indicate their level of agreement (strongly disagree to strongly agree) that each item truly represents a SWOT element. Final prioritization should be based on the overall level of agreement of the faculty.

4. **SWOT elements should be sub-categorized by the scale of the issue.**
   For example, should elements like parking (Weakness #19) and classroom scheduling (Weakness #33) really be considered on the same level as the university’s planning process (Weakness #19) or work/life balance (Weakness #18).

5. **SWOT elements that directly contradict one another should be removed or reconciled.**
   For example: Strength #21: “Our intercollegiate athletic programs add value” versus Weakness #29: “The athletic funding model and return on investment are questioned.”

6. **Our implicit approval of the overall SWOT document should NOT be assumed.**
   The manner in which our feedback was solicited implicitly assumes that the overall document is roughly on target, with only minor modifications needed. We do not accept this assumption, and many of us are reluctant to provide feedback on the grounds that our response may be construed as tacit approval of the SWOT document as a whole.

We recognize that in part, our feedback was solicited specifically to address some of these issues, but we have balked at this because of two problems:

1. **The “where do I begin” problem**
   Many of us found so many of the items in the SWOT to be troublesome, the thought of the time and effort necessary to address them in a fair and articulate fashion left us feeling deflated.

2. **The “will my feedback really make a difference” problem**
   Given that this feedback was solicited suddenly, with very little provision of context, or a clear explanation of how feedback would be assimilated, and also the fact that such a short span of time was given in which to respond, many of us were left seriously questioning whether it was worth our time and energy to respond.

If there are any points on the SWOT with which we are in full agreement, it would probably be contained in Weakness #31:
Discourse can be perceived as... just something you must do as a formality. Final decisions may be predictable despite the conversations supposedly informing the decision. The result of a lack of involvement of faculty (and others) in decision-making leads to a pervasive, powerless feeling at the level of individual faculty, departments, academic unit heads and at higher levels. p.7

The current request for feedback on the SWOT reinforces this weakness because it essentially communicates to us that even though lip service is being paid to the notion that faculty input is important, the unwillingness to allocate sufficient time for us engage us in a better structured process that will ensure that our voice is being heard and incorporated undermines the whole exercise.

In closing, we sincerely hope that our voices will be heard on this point. We understand that strategic planning at the university level is an enormous undertaking. We have a lot to offer, and are very willing to offer it. We feel strongly that the strategic plan that JMU develops as a result of the current process will be significantly weaker without a more robust process for including the voices of the faculty, not just ISAT faculty, but all of the academic units on campus. We strongly urge those in charge of this process to reconsider both their timeline and their strategy for collecting and assimilating our feedback in a structured and meaningful way. Doing so will not only result in a better strategic plan, but also go a long way towards addressing the trust issues between faculty and administration here at JMU.

Respectfully,

The Undersigned Faculty of the Department of Integrated Science and Technology