

# Clarion University True North Initiative Task Force Report

April 1, 2019

## Charge:

- **Guiding Statement:**
  - The True North Initiative Task Force will broadly represent the various divisions, and departments at the University, while striving to maintain a minimal size that allows it to complete its work. At its discretion, the TNI Task Force may create ad hoc subcommittees that consist of members of the Task Force and/or additional personnel from across the University.
- **Goals:**
  - The Task Force will produce 5-6 University priorities that will be the basis for actionable goals to be achieved over the next 3 years.
- **Timeline:**
  - The TNI Task Force will issue a report to the President with priorities by April 2019.
- **Charge:**
  - Under the direction of the Co-Chairs, TNI Task Force will undergo a process of review of Clarion University by analyzing data, gathering input and reviewing regional needs and national trends. Based upon information from multiple sources, the members of the TNI will develop no more than six priorities of focus for the University going forward. These priorities will become the basis for an action plan the University will follow over the next 2-3 years. The TNI will communicate its processes to the campus community on a regular basis in order to provide optimal transparency and facilitate maximal input.

## Task Force Members:

- Dr. Daniel Clark, Chemistry, Mathematics and Physics/Faculty Senate – Arts, Education and Sciences
- Mr. Joshua Domitrovich, Career Services/SCUPA
- Ms. Merrillyn Dunlap, Enrollment Management
- Ms. Jennifer Dutkiewicz, Residence Life
- Dr. Raymond Feroz, Human Services, Rehabilitation, Health and Sport Sciences/APSCUF
- Ms. Lynne Fleisher, Distance Education
- Ms. Jennifer Herron, Athletics
- Dr. Deborah Kelly, Nursing/Faculty Senate – Health Sciences and Human Services
- Ms. Anita Lahr, Biology/AFSCME
- Dr. Terry Latour, University Libraries/Administrative Co-chair
- Dr. Gwyneth Price, School of Education

- Mr. Samuel Puleio, Computing Services
- Dr. Adam Roberts, Chemistry, Mathematics and Physics/Faculty Co-chair
- Mr. Matthew Shaffer, Student Affairs
- Dr. Chad Smith, Management and Marketing/Faculty Senate – Business Administration and Information Sciences
- Mr. Chad Thomas, Facilities Management
- Ms. Tamara Varsek, Division of Finance & Administration
- Mr. Brad Wagner, Keystone School District/Community Member
- Mr. Tree Zuzzio, Council of Trustees/Student Body

### **Organization & Process:**

- **October 31, 2018:** The first meeting of the Task Force was held. President Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson presented the charge to the task force members.
- **November-December 2018:** Meetings were scheduled at two week intervals. Representatives from key areas of the University presented overviews of important aspects of their operations.
- **January-March 2019:**
  - Five working groups were created and charged to focus their attention on the following topics:
    - Academic Programming.
    - Affordability and Finances.
    - Campus Climate and Diversity.
    - Recruitment and Retention.
    - Venango Campus.
  - Each working group was charged with the following:
    - Seek a limited number of additional working group members to represent important stakeholders or that add different perspectives or expertise to the group.
    - Investigate the topics of concern identified for the focus group.
    - Define the top 3-6 challenges for the review area.
    - Define the top 3-6 opportunities for the review area.
    - Draft 1-2 University priority recommendations for consideration by the full TNI committee.
    - Actionable items should be included in the recommendations.
    - Each committee will incorporate the Board of Governors three key strategic priorities in their recommendations. Those three priorities are:
      - Ensuring Student Success.
      - Leveraging University Strengths.
      - Transforming the Leadership/Governance Structure.
    - Complete this work by March 15, 2019.

- Leverage the work of other working committees and engage them in the process (as part of the charge, try to cite known work groups and contacts. Examples: Venango Campus, STEP Up).
  - Working groups met at least weekly and engaged in a thorough investigation of their topic. Input was sought from stakeholders in the forms of consultations with non-selected working group volunteers, presentations, surveys, and focus group sessions with interested individuals, representatives, and groups. University and non-University information, resources, and reports were consulted.
- A more detailed report of True North Initiative activities is available at the True North Initiative website, available through the website for the Office of the President, and at the True North Initiative intranet site.

### **Findings:**

Through the dedicated efforts of each of the working groups, and the many people throughout the University community that supported and shared their honest insights with them, a wealth of valuable data and perceptions have been compiled. This information is documented in the detailed reports and appendices of each working group, which are available at the True North Initiative intranet site.

**One theme, the success and welfare of Clarion University students, was pervasive throughout the investigations and deliberations of each working group.** It is the foundational principle of Clarion University’s mission, as well as that of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. Upon that principle, the True North Initiative Task Force makes the following recommendations.

### **Recommendation 1: Student Success:**

***Student success at Clarion University needs to be better defined, structured, and coordinated to help deliver a high-quality educational experience to all of our students. This includes both within and outside of the classroom.***

In 2017, the PASSHE Board of Governors defined “ensuring student success” as one of its three strategic priorities. PASSHE defines the mission of student success at all 14 of the system schools as, “providing access to high-value, relevant educational experiences that prepare our students in a timely manner for pathways to successful lives and careers.” Clarion has taken strides to improve student success. Coordinated efforts by both academic and student affairs still fall short in providing high-quality services, programs, and support to our students, both inside and outside of the classroom. Student success extends beyond support services. Our pedagogy and advising practices should also actively support the success of our students.

The True North Initiative Task Force proposes the following actionable items as a first step in creating a student success model at Clarion University:

1. **Definition:** Clarion University does not currently have an institutional definition of student success. The structure of student success should flow from and align with this definition, which should be aligned with the definition communicated from the PASSHE Board of Governors. The University and respective divisions, departments, and offices should align their mission, values, and delivery of services with this definition.
2. **Structure:** Clarion University does not have an intentionally developed and cohesive student success model. There is also insufficient coordination and communication between the offices that currently make up the Student Success Center. This lack of cohesion results in uneven results to students and they may not receive the best possible support. To strengthen our student success efforts overall, we suggest the development of a Division of Student Success, organized around an institutional definition of student success and aligned with the PASSHE Board of Governor's vision for student success.
3. **Delivery of the educational experience:** In our day-to-day efforts to support student success at Clarion University, we must remember to support *all* of our students. Our current model focuses mostly on poorly performing students and supports a "deficit" perception of student support services. We suggest the following to improve the delivery of our services:
  1. Develop a campus Learning Center to support all students.
  2. Establish a Center for Teaching Excellence to share best practices and improve teaching and learning for all pedagogical approaches (e.g. online, hybrid, face-to-face environments).
  3. Examine the access, quality, and affordability of online programs and develop stronger policies and guidelines for distance delivery education courses that support its current objectives/beliefs.
  4. Implement strategies from the Advising Council to improve academic advising.
  5. Intentionally integrate high-impact practices into the curriculum and regularly assess their effectiveness.

## **Recommendation 2: Academic Programming:**

***Clarion University must encourage and actively support academic program development in promising new areas and the adaptation/modification of existing academic programs, while supporting disciplines that promote a robust general education program, to maintain and enhance our mission as a regional comprehensive University. Additionally, existing resources should be leveraged whenever possible to enhance current programs, and make new programs even stronger.***

There are issues (both real and perceived) pertaining to the development and launching of programs. As the University strives to create new programs to attract new students it is often unclear to faculty and managers, how to bring a program from an idea, all the way through

launching the program with a marketing campaign. Beyond this, though it is important to innovate and grow, we must rediscover our foundation and honor our roots.

1. **Program Development:** It is recommended that a process be developed, that is crystallized in a flowchart, which encompasses and delineates all of the steps necessary for launching a new program. This process, led by the Provost's Office, should incorporate all of the necessary voices from any related academic and student support departments, to include the necessary data mining and design for appropriate marketing strategies.
  - a. Recommend the process include at the onset an analysis of programmatic finances and profitability, return on investment, workforce needs, scholarship opportunities, competitor analysis, and meaningfulness.
  - b. Recommend the process include a detailed look at the proposed audience for the new program, and consider whether face-to-face, online, hybrid delivery or alternate methodology makes the most sense, along with consideration of whether the program best fits the Clarion or Venango Campus.
  - c. Recommend the process include, when appropriate, discussions with support services such as International Programs, Career Services, Technology Support, Clarion Online, and related units.
  - d. Recommend discussions with Dean's Council members, marketing, and Admissions appear early on in the process and be reflected in the flowchart.
2. **Communications Forum:** It is recommended that a regular forum be established for faculty and deans across colleges to explore new and emerging markets and discuss ways to collaboratively develop programs to meet those new or distinct educational needs. There should be support for a transdisciplinary approach to program development.
3. **Existing Programs:** New programs should focus on being able to leverage existing programs with an eye towards dual majors and dual degrees. Focus should also be on developing programs that appeal to non-traditional learners with some college experience, but not a degree. In the spirit of the STEP Up Strategic Enrollment Plan strategy of "take back our backyard", there should be a rededication to structures and programs that historically have served the purpose of "lifting all boats" and been directly tied to the mission of the University. A particular example of this would be a recommitment to the School of Education as a separate entity with opportunities to grow.
4. **Common Hour:** A "common hour" for the campus would facilitate having a forum where all key stakeholders in the program development process could be present.

### **Recommendation 3: Affordability:**

***Identify affordability as a University priority and define associated goals to review and redesign Clarion housing and student fee rates, scholarship models, and associated budget decisions to...***

1. **Position Clarion with market-competitive, access-enabling housing and student fee rates** to include a freeze on rates for 2019-20 and a charge to identify rate reductions for 2020-21 that are aligned with the overall priorities of the University and, at a minimum, will eliminate 50% of the freshmen affordability gap. The exact dollar goal to be assessed and defined with President's Executive Council (PEC).
2. **Revise and optimize the Clarion E&G scholarship and student work study models** to prioritize financial need as a significant variable for scholarship awards and support the rate reductions defined in (1.) and eliminate 50% of the freshmen affordability gap (exact dollar goal to be assessed and defined with PEC).
3. **Optimize the financial operating model of the University to align budget and resource allocation decisions with defined University priorities** and the "new normal" enrollment levels (defined by Enrollment Management) and define specific targeted goals to identify fund raising or other alternate revenue sources (grants) to support the fee reductions noted in (1.).

#### **Comments:**

Affordability is a key factor for student success. The challenges detailed in this report are perhaps best illustrated by the affordability gap. While this challenge is the most pronounced for the 39% of our undergraduate students who are Pell eligible, Clarion fee levels are an important consideration for all of our students. The net cost of attendance ultimately impacts a student's ability to enroll, persist, and graduate – and the debt levels incurred for educational loans further impact individual success for 10 years after graduation. A prioritized focus on affordability could serve as a key differentiator and an important value proposition for the University, particularly in our region.

We are ultimately measured by the quality of our programs and services and the effectiveness of the outcomes for our students, so affordability cannot be achieved to the detriment of those fundamental items. We cannot continue the status quo and we cannot be all things to all people. Prioritization is key. The True North Initiative will define the University priorities going forward. Even in austere budget times, we have discretionary resources and decisions and those are strengths that we must leverage. To pursue the affordability priority, we must transform our approaches with the resources that we can control and maximize the alignment of those limited resources with the University priorities.

## **Recommendation 4: Student Engagement and Citizenship:**

*In support of student success, Clarion University will establish mechanisms to increase engagement of students, enhance citizenship, and promote a culture where students' basic needs and higher-level needs are met.*

1. **Leverage the classroom environment** to provide thoughtful diversity conversations. It is recognized that students are not attending traditional workshops and trainings and, by way of focus group information, are more likely to retain information presented during instructional time.
2. **Maximize resources** to combat food insecurity, concerns for physical and mental wellness, and concerns for affordability of housing and associated costs.
3. **Promote civic engagement**, an understanding of discourse and difference in points of view, and a sense of civility.
4. **Reimagine communications** with students to promote increased use of programming, as well as to provide needed information relative to academics such as scheduling and advising.
5. Expand utilization of an initiative to **promote the learning of communication skills** with students.
6. **Encourage, “the active voice of all students”** and act on applicable feedback to enhance success.
7. **Promote communications with Clarion Borough, off-campus businesses** and offices, including Police, to assist in better interactions with students while off campus.
8. **Establish and foster collaborations between students, student groups, and faculty/staff** to assist in the development of students.

The climate of campus and diversity are areas which impact recruitment and retention of students and can contribute to the collegiate experience. The Campus Climate and Diversity Working Group discovered many common themes suggesting a need for better communications, need for diversity training throughout the campus community, and a lack of pride in Clarion. It is noted that programs such as the Good Neighbor Program and Collaborations Task Force, which look at forging partnerships between student organizations, and past opportunities for leadership retreats are low or no-cost ways to improve communications, change the culture of the campus, and contribute towards a renewed pride in Clarion University.

It is also not lost on this group that students who have basic needs for food and shelter, as well as growing numbers of students with mental health needs, may not be prepared for work in the classroom and likely not able to positively contribute outside the classroom. Further utilization of resources related to student needs for mental health, food insecurity, and affordable housing help contribute to putting students in a position where they may succeed.

## **Recommendation 5: Clarion Brand and Promise:**

***Clarion University must clarify and communicate, both internally and externally, a realistic brand and deliver on that promise to students. It is essential that there is accountability for what we market and the consistency of the experience students receive.***

With Clarion University's mission and vision statements as guides, in 2013, the University engaged thousands of students, alumni, faculty, staff, friends and community leaders in a study to identify what makes Clarion University special. From this study a brand promise was created, which is captured in the University's "Brand Manual". The University's delivery on promises to students is uneven. Clarion must examine what they promise and what they can actually deliver and be forthright in marketing. Further, Clarion must examine all of its processes. Particularly, Clarion must include, recruitment, retention, academic programs, support services, campus climate and diversity, and affordability. Clarion must present realistic information to current and prospective students, families and constituents.

The True North Initiative Task Force proposes the following actionable items as a first step in delivering on our promises:

1. **University Identity:** Clarion University should review our brand promises and validate that they truly represent who we are, make changes where necessary, and communicate these clearly and consistently. Establishing a formal and ongoing dialogue between the University and local community must occur to improve relations.
2. **Communication:** If leadership at all levels understands our brand identity and goals, and communicates those to all members of the community, we will be able to provide the programs and student experience that we promised students during recruitment. Enhancing communication, upward and downward, must be a part of leadership at all levels. This will allow feedback to inform our marketing and University experience so both become and remain aligned.
3. **Accountability:** Leadership must educate and hold everyone responsible for meeting recruitment and retention goals.
4. **Affordability:** In the short term, Clarion University must provide sufficient aid (particularly need-based aid) to assist students with college affordability. Providing need based aid and early financial aid counseling to targeted families will help students persist.
5. **Recruitment and Retention strategies:** The enrollment management plan (STEP Up) should place a larger emphasis on retention and address strategies focused on student success.
6. **Infrastructure:** Infrastructure improvements should be addressed. Lack of maintenance impacts our image to prospective students and families and leaves our current students feeling as though their "home" is in disrepair and, as a result, impacts campus morale.
7. **Diversity:** Clarion University should make a strategic commitment to increase cultural intelligence and diversity on campus and within the community.
8. **Athletics:** Recognizing the potential role and impact of Athletics on enrollment, retention, student and community engagement, assess the position and define the

future direction of our Athletic Programs to identify the appropriate mix and potential expansion of teams and align that direction with associated funding models for Athletics.

### **Recommendation 6: Venango Campus:**

***The Clarion University Venango Campus must develop a Business Plan encompassing all relevant aspects of building/rebuilding Venango as a viable academic and economic venture for the University and for the region. This plan will provide an analysis of necessary personnel, physical, financial, and academic resources for that unit of Clarion University to thrive. Fundamental to this recommendation is that our Venango Campus have an administrative structure (e.g. Director) whose sole responsibility is leadership of the campus and programs.***

The recommendations and actionable items suggested here are based upon the foundational premise that Clarion University desires to keep Venango Campus open as a branch campus in fulfillment of the University's mission as an access institution, to serve a broader community and population, and to bring a new meaning to being a regional, comprehensive University. The working group, though sufficiently aware of the financial challenges facing Clarion University, makes these recommendations as a way to give University leadership a path for moving forward successfully.

Selected actionable items:

1. **Install a "Director" to lead the administrative team whose sole purpose is to focus on the success of the Venango Campus.** This Director should retain the rights and responsibilities of other individuals at the dean level, including being incorporated into Dean's Council and other similar academic discussions.
2. **Review the policies, processes, and programming** at Venango Campus to objectively determine a viable path forward. Using data on all aspects of the campus including evidence related to finances, human resources, academic programming, and student services, priorities should be set and decisions made which will lead to a self-sustaining campus that is viewed as an integral part of Clarion University.
3. **Develop a business plan** encompassing all relevant aspects of Venango Campus operations.
4. **Build unique Academic Programming** reflecting a new model of 2-year degree, non-degree, certificate, continuing education, and training programs which are stackable and flexible. Programming should be based on regional, workforce needs and serve untapped and non-traditional populations.
5. **Provide proper support services** through reevaluation of job descriptions, reassignment or sharing of staff, and hiring.

An overarching perspective on all of the recommendations and suggestions within the full report is the need for flexibility. Flexibility in process. Flexibility in programming. Flexibility in

structure. Flexibility in thinking. All current policies and processes need to be reviewed with the goal in mind to move, grow, change, and meet the needs of students in a proactive, timely way. Specifically, when it relates to hiring and staffing, course offerings and scheduling, curriculum development and promotion, and the creative use of partnerships, flexibility will be the key to unlock the door to Venango Campus' purpose and success.

Venango Campus will not succeed if all that occurs is an attempt to revisit the past and reestablish "what once was." As the world has advanced, so must the thinking about Venango Campus. The Venango Campus could be, and should be, defined as the location for delivery of workforce education in healthcare, education, business, technology, and science in Northwest Pennsylvania. Venango Campus has the atmosphere of a personalized environment that gives it the potential to serve as an incubator space for new programs, to partner and/or provide a training location for virtually all sectors of the economy to collaborate, to provide training and workforce/professional development needs, and to help facilitate and/or be part of regional economic growth. Programming opportunities for Venango Campus should expand its footprint in Venango and surrounding counties, while filling education and training gaps to meet workforce needs in the region that have been identified. The key to the success of the Venango Campus is to establish partnerships with local communities and a University-wide investment in the programing that establishes stackable credentials that will support differing career ladders. Venango Campus should be regarded as a resource with untapped potential. It will be imperative to use creative thinking, unconventional approaches, shared governance, and careful planning to ensure the viability of the campus.

**Additional Information:**

True North Initiative Working Group reports, which include a wealth of data and serve as the basis for each recommendation, are available at the True North Initiative intranet site.