

Student Stakeholder Group

Concerns Resolution

January 21, 2005

Affordability and *Access* are issues of paramount concern to students and must be addressed by the Work Group and the Arizona Board of Regents as they proceed with the university system redesign study.

INTRODUCTION

Arizona's universities must not only be environments for advances in technology, commerce, and art; they must also be fostered and supported as crucial investments for the future of the state. The imminent surge in student population is the driving issue. The redesign study must identify facilities and fiscal strategies for accommodating this expansion while delivering the highest quality of education. Such growth could be dealt with by revising internal models rather than an Arizona University System (AUS) restructuring.

Perception is often reality. There was much criticism of the initial proposal as a result of its implied two-tiered system; this impression is far from being a closed issue. Students worry that the proposed regional universities might become lower-tiered schools rather than research universities, despite assurances to the contrary.

Whether by design or misperception, a tiered system with limited degree opportunities risks the following:

- Decreasing recognition as a result of campus name changes;
- Undervaluing of degrees;
- Eliminating advanced research for which there is community demand;
- Curtailing options for minority students by funneling them into particular universities by degree restrictions and higher academic standards; and
- Affecting the legislative budgetary support between research-intensive universities and research-extensive universities.

Thus far, the process has emphasized undergraduate student capacity. Provisions must also be made for graduate and professional student population growth. Current AUS students support the increased access to higher education that the redesign study seeks to provide. We oppose any plan that would limit students' access to graduate or professional education, regardless of their geographic or financial circumstances. Students recognize that advanced research and training necessitates higher infrastructure costs. Despite the expense, the State must support a system that will provide the broadest access possible to graduate and professional degrees.

AFFORDABILITY

Arizona must have an adequate financial aid system so that universities with greater costs of attendance will not limit student access. As the universities' identities diverge, the cost of attendance will differ. This could create much larger differences in the costs of attendance than the relatively small ones that exist today. An adequate financial aid system would allow a qualified student to enter the AUS school of their choice regardless of their family's financial situation.

Some of the options that could achieve this goal include:

- Increasing state contributions to the Arizona Financial Aid Trust;
- Raising the Arizona Board of Regents set-aside;
- Providing 100% tuition remissions for graduate students holding .50 FTE assistantships;
- Creating a state-funded, merit-based financial aid program; and
- Implementing an AUS clearinghouse that provides "one-stop shopping" for financial aid.

ACCESS

Serving Diverse Populations

The Student Stakeholder Group acknowledges the Diversity Stakeholder Group's role in the redesign study. Any effort to restructure Arizona's University System must advance a population drawn from varied ethnic, social, economic, geographical, and academic backgrounds at each campus. We believe diverse campuses are a vital component enriching the educational experience. This applies to faculty as well as student populations; ideally, the goal for both groups should be to have them more closely mirror the demographics of Arizona.

Numerous redesign presentations convincingly stated the pressing need to serve the growing Hispanic population in the future. Arizona is *already* failing to meet the post-secondary educational needs of key segments of its population. For example, Native American undergraduate retention rates below ten percent are appalling. The existing partnership with the DINE Community College may be a model for future outreach to other Native American communities throughout the state. In short, we believe that the State must better serve diverse populations.

Graduate and Professional Students

In order for Arizona's population to be adequately served by advanced professionals and to foster innovative research bolstering the State's economy, student access to advanced training must be expanded. Establishing regional universities without graduate degree programs potentially creates "glass ceilings" on student advancement. This would disenfranchise not only geographically restricted students, but also entire regions of the State. In addition, first-generation students at the proposed regional universities could be less aware of advanced research and professional training opportunities since they will not have been exposed to such programs.

Community Colleges

2+2 programs should be expanded through articulation agreements. The course offerings should be tightly coordinated between partnering institutions to expand degree options. For example, this would allow a student to fulfill nursing pre-requisites at a community college. This student could then transfer seamlessly to the corresponding university's baccalaureate nursing program. If he or she chose, that student potentially could earn a Master of Science in nursing at the same university.

To address Arizona's growth-induced shortages of post-secondary education opportunities, certain community colleges should be allowed to offer baccalaureate degrees in limited but vital areas such as nursing, education, business, and public safety.

CONCLUSION

The Student Stakeholder Group is opposed to any of the current AUS campuses being stripped of research capabilities. Any "tiering" of the universities, whether by design or perceived, is unacceptable.

Other factors of monumental importance to Arizona's public university students are the cost of attendance, quality of education, and diversity of student body and faculty. Any redesign of the AUS should include special attention to these elements.

The Student Stakeholder Group would like to thank the Arizona Board of Regents and the Feasibility and Planning Study Work Group for the opportunity to provide our input.