



WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY  
*Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Research*

## Memorandum

**TO:** All Faculty and Staff  
**FROM:** Gary L. Miller *GLM*  
**DATE:** January 22, 2009  
**RE:** Great Work

It is no secret that we are all concerned about the state economy and its effect on the university budget. On January 12, we learned the Governor's recommendation to address the expected budget shortfall. The work of the legislature will unfold in the coming months leading to new budget priorities for the coming year and beyond. We continue to plan for various scenarios.

Despite uncertainty about the budget, the great work of the university continues. Over the past year an extraordinarily large group of faculty and staff and administrators have worked on six special projects: (1) the globalization task force, (2) the honors task force, (3) the enrollment work group, (4) the e-learning task force, (5) the Tilford diversity group and (6) the Foundations of Excellence Program.

Each of these groups has worked with great energy and creativity and each has, or shortly will, come forth with important recommendations. But, there is also an important collective dimension to the work that embraces some of the most important values of the academy.

Keith Pickus and I have taken some time to reflect on the broader aspects of this extraordinary body of faculty work and we share our observations in a short essay that follows this memo.

As always, I provide these comments to stimulate discussion and I welcome your comments.

Thank you for your great work.

GLM:lcm

C: President Beggs

**Celebrating Fresh Approaches to Accountability, Interdisciplinarity, Analysis and Collegiality at Wichita State University**

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Over the past year or so large numbers of faculty and staff from the academic division and other parts of the campus community have worked on six important initiatives. Over one-hundred people have joined the *globalization task force*, the *Tilford diversity group*, the *honors task force*, the *enrollment work group*, the *e-learning task force*, and, most recently, the *Foundations of Excellence* self-study process. Some of these projects were initiated in response to the need to reexamine current practice within the urban serving research mission (the globalization and honors work groups), one responded to the critical strategic need to enhance our student retention profile (Foundations of Excellence), another initiative emerged from the growing importance of technology in teaching, course design and delivery (e-learning task force), one work group focused on the core dynamic of our budget model (enrollment task force) and the last effort grew from a deep sense of responsibility among the faculty to diversify the programs and personnel of the university (Tilford diversity group).

Each project has operated under separate guidelines and with distinct objectives. As a result of extraordinary faculty and staff leadership, all six groups have enjoyed enormous success, generating important recommendations and stimulating thoughtful conversations about the topics within their purview.

One of the great joys of our vantage point is the opportunity to reflect on the work of these groups as a whole, within the context of our mission. As we looked at their collective work, we observed the emergence of a new spirit around four important values of the American academy: *accountability*, *interdisciplinarity*, *rigorous analysis* and *collegiality*. We believe that nurturing these will serve as our bridge to bringing the full recommendations of these faculty groups to fruition at the appropriate time and to plan strategically for the financial challenges that we presently face.

*A New Accountability*

The “New Accountability” that we observed in the work of these groups is a Wichita State University foundational theme, freshly conceived. During President Beggs' tenure, accountability has been the central value of Wichita State University. We have typically thought of accountability as a measure of specific obligations, particularly in the way in which we spend money, account for work time, and use facilities. The work of these groups extended this conceptualization into the realm of deep self-reflection.

Asking whether we do an adequate job of taking care of the brightest students, ensuring that success of all students, understanding how connected we are and forever will be to the world and, perhaps most importantly, reflecting deeply on the nature of our differences and the meaning of connecting those differences with a nurturing matrix of common humanity are, ultimately, considerations of accountability.

Each of the study groups extended themselves well beyond the normal effort – and level of contemplation – generally reserved for the dreaded “task force” service work. Each of the groups exposed their biases and weaknesses on the way to discovering their common strengths and commitments to the enterprise. In dealing with tough issues that have real effects on our success, these groups have held themselves accountable at a much higher level than our routine work calls us to do. Accountability is certainly not unique to higher education or to Wichita State University for that matter. But, it is rare and quite extraordinary when observed as we have observed it.

The Tilford and Foundations of Excellence groups showed impressive insight into the deeper dimensions of accountability. Most of us agree that our responsibility to understand and embrace the diversity of race and culture and thought of our society is one of the most sacred obligations of the academy. In practice, this has proven to be difficult because of a lack of real intentionality, silo behavior, hegemonic assurances, and simple lack of attention to detail. The Tilford group purposely organized itself across these inertial currents. The group rejected rationalization, preferring instead to ask hard questions and engage in self-examination to find answers. The recommendations about the strategy that we should adopt to advance diversity and nurture it in our programs are yet to fully emerge but those recommendations will require a full consideration of our practices. Similarly, the Foundations of Excellence process compels its committee members to evaluate diversity in a multitude of ways that extend the boundaries of such discussions beyond identity and ethnicity. Central to their investigation are thought provoking efforts to define the contours of a diverse learning environment both inside the classroom and on campus in general.

### *A New Interdisciplinarity*

One of the most important ideals of the liberal arts philosophy is the notion that knowledge has no boundaries and that to be truly educated one must be capable of ranging intellectually across the vast expanse of human thought.

Much of American higher education is organized to work directly against this ideal. College and department boundaries set up strong activation energies for interaction and general education curricula (particularly menu-driven ones like the one we have at Wichita State University) are negotiated among departments to ensure that boundaries do not crumble. Real interdisciplinarity is difficult to achieve. It is in task force groups and rarely traditional departments where the best interdisciplinary thinking occurs and where there is the best hope of nurturing revolutionary new ideas about higher education.

An excellent example of this is the work of the Honors Task Force and the Foundations of Excellence groups. This work has proceeded very intentionally to examine the environment in a different way. In struggling with what a 21<sup>st</sup> century honors program at an urban serving research university should be, the honors group resisted the temptation to cobble together a menu of their individual interests. Instead, their work talks about the essential characteristics of an honors *education* rather than the nuts and bolts of an honors *program*. The Foundations of Excellence program begins with an unusual question: how do our activities and attitudes affect student performance? This is a much different starting point than: what are our expectations of students and how do we measure them? Both of these approaches are, we believe, fundamentally interdisciplinary.

The work of the e-learning group resulted in some of the most interesting and important interdisciplinary thinking. Faced with the fundamental need to reconceptualize teaching and

learning in the technological world, the e-learning group applied concepts of course design, faculty-student interaction and learning outcomes from a variety of disciplines. In spite of their disparate academic backgrounds and training members of the group reached consensus on these issues in a dynamic and evolutionary manner.

### Rigorous Analysis

Central to the work of each group was the dependence on the bedrock of intellectual inquiry: rigorous, data driven analysis. No matter the project, task force members deployed the most sophisticated tools of their trade. They framed thoughtful and probing questions, identified appropriate sources of evidence and formulated conclusions supported by data and corresponding materials. In so doing, the issues addressed were contextualized within the arena of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the local environment of Wichita State University.

The Globalization task force began its work with a summer reading project that helped define the concepts they dealt with and provided examples of similar efforts throughout the country. The Honor's task force also initiated its efforts by developing a summer reading list that helped structure their discussions this past fall. As each group moved back and forth from the broader environment of higher education today to the specificity of education at Wichita State University, members relied on institutional data, surveys and interviews with faculty and staff to scrutinize the local situation. The Foundations of Excellence project is just one example of the dependence upon data driven decision making as the process requires members to formulate their recommendations on the basis of two surveys, institutional data and the collective knowledge of each committee. The e-learning work group framed its analysis around the best practices in higher education pedagogy and the principles of curriculum development and course delivery at Wichita State University.

While the use of such analytical tools is not surprising given the individuals involved, the collective methodology of the six groups affirmed a fundamental feature of higher education. By exemplifying the power of critical thought and rigorous evaluation, the working groups modeled standards of excellence for the entire Wichita State University community.

### A New Collegiality

Faculty, staff and administrative interactions at WSU have always been characterized by a high degree of collegiality. What do we mean by a "New Collegiality?"

The work of these various faculty and staff groups has proceeded against the background of the normal governance activities of the faculty, the Senates and the administrative interactions of the departments and colleges. All of these activities are dependent on a kind of orderly collegiality that forms the necessary matrix of successful shared-governance operations. Evident in the work of the members of these groups, however, was a deeper and more daring suite of interactions requiring the suspension of disbelief, disciplined observation, and a commitment to understanding as a prerequisite to learning and to action. The results of the work of these six groups, then, is more than everyday strategic compromise. Rather, it is heuristic, sometimes risky and, at its best, enlightened.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the members of these groups for their work on behalf of the university.