



# BIGGER/BETTER: ENROLLMENT AND OAKLAND UNIVERSITY'S VISION 2010

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Having lurched from one strategic plan to another through the 1990s, Oakland University appears to have settled for the long haul on the Vision 2010, developed and revised at the beginning of the current decade, and it is now hurtling along toward the achievement of what seems to be the cornerstone of that plan, the achievement of the enrollment of 20,000 students by 2010. With four years and 2,661 additional students to go, the Fall of 2006 strikes me as an appropriate moment to reflect on our progress toward the achievement of the many goals we have set for ourselves, including enrollment. More and more frequently, I'm hearing suggestions that it's time for a university-wide conversation about enrollment; and, particularly on those mornings when I'm fielding double-digit numbers of student requests to add into my already over-enrolled classes, I'm inclined to agree.

Although little record or memory of it seems to remain, we *did* begin a university-wide discussion of enrollment seven years ago, when an Enrollment Planning Committee was formed by the then Provost and charged to work with the consulting firm of Lipman Hearne "to develop an enrollment planning document for campus-wide review and consultation . . . intended to promote campus wide dialogue on the subject

of enrollment planning.”<sup>1</sup> Even at that time, the appointment of this committee was, perhaps, a bit late, for in many ways the enrollment plan was already under way prior to the charging of the committee. The admissions office had been expanded and the position of the director of admissions had been upgraded and expanded to Vice President for Enrollment Management while a number of initiatives had recently been put in place, including the opening of the new Recreation Center, the opening of Elliott Hall, the replacement of Pioneer Pete with the Golden Grizzly, the entrance into Division I sports, and new graduate programs in Nursing, Biology, and Health Sciences. All of these initiatives were conceived, rationalized, and implemented with the goal of enrollment growth. It was relatively clear at the time of the committee’s appointment that the scope of its deliberations did not include the question of *whether or not* to grow; instead, it was to consider *how* to grow.

Reviewing the committee’s draft proposal, however, along with the responses from the university community that were solicited, one finds considerable good sense and a relatively high degree of judiciousness. For a committee report, the document makes unusually good reading, and one would wish that it were still available for the campus community’s consideration. Having hunted down a copy, I’d like here to summarize it and then to consider, based on the information available from our Office of Institutional Research, how consistent our enrollment growth has been with the committee’s proposal, as well as with other aspirations listed in our Vision 2010, and how far along we have come in achieving our objectives.

In the mid-90s, as many of us recall, OU began energetic efforts to increase its enrollment, to grow in order both to serve our local populations and to establish our stature nationally while thus, we hoped, increasing revenue both from tuition and from legislative appropriations. The plan was, we were told, to plough the increased revenues into development of infrastructure and the necessary human resources in order to support the increased number of students. The committee report includes a chart of Oakland’s enrollment history, which

spikes rapidly from 1959 to 1973, growing from zero students to 10,000 students in those first 14 years (an average increase of 715 students per year). The subsequent period from 1974 to 1993 shows slow and fitful increases as we moved from 10,000 students to 12,000, roughly 1000 students per decade. In 1993 a new spike begins, the one in which we remain involved, as the number of students grows from 12,000 to 15,000 in only six years, five times the rate as in the previous two decades, or 1000 every two years. Since then, we have grown to 17,339.

Reviewing the most recent and dramatic increase in enrollment, the committee report noted that “a combination of market forces and entrepreneurial faculty and administrators were the key drivers of this growth, as opposed to a carefully planned holistic approach” (3). It warned that, in fact, such unplanned and unregulated growth could lead—paradoxically—to recruitment problems: the rapid unmanaged and unstrategized increase in student population, along with the lag in the development of infrastructure and human resources, could boomerang as successfully recruited students begin to leave after disappointing or unsuccessful experiences consequent to over-enrollment and under funding. Citing the wisdom of Yogi Berra, the committee noted that it’s possible to grow too much too fast. As Yogi said of a popular restaurant, “Nobody wants to go there anymore: it’s too crowded.”

Consequently, the committee report mandated a careful study of whether or not the needs of then current students were being adequately served and suggested a modification of the grow-first-support-later program that OU had embarked on. Before growing further, the committee said, a thorough maintenance check was needed.

The committee warned, furthermore, that in its efforts to grow, OU’s primary strategy had been, thus far, to try be responsive to “market forces,” attempting to gauge what potential students would want and then to promise it to them in order to get them in the door. In doing so, the committee noted, Oakland was allowing its best guess about “the outside world to dictate [it]’s mission and determine its success” (4)

and that “moving further along this path could mean that the best interests of the institution could be put at risk” (3). That is, the tail could begin wagging the dog so vigorously that the pitiful beast could die of malnutrition, nervous exhaustion, or a new breed of canine insanity. The committee noted presciently that “with a heavy reliance on serving market demand, the University was vulnerable to big fluctuations in the economy” (4). The committee did not explicitly say but it did imply that the “market” for university education was not always the best judge of what it needed and that the university should be more active in demonstrating its expertise in defining needs of which the market might be unaware.

Instead of attempting to respond to market forces, then, the committee urged the university to couple its enrollment aspirations to its institutional objectives, strategically growing those segments of the university which are most important to our long-term institutional objectives. In order to work towards the right mix for the university, some segments of the student population would need to grow faster than others. Enrollment growth was found to be a suitable goal, but the committee urged that the university should strategically manage the growth and *not*, conversely, *be* managed by the growth.

Looking at the big picture, the committee suggested that growth in the Schools and the College should be managed in order to create an optimum mix of students within the university; it proposed that the College should enroll 30% of our students (up from 28% in 1999, and a considerably higher percentage than the 24% which the committee predicted if the university were to continue to be at the direction of market trends); the percentage in SHS and SON, it was suggested, should remain the same (meaning that enrollment should increase at the same rate as that at the university as a whole); slight (1%) increases in proportion were recommended for the SECS and the SBA; and a slight (1%) decrease in proportion was recommended for the SEHS.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that while the percentage proportions are being adjusted, *all* the units are growing in enrollment in this model; only the relative

*rates* of growth are, in some cases, being limited.<sup>3</sup> In keeping with a vision of enrollment growth based upon quality, the committee suggested that programs that needed mechanisms in order to control their growth could implement higher admission standards.

Across this larger institutional mix, the committee also suggested that Oakland should prioritize growth in the Honors College, growth among full-time and residential undergraduate students, growth among students from outside the six-county area surrounding us, and growth among students of color.

The committee was forthright about the budgetary impact of such a strategy. Increased enrollment, especially if effected by recruitment emphasizing quality education—in addition to generating revenues would necessitate increased expenditures. In particular, the committee noted the possibility that both high-ability and lower-ability students admitted to the university within a program of managed enrollment growth would need more advising and more personalized instruction; library services might need to be strengthened; class sizes might need to be reduced.

The committee noted that the entrepreneurial model, based on interests and initiatives of faculty and staff, had produced considerable success and should not be discouraged; incentives for initiatives, however, would need to be moderated by a set of criteria reinforcing the strategies for growth and our institutional objectives (aside from growth).

Finally, the committee noted that the entire university would need to stay on message about our institutional mission. That is, once the university community had established its objectives and its vision of the ideal student body, the people on the front lines of recruitment, i.e., those in admissions and in marketing, would need to tailor their messages specifically to those populations that we seek to increase (12).

Evidence within the report suggests that this committee sincerely wished for the report to be thoroughly and universally discussed; that subsequent to revision and approval, “a de-

tailed, integrated overall implementation and marketing plan, grounded in research, would be developed by an empowered project team . . . The plan would be inclusive of all academic and administrative units and would delineate goals, strategies, and tactics for the academic year. . . . Once the plan is written and agreed on by all units, an implementation timeline would be created and adhered to” (12).

And *some* discussion did ensue. The draft proposal was submitted for consideration by the Senate which requested reviews and responses from its Planning Review Committee, Admissions and Financial Aid Committee, and Budget Review Committee.<sup>4</sup> Finally, review and response was solicited from the President. Both the Planning Review Committee and the Budget Review Committee were favorable to the plan, commending the mission-driven approach to enrollment growth proposed by and incorporated into the plan; both also noted, however, that the proposal did not give full consideration to the cost in human resources (faculty and staff) that the plan would require, and the Budget Review Committee, in particular, wondered where the money for each sub-strategy (e.g., maintenance of quality programs, growth of the Honors College) was going to come from.

Only the Admissions and Financial Aid Committee explicitly expressed doubt about the proposal’s rejection of the market-driven approach to enrollment growth: “Market effect should not be discounted given a robust economy for about a decade and a demand for qualified people in almost every discipline. . . . If we do not meet market demand, we may be perceived unresponsive [sic]. There may be a real danger in the coming years that Oakland may lose a large share of students to other institutions such as Phoenix University, or on-line programs.” Overall, I think it’s fair to say that the original committee has been proven more prescient than has the Admissions and Financial Aid Committee. Phoenix University, while I shudder at its use as a benchmark in any way for Oakland, has not proven a threat; the economy has not proven itself to be robust; and the market approach, I think it arguable at this

point, has not demonstrated that it can generate the revenue needed to support continued growth nor that such growth is sustainable over the long term nor that it is consistent with the university's mission as that mission is regularly articulated, as in some of our objectives as stated in the Vision 2010:

- “Oakland University will provide high quality and challenging undergraduate education that offers students an enriching and diverse combination of liberal arts, professional education, and cultural and social experiences.
- Oakland University's commitment to the highest quality undergraduate education will be shown by the high percentage of classes taught by full-time faculty.
- A majority of classes taken by Oakland undergraduates will have sizes that maximize opportunities for student-faculty interactions.”<sup>5</sup>

Upon receipt of the Senate Committees' reports, the University Senate unanimously approved the enrollment proposal, adding two provisions: 1.) They urged that the goal for the number of residential students by 2010 should be raised from the 2500 students in the proposal to 4000,<sup>6</sup> and 2.) they insisted that the plan be backed up with adequate resources to support both continuing and new programs. At the date of writing this, I'm unable to find documentary evidence of the continuation of this conversation. The president issued an ambivalent response, no longer available on the Oakland website. I do not find any records of the document's consideration by the Board of Trustees. I imagine that these proposals were quietly and informally abandoned by not being formally adopted. Nonetheless, we have no alternative articulation of our enrollment goals, and consequently this remains the only available yardstick, one that achieved a considerable degree of support, with which to measure our relative success.

Indeed, six years later, information from the Office of Institutional Research suggests that we have made substantial

progress toward some of the goals offered by the enrollment planning committee's proposal:

- Enrollment growth continues apace, in spite of a short-term partial admissions freeze in 2004–2005 necessitated by budget cuts imposed by Lansing.
- Full-time undergraduate students now comprise 71% of the undergraduate population, up from 65% in 1999, and moving toward the goal of 75% for 2010.
- In distribution throughout the university, it appears that some units are right in step with the proposed plan, while others are not<sup>7</sup>:

	1999 percentage of enrolled students	Fall 2005 percentage of enrolled students (FYES, grad and undergrad combined)	Recommended percentage of enrolled students for 2010
CAS	28%	30.6%	30%
SBA	16%	18.1%	17%
SEHS	19%	25%	18%
SECS	11%	10.6%	12%
SHS	5%	5.8%	5%
SON	6%	9.6%	6%

- The table below summarizes other changes in the student and university population for the period from the committee's charge to last Fall semester (2005)<sup>8</sup>:

	1999	2005
Students from 6 counties	89%	88%
Students from elsewhere in Michigan	5.8%	6.4%
Students from other states	(4.1%) Other states & foreign countries	1%
Students from foreign countries	(4.1%) were combined in 1999 count)	3.3%
Residential students	10.8% (1259)	12.8% (1717)
Undergraduate students	79%	77.6%
Graduate students	21%	22.4%
Full time undergraduates	57%	72.6%
Male	35%	38.4%
Female	65%	61.6%
White	85%	82.8%
African American	6.5%	8.5%
Asian American	3.3%	4.2%
Hispanic	1.3%	1.6%
Native American/Alaskan native	.05%	0.4%
Foreign national	2.8%	2.5%
Full time faculty	389	441
Portion of university revenue supplied by tuition	33%	44%
Enrollment—headcount	14,726	17,339
Enrollment—FYES	11,359	14,245
H.S. GPA of entering students	3.2	3.2
Average ACT score of entering students who provide ACT scores	21.7	21.5
Number of FTIAC applications	4966	6014
Percent of FTIAC acceptances	75%	82%
Percent of acceptees who enrolled	49%	45%
Number of transfer applications	2401	2514
Percentage of transfers accepted	65%	73%
Percentage of transfer acceptances who enrolled	77%	73%
First-year retention rate	74.9%	70.5%
Student/faculty ratio	18	NA—20 reported in 2004
Percentage of part time faculty	43%	49%

A quick and informal survey of recent institutional history suggests an approach to enrollment growth not altogether consistent with the vision of the enrollment committee. Our primary capital outlays have gone toward a new building for the SEHS, whose proportional size within the university was, in the proposal, supposed to be more tightly managed, and for a new parking structure to support the increased number of student commuters (i.e., not the residential students whose increased numbers the committee suggested were crucial to our objectives). Pawley Hall does, of course, offer the university at large more classrooms in order to support the additional sections of courses required by the growth in enrollment. The parking structure, given its location, primarily serves Pawley Hall (SEHS), Varner (CAS), and Elliott Hall (SBA), while also continuing the re-orientation of the campus such that the center has been moved from O'Dowd and the Library to the east (SEHS) and SBA. Student application rates are up and the percentage of those applications accepted has also increased, but the percentage of those accepted who enroll has decreased. Similarly, the retention rate continues to drop. To a lay person like myself, these figures suggest a degree of inefficiency: we seem to be increasing enrollment primarily by casting a wider net rather than strategically seeking students who fit our vision and so will both enroll and complete degree programs here.

The general strategy of enrollment growth has worked—or has been worked—to our significant advantage in Lansing, which I believe was one of the initial objectives of increasing our enrollment. There had been, in the 1980s, pressure in Lansing for Oakland to grow in order to serve as many of our local constituents and stakeholders as possible, and we have acceded to that pressure. In return, Lansing has been ever more attentive in working out higher education budgets which correspond to enrollment among the universities and to Oakland in particular. Unfortunately for us, this attention was synchronized exactly with the catastrophic downturn in the Michigan economy from which no recovery is currently foreseen. Thus, although we have fared well relative to other universities, in

the last two budget rounds, the prospect of the big payout disappeared years ago and there's little likelihood of it coming back soon. We're getting a bigger piece of the pie than we used to, but the pie is considerably smaller than it used to be. Instead of enrollment increases leading to state revenue to support expansion of human resources in order to maintain and improve quality, we have seen enrollment increases simultaneous with salary and hiring freezes. As noted in the table above, in 1999 student tuition accounted for 33% of the general fund, while in the most recent year it accounted for 44%.

Still, looking at the numbers over the past five years, it's clear that we have had many notable and some surprising successes. Programs that I might not have thought were hot commodities have grown dramatically: I'm rather sure that no one in the administration expected that enrollment in English would increase 21% since 1999, particularly after (or in spite) its double-digit percentage increase from 1995 to 1999.<sup>9</sup> I certainly didn't expect it, and it's my own program. The most dramatic increases in enrollment have been in new programs which have been cobbled together from already-existing resources; other major increases are simply the result of a substantially increased student population being funneled into already existing programs. The increase in the number of full-time faculty, surprisingly, seems to be keeping pace with the increase in the number of students. However, we were substantially understaffed in 1999, and consequently our growing at the same rate as the student body simply keeps us substantially understaffed, i.e., we are maintaining rather than resolving a deficit. A clearer indication of understaffing comes in the student/faculty ratio which has climbed from 18 in 1999 to an all-time high of 20 in 2004.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, although we seem to be successfully meeting most of the goals set in 1999 for student enrollment and disciplinary distribution, the broad area that we seem not to be addressing has largely to do with creating the academic culture characterized by excellence that should, according to the committee

proposal be at the heart of our endeavor and which should be our primary recruitment tool.

Among the indications that we are not attending to these objectives are the following shortfalls: We will not have 4000 residential students by 2010, because we do not have the residence halls that they would require. (We built a parking structure for the non-residential students instead.) The Honors College population has remained relatively steady over the last six years and thus has become relatively smaller rather than larger in proportion to the rest of the university: it had roughly 300 students in 1999 and anticipates 330 in the Fall semester of 2006. We will not have lower class sizes in order to maintain the academic intensity necessary to support claims of educational quality. Our student/faculty ratio has reached an all-time high, as has the percentage of classroom instruction carried out by part-time instructors (49%).

This last figure is perhaps the clearest indication that we continue to follow a market-driven rather than a strategically managed approach to enrollment growth. In the university, as in the corporate world, the rationale for using a high percentage of part-time or “consulting” employees is to ensure the flexibility necessary to continue to respond to market trends. When student demand for majors in computer sciences dips, one can respond by quickly cutting sections of courses taught by part-time instructors. Instead of identifying those programs which are essential to the university’s goals and undertaking to staff them at the levels necessary to attain and maintain high-quality and thus attract students seeking what we aim to offer, we seek short-term and thus largely unpredictable enrollment bursts by on-demand production. This clearly did not work for General Motors, where it might have been more likely to succeed than in a university environment; over the long term, it certainly will not work for us.

I think that it is time for us to congratulate ourselves on the success we have had in the university’s growth in enrollment and to assess how best to support the students we have and to maintain or even to improve quality. There’s nothing

magical about the idea of 20,000 students by 2010, and it would be far better to delay attaining that goal—without necessarily abandoning it—while we pay the piper for the growth we’ve experienced thus far. We need to keep in mind a holistic view of enrollment growth, which includes all those benefits for which the growth is a means. The prospect of a thriving Oakland University with a rich and diverse academic culture supported by 20,000 full-time students, most of them full-time and many of them residential, who have dedicated themselves to learning and who have been attracted to OU on the basis of its reputation for quality is inspiring. But the number “20,000” is a minor essential part of that vision. The prospect of an exhausted Oakland University, with 20000 students, many taking classes off-campus, who have been attracted to OU’s programs because they are convenient and cost-efficient, is a dismal one.

Repeatedly, over the past fifteen years, we have invested in attempts to “expand our market” with little attention to issues of quality control. Our short-lived distance learning relationship with Traverse City is exemplary: rather than attract the students we wanted by providing high quality education, we attempted to increase enrollment (“market share”) by using technology to move into a geographic location where there was little or no competition. When the strategy was explained to me, I remember suggesting that our motto might be changed from “Seguir virtute e canoscenza” (“To seek virtue and knowledge” to “Est melior quam nihil” (“It is better than nothing.”)

Such a new motto would be dispiriting, but we must begin to ask ourselves how much of our “virtute” we are prepared to sacrifice for enrollment. Paraphrasing Winston Churchill’s remark to a woman who indignantly asked exactly what kind of woman he took her for, we have established what we are and what we are now haggling about is price. It is, I think, *that* conversation—the one about the degree of educational and intellectual integrity we are willing to cede for the sake of enrollment—that should engage us at this point.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> *Draft Document: For Campus Review and Consultation, Oakland University, Enrollment Planning 1999–2010, Draft Recommendation, 1.* This document, along with President Russi’s response to it, was formerly available at <http://www2.oakland.edu/admissions/old/draft2.htm>, hosted by the Enrollment Planning office but are no longer available there. Responses to the document from the University Senate continue to be available from the Senate’s website, <http://www3.oakland.edu/oakland/frames.asp?main=http://www.oakland.edu/senate/>. Subsequent references to the enrollment planning proposal are cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>2</sup> In an accompanying document compiled by Laura Scharman, a breakdown of the cost by rubric for delivery of one credit suggests that this model is economically as well as academically prudent. The average cost to the University in delivering one credit in the College and in SEHS in 1999 was \$97.00; \$135.00 in the SBA; \$156.00 in SHS; \$163.00 in SON; \$185.00 in SECS.

<sup>3</sup> In tracking the recent enrollment trends, the committee seems to have been alarmed that if trends continued and growth was unregulated, it was likely that SEHS would enroll 33% of the students in the university by 2010. Such dominance by this School would register a fundamental change in the nature of the institution as well as in the perception by the public of what the institutional purpose is.

<sup>4</sup> Copies of the reports of the Senate subcommittees remain available on the Senate’s website at <http://www3.oakland.edu/oakland/frames.asp?main=http://www.oakland.edu/senate/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Oakland University in 2010,” <http://www3.oakland.edu/oakland/aboutou/2010profile.htm>, July 26, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> I note in passing that this emphasis by the Senate on increasing the number of full-time residential students seems—to me—to be not altogether consistent with the emphasis we have seen over the past several years on offering courses off-campus or online. These initiatives are not, I hasten to add, totally inconsistent with the strategy of increasing our population on campus, but some sort of judicious management seems to me to be necessary.

<sup>7</sup> Enrollment figures by School/College are provided by the Of-

Office of Institutional Research on their website at [https://www2.oakland.edu/secure/oira/data\\_frame.htm](https://www2.oakland.edu/secure/oira/data_frame.htm), July 26, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> All figures come from or are derived from information available on the OIRA website at [https://www2.oakland.edu/secure/oira/data\\_frame.htm](https://www2.oakland.edu/secure/oira/data_frame.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Enrollment figures for programs and even, more recently, for courses are available from the OIRA website Data Book at [https://www2.oakland.edu/secure/oira/data\\_frame.htm](https://www2.oakland.edu/secure/oira/data_frame.htm).

<sup>10</sup> As of this writing, the OIRA has not included the student/faculty ratio for 200-2006 on its “Faculty Resources” report at its website.