

Process and Structure Working Group Final Report

April 15, 2024

Introduction

In Fall 2023, the Process and Structure Working Group was charged with leading a comprehensive and inclusive conversation about barriers to achieving Empire State University's strategic priorities, objectives, and goals; and articulating possible options for overcoming those barriers, including options to change core academic processes and/or school structures.

SUNY Empire's current financial stability, strong enrollment outlook, and clear set of strategic priorities, provide an opportunity to elevate the institution for future stability, growth, and effectiveness in service to our students. At the same time, consultation with the university community and further analysis of available data indicated that the development of new school models may require additional time. Therefore, as an alternative to new models, President Vollendorf requested a list of opportunities and considerations to be submitted for her review with Cabinet. At the same time, she underscored her commitment to carefully considering the barriers, opportunities, and considerations identified in the final report and her willingness to take a phased approach to any forthcoming changes aimed at elevating our ability to serve our students more effectively and to achieve our strategic goals.

With sincere appreciation to the hundreds of members of our Empire community who provided feedback and contributed their thoughts, ideas, and concerns regarding this charge, the Working Group presents to President Vollendorf and the Cabinet a series of considerations and options in support of the Strategic Plan implementation. The attached appendices, which include the charge, the working group's membership, the timeline, and operational definitions provide additional detail.

Section One: Emergent Themes

Through review of institutional and external data, analysis of community feedback, and participation in working group meetings, the working group has identified themes, opportunities and considerations to increase institutional efficiency and support enrollment growth in the context of the priorities of the strategic plan. There is an increasingly competitive marketplace for online programs that serve learners of all ages. For Empire State University to support its access mission, opportunities for growth through strong and varied academic programs must be considered. Structures and processes influence how academic programs are delivered and executed, directly impacting student success, enhance

operational efficiency, and promote academic excellence and inclusiveness, all of which help raise Empire State University's public profile.

Theme 1: Student Success: Scaling for Growth and Creating Clear Degree Pathways

Since academic schools were created, program development and enrollment growth have not been consistent within and across schools. Some schools remain significantly larger than others, while some have little to no disciplinary diversity and therefore are more reflective of a department than a school or college. Many opportunities exist for program development and for leveraging the pipeline from undergraduate to graduate through 4+1 and other pathways. Students are overwhelmingly choosing structured programs, which also introduces opportunities to continue to create and support clear pathways for degree access and completion. Where the university has grown, the variety of degree options has introduced complexity in how degree programs are managed and delivered and in how academic advisement is given. Creating and communicating clear pathways for degree access and completion is of service to our students and their success.

Theme 2: Operational Efficiency: Incremental Changes and Systems Infrastructure

There is a strong perception in the university community that previous structural and other large-scale administrative changes did not provide adequate attention and resources to update, test, and implement changes to systems infrastructure to ensure success and operational efficiency. The introduction of structured programs has required the need to rethink policies, educational planning, catalog, and advising and mentoring. In these cases, the necessary incremental nature of change, may have obscured the need for other necessary changes to structures or processes thereby impacting the overall operational effectiveness and efficiency within the entire university ecosystem. In other cases, end users have not fully adopted well-designed systems. All of this contributes to issues with data collection, analysis and reporting.

An inconsistent adoption of communication tools and strategies further complicates some operational inefficiencies. The distributed nature of the university requires that most communications are mediated by technology. A shared recommitment to communication strategies, tools, and timing increases the efficiency and access to shared information and may improve participation where consultation and collaboration is desired. Ultimately, operational inefficiencies contribute to the community's wariness of change and must be resolved to remove unintentional barriers to student success.

Theme 3: Academic Excellence and Inclusiveness: Reducing Resource Competition and Enhancing Collaboration

Community members exhibited a strong affinity towards and identity with their current school. In some cases, unit/school leadership, in which there was a high level of confidence, has nurtured productive and collegial cultures. At the same time, including diverse and/or adjacent disciplinary perspectives, opportunities for collaboration, and having increased access to underutilized resources are also valued. Ultimately, these two perspectives need not be mutually exclusive.

In areas where there is distribution of allied programs (e.g., BBA and MBA, graduate and undergraduate education programs) across departments and/or schools, opportunities for coordinated program development and faculty collaboration and access to like resources and faculty expertise could be expanded with a coordinated and collaborative approach to structure design. This is similarly true for some programs split between undergrad and grad (i.e., education) where opportunities for collaboration, program alignment, and access to faculty expertise may result from ad hoc initiatives but could be strengthened through a more formal alignment. Furthermore, unified programs should provide improved marketing opportunities and options.

Section Two: Process Considerations and Opportunities

Building on the themes discussed above, the activities of the working group revealed ways in which current processes might impede the full implementation of the strategic plan and where opportunities exist for new ways of working that could enhance or streamline these processes.

Theme 1: Student Success: Scaling for Growth and Creating Clear Degree Pathways

Degree Planning

Considerations:

Feedback received suggests that the use of multiple tools and systems (e.g., DegreeWorks, DP Planner, Banner, Advise) has led to confusion among students and mentors, presenting challenges to the timely completion of a degree plan. Difficulty with degree planning is further exacerbated by the continued use of generalist mentors in an increasingly diverse degree plan environment that necessitates specialized mentor expertise. The university may soon face competition to its PLA expertise as SUNY has raised the visibility of PLA/PLE in its recently adopted Award of Academic Credit by Evaluation policy which notes “the awarding of academic credit should be considered early enough to ensure maximizing its benefits toward a desired degree.”

Opportunities:

- coordinate a shift from the generalist mentoring model to one that provides more specialized faculty mentoring
- revise the process for managing and distributing the mentoring load within these specialized areas of study, particularly with licensure programs, or where PLE and iPLA may be heavily utilized
- leverage the institution's expertise in iPLA to support student success and increase measures of retention, persistence, and graduation and maintain visibility within SUNY

Student Pathways

Considerations:

While Empire has established dual-degree and pathway programs to help students transition from undergraduate to graduate, such programs are generally unknown or underutilized by students. The lower-than-expected percentage of students taking advantage of this option may suggest barriers to students pursuing dual-degree or pathway programs, which may include ownership questions, varying credit models between undergraduate and graduate, and inconsistent promotion of the programs.

Opportunities:

- create a shared understanding between undergraduate and graduate faculty about dual-degree and pathway benefits
- develop clear guidance for faculty on how they can support students in accessing and navigating these accelerated options more readily
- identify gaps in pathway options
- develop and promote additional partnership opportunities between undergraduate and graduate programs

Theme Two: Operational Efficiency: Incremental Changes and Systems Infrastructure

Accreditation

Considerations:

Empire has a growing number of accredited programs but could benefit from process efficiencies to maintain these accreditations and/or seek new accreditation if desired. Some accredited (or soon to be accredited) programs are split across schools, making the oversight and coordination of accreditation more difficult.

Opportunities:

- establish processes that ensure appropriate oversight within accredited units and support successful accreditation efforts across the university
- share successful accreditation preparation and tracking processes in support of quality and efficiency
- establish a more systematic approach to the tracking of learning outcomes to facilitate external accreditation

Faculty Collaboration

Considerations:

Given the current eight school structure, some faculty could benefit from the synergies of being in the same school or department are currently separated from one another, thus reducing opportunities for cooperation and collaboration across academic areas. Splitting academic disciplines across schools can lead to departments competing for new hires and create barriers to the sharing faculty lines across allied programs. This can result in the perpetuation of a siloed approach to teaching and mentoring, which can result in the development of multiple versions of the same courses across departments and schools.

Opportunities:

- reduce barriers to faculty collaboration by considering alternative models for counting course credits for budgetary purposes that encourage and support cross-department/cross-school teaching

- develop formal centers or affinity groups that promote interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship
- identify and remove barriers to create greater efficiencies regarding faculty collaboration through academic alignment of programs and departments within schools and colleges

Graduate Coordination

Considerations:

Graduate programs continue to grow at Empire with several new graduate programs having either recently launched or are in development. Empire's current approach to administering graduate education emphasizes graduate affiliation over academic focus, which could create process barriers related to program scaling and alignment, accreditation efforts, leveraging student pathways, faculty collaboration, and raising the disciplinary public profile of the respective graduate programs.

Alternative administrative approaches could provide best practices regarding the ways graduate education may be administered to raise the profile of graduate programs, create economies of scale, and promote graduate student success. These approaches promote innovative ways of maintaining a graduate school identity and providing opportunities for interdisciplinary research opportunities, albeit in ways that may look different from our current approach.

Opportunities:

- identify processes and opportunities for graduate faculty to collaborate around pedagogical approaches, shared resources, accreditation processes, or institutional assessment practices
- develop scaffolded skill development approaches across courses and degree levels
- promote intentional efforts to maintain the identity and culture of graduate education through an administrative graduate framework by which the graduate faculty, along with a graduate council and graduate leadership, would administer graduate policies and procedures

Theme 3: Academic Excellence and Inclusiveness: Reducing Resource Competition and Enhancing Communication and Collaboration

Resourcing of departments

Considerations:

Significant differences in the size and complexities of our schools and departments mean that resource needs vary. Departments with a greater number of majors or that maintain professional programs with accreditation or licensure requirements, or include co-curricular activities requiring management or coordination (e.g., internships, clinical placements), may require a level of support to operate effectively or efficiently that differs from other departments.

Opportunities:

- identify departments and schools that may have specialized resource needs and explore where resource overlap and gaps may currently exist.
- monitor department and school resource needs to ensure that work is adequately supported through the reallocation or hiring of new faculty, support staff, and professionals with consideration paid to the human resource needs of those areas that have needs beyond direct instruction or mentoring

Communication

Considerations:

Ensuring consistent and timely communication across and between units is challenging due to the variety of communication modes and tools (e.g., email, Brightspace, Teams, websites). While variety can serve an important purpose, it's often unclear as to what information is the most current or official, or where to find information that has been archived. As the university continues to evolve with new programs, policies and processes, reviewing and further refining the communication strategies is important to facilitate shared understanding within and across units in the Office of Academic Affairs.

Opportunities:

- assess and prioritize the push and pull technologies and strategies to manage shared information flow and organize information
- establish the common expectation of Outlook calendar use to allow for easier access and invitation for collaboration and communication
- update and maintain accurate email lists to prevent pushing information out to people who don't need to receive it

Section Three: Structural Considerations and Opportunities

Fostering Growth with Colleges

Within the framework of opportunities and considerations, the activities of the working group revealed certain synergies that exist within a variety of areas (e.g., undergraduate nursing with graduate nursing, undergraduate business programs and graduate business programs). In some areas where program growth is already occurring, the development of colleges with a more formal alignment between undergraduate and graduate programs may provide further opportunities for enrollment growth through opportunities for curricular alignment, clear degree pathways, faculty collaboration, coordination of accreditation work, and a focused responsiveness to workforce development needs (e.g., Nursing, Education). Two potential colleges emerged as well-positioned for more focused consideration and deliberation.

College of Education

Considerations

Education-related program development, both at the graduate and undergraduate levels, has been increasing, and there is significant enrollment growth potential. In particular, the high workforce demand for certified teachers and the university's access-oriented online delivery provides a unique opportunity to reach many potential teachers whose geographic location may have otherwise limited their access. P-12 education programs, particularly licensure programs, have unique needs, including specialized advisement in preparation for certification clinical placement requirements, and accreditation reviews beyond that required by the Middle States. In addition to P-12, faculty expertise in graduate programs in higher education and related areas further extend Empire's impact and influence in the broader, educational continuum.

Opportunities

Moving from a split structure across two schools to a College of Education may provide several opportunities. The College of Education Dean, with education-focused credentials and experience, can prioritize raising the public profile of undergraduate and graduate education programs and would build capacity for an increased presence at the state level, including advocating for the populations served by SUNY Empire. Furthermore, the Dean, in collaboration with college faculty, would be positioned to leverage resources, expertise, and partnerships to promote a P-20 continuum, build and facilitate pathways between P-12 schools and institutions of higher education, and contribute to the synergies among organizations. Empire State graduates in education programs should benefit from these collaborations.

Aligning the undergraduate and graduate programs within the teacher certification programs supports scaling for growth through shared resources and partnerships as NYSED requirements shift in the coming years. Alignment between the degree levels may improve and/or provide new pathways from undergrad to grad and, in some cases, may foster dual enrollment pathway development in areas such as special education. Shared expertise and resources for program development, alignment, and accreditation can remove duplicative efforts and support positive outcomes related to certification and clinical experiences.

College of Business

Considerations

The undergraduate school of business has been a leader in developing new structured degree programs, highly desired by students, and leading to strong enrollments. Enrollment in graduate business programs is also strong, with the MBA program enrolling the most students in the graduate school. While nearly 30% of graduate students have also earned a bachelor's degree from SUNY Empire, only .3% of graduate students are enrolled in the dual degree pathway annually. Barriers such as the lack of shared ownership of the dual degree program process, the impact of varying course credit models (4 credits versus 3 credits) on financial aid eligibility, and the need for dual enrollment advising expertise have been mentioned as barriers to further growth of this option for Empire students.

Currently, the MBA programs are accredited through IACBE, while the remaining graduate programs and the undergraduate programs are not. Accreditation can contribute to raising the public profile of the programs and could provide additional employee reimbursement pathways for future students. This would require more coordination and alignment if this were

to be pursued. Opportunities to align curriculum, including identifying potential knowledge gaps and/or overlap, may be more challenging within business programs if only one area is required to meet accreditation standards.

Opportunities

The strong enrollment of the business programs and emerging workforce needs suggest great potential for continued enrollment growth. A College of Business may foster or accelerate growth by providing clear, focused pathways for degree completion across degree levels and, where possible, identifying areas where degree program completion may be accelerated through dual enrollment, PLE, and iPLA or enhanced through experiential learning.

Like the College of Education, a focused College of Business allows dean-level leadership to prioritize raising the public profile of undergraduate and graduate programs within state, corporate, and not-for-profit partners. Increased partnerships provide not only enrollment pipelines but may also benefit students through access to internships or employer-sponsored benefits.

Fostering Growth within Schools

The development of a college structure versus a school structure was proposed as a means of aligning academically similar majors and degree programs under a broad umbrella in order to better capitalize on shared faculty expertise, outcomes, philosophies, accreditations, assessment, and other academic synergies that could support growth. Beyond the two colleges identified for consideration, the remaining schools need further consideration to determine what, if any, structural shifts may be beneficial. While several of the remaining schools were identified as having growth potential due to high workforce needs in related areas or high potential for partnerships and enrollment pipelines, more information is needed to understand barriers to growth and opportunities that may already build on existing strengths or foster innovation.

Considerations

Various issues can impact enrollment growth. Many times, marketing and targeted recruitment, which are managed by other areas of the institution, are the first to be mentioned. However, in areas with a high market demand and low enrollment, there may be more factors impacting enrollment resulting in smaller schools. For example, a limited pipeline, instructional delivery mode or location-specific model may limit enrollment potential. In another example, the national demand may be high, but the large number of competing programs requires active development and nurturing of partnerships to build enrollment pipelines. In yet another case, grants may help create enrollment pipelines, but grant oversight is labor-intensive and may limit the number of

grants that can be sustained as pipelines. Ultimately, these smaller schools may lack the personnel and resources to support growth or to participate in the university fully.

Opportunities

To promote growth within remaining schools, a more focused school-specific analysis to identify specific barriers would help inform whether a structural change would support enrollment growth or if capitalizing on other opportunities may be more effective. For example, a variety of opportunities were identified such as:

- developing more structured degree programs
- leveraging PLE/PLA opportunities and decrease time to degree completion
- promoting access opportunities such as online lab offerings
- exploring stackable credentials
- increasing robust and interdisciplinary collaboration such as STEM to STEAM
- increasing partnerships such as expanding HVLAS beyond IBEW Local 3
- increasing public profile within relevant state, corporate, or not-for-profit organizations
- updating processes for grants and scholarships

Appendices

Process and Structure Charge

The working group will lead a comprehensive and inclusive conversation to identify barriers to Academic Affairs achieving Empire State University's strategic priorities, objectives, and goals. The group will then articulate possible options for overcoming those barriers, including options to change core academic processes and/or school structures. In support of this expanded charge, the working group will review feedback from the recently administered surveys to design and implement a process for gathering and analyzing additional input from the university community. Feedback gathered will be shared with the university community throughout the process as part of this work.

The working group will articulate options for aligning core academic processes and structures with the university's strategic plan. The group also will identify opportunities, strengths, and other considerations for each option. These options will incorporate feedback from stakeholders across the university and will reflect the range of structures included in the initial round of feedback. In addition to providing regular updates during their work, the working group will provide a final report that will be shared with the university community on a project webpage.

The following principles apply to the working group members:

- Members are charged with developing a process for iteratively gathering, analyzing, and sharing community feedback aimed at developing a set of options focused on aligning core academic processes and structures with the university's strategic plan. These options will be considered by leadership for possible implementation.
- Members are stewards of an inclusive, iterative process in service to the university and are not representatives of their own discipline, school, unit, or position within the institution.
- Members assume the responsibility—and the opportunity—to help Empire State University mitigate and eliminate as many barriers as possible in service to our students and our strategic plan priorities.

Process and Structure Working Group Members

- Quran Bell, Student Success Coordinator
- Tracy Galuski, Chair, Educational Studies
- Seana Logsdon, Associate Provost for Student Success (Co-Chair)
- Eileen McDonnell, Executive Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning
- Thalia MacMillan, Senate Rep and Chair, Health and Human Services
- Paul Miller, Chair, Historical Studies
- Connie Rodriguez, UG Faculty, Accounting
- Chris Rolley, Enrollment and Partnership Outreach Officer
- Rob Sanders, Associate Provost for Faculty and Academic Excellence (Co-Chair)
- Kay Watkins, Managing Director, University-wide Project Management
- Tom Wiese Grad Faculty, Applied Analytics

Working Group Timeline and Activities

- August 31, 2023: Survey sent to university community requesting input about our academic structure and naming conventions.
- October 24 to November 8: Formation of the working group.
- November 13, 2023: First meeting of the Process and Structure Working Group.
- November 13, 2023 to January 29, 2024: Analysis of strategic plan community feedback from 2022-23; school data provided by Decision Support; and the initial survey regarding academic naming conventions and structure.
- January 29, 2024: Community conversation sharing initial findings and suggestions.
- January 29 to February 16: Feedback period, including one survey, 10 listening sessions, input from non-academic units.
- February 19 to now: Analysis and consideration of all feedback.
- April 15: Final report of the working group due to President Vollendorf.

Operational Definitions

- **University:** the umbrella unit that includes multiple colleges, schools, and/or departments
- **College:** a large unit of organization within the university that includes multiple smaller units (schools or departments) representing a broad array of programs within a field or discipline (e.g., Health Science, Education, Arts and Sciences)
- **School:** a smaller unit of organization than a college in terms of size and/or scope, that includes multiple departments or programs representing a narrow array of areas within a field or discipline (e.g., Music, Arts). May also exist as an administrative unit to provide support and management of programs (e.g., Graduate School)
- **Department:** a unit made up of faculty around a field of study or related fields of study
- **Program:** an area of study comprised of courses offered by the faculty from a department that leads to a credential
- **Center:** an interdisciplinary unit that supports research, scholarship, or service to the campus and/or the community