

## Voices Shared: feedback from the UM-Flint campus community

### INTRODUCTION

In 2000, Carnegie Communications conducted a multi-faceted Enrollment Market Analysis for the University of Michigan-Flint (UMF). This study included focus groups and surveys with a variety of audiences including prospective students, current students, faculty, staff and alumni, along with an environmental scan and a full-scale geodemographic analysis of the University's historic enrollment patterns. Some of the key recommendations from the Enrollment Market Analysis include the following:

- the University should consider creating student housing
- potential degree programs of interest to prospective students include nursing, education, computer science, business and health care
- the University should increase its external marketing efforts, both because its competitors are doing so and because there are good things happening at UM-Flint that are not well publicized
- the admissions effort should be enhanced with e-mail communication, better publications, a better Web site, and more targeted student recruitment efforts based on a system of grading prospects

One of the chief outcomes of the Enrollment Market Analysis was Chancellor Mestas' decision to launch a follow-up project, The Campus Conversation, designed to get the entire University community "on the same page" to discuss the future of the institution.

<b>AUDIENCE</b>	<b>MODERATOR</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>FORUM</b>
Focus Groups			
Citizens Advisory Committee	Scott H. Levine, Ph.D.	28-Mar-01	focus group
UM-Flint Faculty	Scott H. Levine, Ph.D.	28-Mar-01	focus group
UM-Flint Alumni	Scott H. Levine, Ph.D.	28-Mar-01	focus group
UM-Flint Staff Council	Scott H. Levine, Ph.D.	30-Mar-01	focus group
UM-Flint Student Government	Scott H. Levine, Ph.D.	30-Mar-01	focus group
UM-Flint Students	Virginia Allen	3-Apr-01	open forum
UM-Flint Faculty	Larry Kugler & Renate McLaughlin		open forum
UM-Flint Staff	Paula Pollander & William Webb	5-Apr-01	open forum
Community Forum	Juan Mestas	19-Apr	open forum

As an integral part of the University of Michigan-Flint's (UMF) Campus Conversation, Carnegie Communications conducted a series of focus groups with key audiences in the spring of 2001. Complementing the focus groups was a series of Town Hall meetings conducted by various members of the Chancellor's cabinet. All of these forums were designed to allow various constituencies of the UM-Flint community to voice their feedback about the document titled "Toward a Shared Vision". This document captured the roundtable discussions that took place in the spring. The roundtables consisted of faculty, staff, students, alumni and community leaders, all of whom were appointed by the Chancellor.

The Campus Conversation was designed to look for ways to bring the University of Michigan-Flint campus together to look toward the future. Inevitably, this type of forward thinking requires an analysis of the present and the past, since understanding how the institution reached its current status over time is critical for planning its future. While the roundtable format of the Campus Conversation led to some criticisms, it also offered a wealth of feedback about the University's strengths, such as the aesthetically pleasing campus and the care and compassion exhibited by many professors and staff.

The report that follows is intended to identify recurring themes that arose in the series of open forums and focus groups. Wherever possible, we include direct quotes from the Carnegie-moderated focus groups to help impart the passion with which various opinions were shared. By their nature, open forums and focus groups are designed to allow for anonymity; therefore, we do not match the speakers with specific quotes. It is important to note as well that the open nature of the forums and focus groups creates an inherent imbalance, inasmuch as it can be difficult to assess a weight to a comment. For instance, one highly vocal participant might dominate a forum, distorting the results. A professional focus group moderator can sidestep this issue, but it is difficult to do so in an open forum. For this reason, though we include maximum feedback from the open forums, there is a slightly greater emphasis on the focus group feedback. Similarly, because the Carnegie-moderated focus groups were audiotaped, we were able to listen to them repeatedly to cull the most salient facts. This was not possible with the open forums.

It is important to note that we emphasize the issues that were raised and focused on most heavily

throughout the Campus Conversation. While not ideal, this is an inherent compromise that accompanies qualitative research such as focus groups. The goal of these groups and the open forums was to get campus constituents talking openly, and it is therefore not surprising that some issues received greater attention than others.

## **I. ENROLLMENT GROWTH**

One of the most hotly contested assertions of the document *Toward a Shared Vision* and the conversations surrounding it is the issue of enrollment growth. In the focus groups and the open forums, enrollment growth was a significant topic that received a great deal of attention. Quite often, participants questioned whether enrollment growth should really be a top priority for UM-Flint at this particular time in the institution's history. Both faculty and staff audiences, in particular, expressed concern about the infrastructure improvements (in terms of personnel and physical plant issues) that student housing would necessitate. Some faculty members asked whether it is in fact true that the University needs to grow despite the fact that enrollment has decreased by a combined three percent over the past two academic years. In fact, there was some disagreement with the notion that growth is critical to the University's survival. Some of the faculty who participated in the groups and forums, rather than focusing on the need to grow in order to remain financially viable, instead questioned whether enrollment growth would have a deleterious impact on academic standards and "quality".

In the faculty open forum, one participant raised an important point about enrollment growth: it need not come solely from recruiting new students. Indeed, this faculty member noted that improved retention would go a long way toward helping the University grow its enrollment. The staff at Carnegie Communications, having worked with well over 100 admissions offices, concurs. The common wisdom in enrollment management holds that it is much less expensive and disruptive to retain a current student than it is to recruit a new one. Some faculty also noted that while the growth projection is ambitious, other Michigan colleges and universities have grown over the past two years. Some alumni were vocal in questioning the need to grow as well, raising some of the same infrastructure questions as faculty and staff.

However, they focused more heavily on the University's ability to market itself, leading to questions about how to grow over the long term.

There were some positive comments about enrollment growth, albeit delivered with a number of caveats. Some members of the University's Staff Council noted that despite these concerns, the prospect of enrollment growth outweighs the negatives or downsides. Reservations included the lack of instructors and class space (the latter is a strong recurring theme), increased workload for staff, managing enrollment growth in the current, fiscally troubled environment, etc. The focus group with student government was more positive about enrollment growth, with one participant stating, "if you're not changing with the times, you're standing still". Several students, while acknowledging the risks associated with enrollment growth, noted that "more students equals more money" for the University. Students also felt that with enrollment growth, the University might be able to offer more classes, thereby addressing one of their chief concerns.

Perhaps one of the most illuminating questions came from a faculty member in the faculty focus group (at which, notably, the Chancellor was present): "Do we have to grow or die?" This question suggests that overall, the campus community has not entirely bought into the need to grow enrollment even though other documents have suggested that so doing is vital to the University's continued financial health.

### **Scheduling Classes**

An important sub-topic pertaining to enrollment growth that arose in nearly every focus group and open forum is the issue of class availability and scheduling. There was general agreement that course scheduling and availability is inextricably linked with the notion of growing enrollment. Virtually every audience agreed that the process of course scheduling needs significant improvement at the University. One focus group participant noted, "right now, instructors get to pick their room even if it's not appropriate for their purposes, so right now, we could have a class in a room that's designed for 100 students and there's only 25 students". Some students were especially vocal about the lack of availability of classes, particularly upper-level classes needed to graduate. Several staff members shared anecdotes of students who were unable to graduate on time because of poor course scheduling. There

were, likewise, several anecdotes of students (and even one staff member who is also a UM-Flint student) taking courses at competitor institutions because the classes they need are simply not offered frequently enough. There was much concern that adding more students would make it even more difficult for students to graduate on time. Some staff members commented that faculty must be willing to offer more courses, and to offer them on a more frequent basis, in order to meet the needs of students.

Members of the Citizens Advisory Committee who participated in a Carnegie-led focus group echoed this sentiment, suggesting that one of the biggest inhibitors to change at UM-Flint is the firmly entrenched faculty. It was noted that, generally, faculty are resistant to change and are more interested in maintaining the status quo. One participant stated that faculty resistance is a sizeable stumbling block on the road to change. It was further noted that many, if not most, UM-Flint faculty members do not even live in Flint.

Faculty members weighed in on the issue of course scheduling and availability as well. There were many complaints about the actual design and layout of the course schedule, with one focus group participant noting that the design buries courses so that students do not see them. Another noted that enrollment in Saturday courses has decreased since the course schedule was redesigned. Staff concurred that highlighting Saturday and evening courses in the course schedule would help clarify things for students. Another professor pondered how faculty should be expected to teach weekend classes when buildings are all locked on Saturday mornings. There was general frustration that different parts of the University do not communicate, with troubling consequences such as classrooms being locked on the weekends.

Negative comments about faculty members' willingness to teach at times students want were noted by many alumni, students, members of the Citizens Advisory Group, and staff. Some stated that faculty members just do not want to teach at times they find inconvenient. The issue arose in the faculty focus group too. One faculty member stated, "I have taught an evening class every semester for the past 25 years". Clearly, this is an issue over which there is little agreement except for the need to create change. A troubling point from the faculty open forum is the assertion that many students do want daytime classes, and that small departments would have a hard time offering both day and night courses. Carnegie staff

support the assertion of one focus group participant who suggested that perhaps the University should “do a survey to determine what programs people want to have at night...” With the ability to conduct electronic survey research via the Web, this would be a relatively simple exercise.

Other comments about scheduling focused on the split between traditional and non-traditional students. Noted one participant, “a lot of the students in professional programs struggle with the one hour, three-times-a-week kind of general education classes they need...a lot of our students work full time”. Noted a non-traditional student, “with my work schedule, there’s no way I can do the typical Monday-Wednesday-Friday...to come here, I would have to quit my job”. Notes from the staff open forum include a powerful statement:

Faculty governance is very strong. Faculty set the course schedule according to what they (meaning the faculty) want to teach and when. Faculty seem to only want to be on campus one day per week. The needs of the students are not being considered. We cannot fix enrollment decline unless the faculty are willing to change and be more flexible.

Ultimately, it seems, every constituency is dissatisfied with the availability, scheduling, and frequency of course offerings. While this is clearly a significant situation, it is important to note that the Campus Conversation was designed specifically to identify the most pressing issues, and knowing that course scheduling is such a problematic area will lead to action steps designed to address these challenges.

## **II. Underfunding/Resource Allocation**

One issue universally agreed upon by virtually all constituents participating in the Campus Conversation is the lack of funding at the University and the myriad problems associated with allocating resources. In the staff open forum, it was noted that the budget process as it now stands is overly complex, and that many simply do not understand it. Some staff members further questioned whether departments and units should be rewarded for enrollment growth. Though not named as such, this is much like the budgeting theory known as Responsibility Centered Budgeting.

Interestingly, however, while every audience agreed that budgeting and resource allocation

are pressing issues on the UM-Flint campus, neither the focus groups nor the open forums yielded a great deal of feedback about the issue. Once again, this suggests that the Campus Conversation has been successful by helping to identify the University's biggest challenges.

### **III. Marketing**

Though not listed as a major imperative in *Toward A Shared Vision*, the issue of marketing nonetheless is a common theme woven throughout virtually all of the focus groups and open forums. There was near-unanimous agreement that the University has not been successful at marketing its greatest strengths. In particular, several alumni members were quite vocal about the University's inability to market itself, noting that there has not been a professional university relations staff member for over a year. Student government members also noted that, despite the many excellent programs at UM-Flint, there is no successful marketing to get the word out. They noted as well that competitors such as UM-Dearborn and Baker College are much better about touting their strengths. The Citizens Advisory Committee noted that the University's competitors are also "eating UM-F's lunch". Interestingly, faculty members did not vocalize the need for more/better marketing. In the student open forum, it was noted that many students are transferring to places like Ann Arbor, and it seems like UM-Flint is a middle passage. A commonly noted sentiment suggests that the University has great programs, but they are not marketed well enough to garner any attention.

In an illustrative real-world example, one alum stated that his son received direct mail from most of the University's competitors, but "hardly got anything from Flint". In Carnegie's Enrollment Market Analysis, we suggested the need for a dramatic increase in budgeting for marketing for this very reason. Our recommendation included drastically improving recruitment publications and increasing the flow of information to prospective students with a high likelihood of enrolling. A staff member who is finishing her degree at Baker said she knew of that institution because of its aggressive marketing:

...billboards, mail...get stuff in the mail from Baker all the time. They almost overload you with it. They make you want to call them and find out what's going on. And when you go there, they are so friendly to you—you're the reason we have a job, that's how they treat you.

Another issue related to marketing is the perception that UM-Flint is “the really ugly step-sister to UM-Ann Arbor.” One participant who employs several UM-Flint graduates says that when you ask them where they went to school, it’s just “U of M.” They don’t say “UM-Flint.” One staff member said that when people back home say, “Wow, you work for UM,” she doesn’t elaborate. And the alum whose son almost went to Central Michigan—well, his son is attending UM-Flint “because he wants to go to Ann Arbor.”

Some staff members in the open forum noted that the University fails at marketing itself internally due to poor communication. They echoed the sentiments of students and alumni about the institution’s inability, as a result, to market its services to the external world. Minutes from the staff open forum include the following statement about the combination of poor internal communication and ineffective external marketing:

Relationships with the outside community are very important, however we need to work on our on-campus relationships. We are too separated—faculty, staff and administrators are separated from each other and the students are separated from everyone...How can we market ourselves if we cannot even talk to each other in a congenial, professional manner?

This powerful quote symbolizes the need for a University-wide integrated marketing plan. Such a plan, as used on other college and university campuses, would be designed to create the three or four strongest marketing themes, which are reinforced at every opportunity by every member of campus. One example of the need for an integrated marketing plan is the lack of a standardized tagline for UM-Flint. In our experience, several are in use now, from “Building Futures” to “The Riverfront Campus of the University of Michigan”.

#### **IV. Housing**

The feedback among the different groups regarding the notion of creating student housing at the University of Michigan-Flint was extensive. For the most part, participants in the open forums and the focus groups expressed concerns about the timing of creating student housing. Faculty suggested that any movement toward building student housing should be taken with great caution. One participant warned against the “build it and they will come” approach. Alumni focus group participants generally agreed that creating student housing is a good

, but wondered about the many challenges the institution would face in making this a reality.

As was the case in the Enrollment Market Analysis, the notion of student housing raised a plethora of associated issues including safety, services, parking, staffing requirements, etc. A recurring theme in the Campus Conversation focus groups is the need for a symbiotic relationship between the city of Flint and the University if student housing is to be a viable venture. One likened it to the “chicken-and-egg” conundrum, wondering whether the city should create services first or, conversely, whether the creation of student housing would fuel external development.

There was some agreement across the focus group audiences that “it’s the city’s turn to make the first move”. One faculty member noted that “it’s their turn. It’s not our turn”. Student government representatives echoed this sentiment, noting that the University needs to lobby and be more aggressive with the city of Flint. One focus group participant, referring to the city of Flint, stated that, “They’re not going to do anything. They’ve shown themselves to be heroically inadequate”.

Community leaders in the focus group with the Citizens Advisory Committee generally disagree. They suggest that the University’s reputation is strong enough to get students to live downtown, and that once this begins, critical mass will grow. They believe that building student housing first will serve as the catalyst to growing retail outlets downtown. What’s more, there was strong agreement that the University has been a constant positive in an otherwise-troubled downtown Flint. One focus group participant called the University the “anchor store of the Flint mall”. They also noted that while many faculty members do not themselves live in Flint, the University nevertheless brings educated, relatively well-paid people into downtown every day. There was also some mention of creating a joint housing “village” for several of Flint’s institutions of higher education, including UM-Flint, Kettering University, and Mott Community College. It was also noted that Kettering University had recently launched the second phase of University apartments across from the campus due to the overwhelming success of the initial phase.

Some Staff Council members were not overly keen on the idea of building student housing given the great needs elsewhere on campus (academic programs, staffing, more courses,

alternate delivery methods and the universally acknowledged lack of resources). They voiced concerns about the perception of safety and the dramatically increased load it would place on staff resources as well as fiscal resources, and questioned whether having student housing would really help grow enrollment. Regarding staffing, these members of Staff Council wondered about housekeeping, health services, safety officers and facilities management. In the staff open forum, it was noted that enrollment should grow *before* housing is built. This is in somewhat marked contrast to the finding in the Enrollment Market Analysis, which suggested using student housing as a vehicle to grow the University enrollment. Another focus group participant neatly summarized both the fear and the promise of student housing, noting that,

I think everyone will agree that it [student housing] would do wonders for letting us attract a more varied, competent student body. It is also terrifying that we'll end up with another Autoworld and lose a bunch of money.

A missing element of these discussions regarding student housing at UM-Flint is the fact that the Chancellor has suggested than any such effort would have to be self-supporting. This raises another important issue from the Campus Conversation, which is the lack of understanding about how student housing would be created.

## **V. Alternate Educational Delivery**

Given the concerns about growing enrollment, increasing revenue, and the need to offer more courses to help be more student-centered, the issue of alternate educational delivery is of paramount concern at UM-Flint. As with growing enrollment and creating student housing, this issue was studied at length in the Enrollment Market Analysis. As with virtually all other issues in the Campus Conversation, however, there are mixed feelings about offering alternative educational delivery, whether in the form of evening classes, weekend classes, or online courses. Having addressed the issue of weekend and evening classes earlier in this document, we focus here on online learning.

As with building student housing, many staff members were particularly concerned about whether creating a more systematic approach to online learning is something the University

really wants, and can afford, to take on at this time. There was sentiment among staff and faculty that online courses would certainly be advantageous for non-traditional students who are not otherwise able meet the rigid scheduling of many academic programs. However, several participants raised concerns about competing in the now-crowded Web-based distance learning arena in which other campuses have more experience, more money, better marketing, and greater name recognition. Said one faculty member, “there’s a lot of people out there who are already doing it, and that might be an issue too—we might have gotten into it too late.”

Some faculty members also expressed concern about how to properly integrate online courses with current curricula. And it was noted that not all learners are a good “fit” for online learning. (This is a well-accepted fact in distance learning circles. For this reason, several online distance learning operations include a diagnostic tool to allow prospective students self-select whether online learning is a good option.) Faculty members were vocal about the need to maintain academic quality with online course delivery. And they noted that some courses are simply better taught in person.

## **VI. Becoming Student-Centered**

Staff and alumni talked in depth about the need for the University to be student-centered, to cut through the red tape for students, to make it easier to transfer credits in or out of UM-Flint, to take classes, or to get help. One participant said that it’s more important for students who will be moving out of the area to go to a school with name recognition, but that “non-traditional students who will stay in the area don’t care—the less red tape the better.” And participants in the Citizens Advisory Group, the alumni group, and the staff group said that institutions like Baker and Mott Community College and Saginaw Valley are doing a better job of responding to student needs—offering programs that students want, making it easier to transfer credits, offering courses online or at different times. One staff member talked candidly about her personal experience with taking classes at UM-Flint, then transferring to Baker because the program was more flexible:

“That’s one of the things I liked about Baker. I was a student here and I was still a staff member here at the time. I got so frustrated with the red tape...I said, ‘forget this, I’m leaving.’ And I was a part-time student, 3.7 GPA, this was three years ago, and I left here and went to Baker. The first day I went to Baker, I sat down with my enrollment packet and set down my academic plan. And they have been so nice and the classes—I

do all online now because I'm getting ready to graduate. But as a staff member *here*, I couldn't even get help. Forget this, I'll take my money and go somewhere else."

There was near universal agreement that the University still needs to take steps to become as student-centered as it wants to be. But there is little consensus about how to improve on the status quo.

## **VII. Community**

In the Carnegie-moderated focus groups, there was a greater emphasis on some of the aforementioned issues, with less attention paid to the notion of a shared sense of responsibility to the community. That said, there was some discussion in the focus groups and a considerable number of questions raised in the staff open forum on this issue. For instance, staff noted that the term "community" is ill defined, as it is unclear whether this refers to the UM-Flint community, the city of Flint, Genesee County, or some combination thereof. Interestingly, some staff members suggested that the University is almost haughty, and that "community people see us as being closed and segregated, i.e., closed walkways. It appears as if we do not want any contact with the outside world." The earlier comments about the University's poor marketing efforts were raised again, this time in the context not providing information about the University to the community at large.

The student open forum yielded more positive comments. One student felt that the campus facilities should be available to the general community, though it was not clear in what capacity. Notes from the open forum suggest that, "Flint is struggling economically. The

University should help make the community better.” That said, students echoed an earlier theme by stating that, “the walkways of this campus are set up so that we don’t have to be involved with the community and vice versa. The community doesn’t feel it can enter ‘this world’—our campus.” In the faculty forum, another reason for fostering communication with the community was given: “community involvement could generate funding, too”.

## **Final Thoughts**

The Campus Conversation was designed to get the many different parts of the University of Michigan-Flint focused on the most important challenges. This in and of itself is a sizeable task given the complexity of the institution and its myriad constituents. While there are few, if any, easy answers, the Campus Conversation has been a great success in terms of identifying the most pressing issues. The focus groups and open forums, as originally intended, gave voice to these different constituencies and brought many difficult issues out in the open. As with any conflict, the most important first step is identify the issue and getting all involved parties engaged in finding solutions.

The UM-Flint community now has a quartet of documents that will help take the process forward to help, for instance, determine how and when student housing will be built, how to improve course scheduling, and how to better market the many wonderful aspects of UM-Flint that, for now, remain hidden. These documents include:

- the Chancellor's inaugural address
- the Enrollment Market Analysis
- Toward a Shared Vision
- this summary of the focus groups and open forums

Given these documents, the University's progress to date, and the apparent determination of the University's leaders to effect positive change, there is great hope for the future of the University of Michigan-Flint.