

Response to Senate Resolution on an Appropriate Emphasis for Academics

First of all, we appreciate the Senate taking the time to craft this Resolution, to which we are happy to respond in some detail.

First of all, we do not agree with the Resolution's contention that there is a "shifting emphasis from the university's primary mission." WKU seeks to provide a quality, comprehensive learning experience for our students, and to provide students, faculty and staff with an up-to-date campus in which to study and work. We are therefore very encouraged not only by the significant investments in academic quality (e.g., Honors College enrollment, national scholarships earned by our students), and internationalization, but also by the concomitant investments in extra-curricular support and student support services that have occurred over the period in question.

It is true that base salaries for WKU faculty are low compared to the proposed benchmarks. However, we would stress that these benchmarks were intentionally selected to provide as high an aspirational group as possible. Further, the proposed 2012-18 Action Plan contains aggressive measures to increase WKU's ranking within this benchmark group, even recognizing that this goal is a "moving target." And, to show unequivocally the administration's steadfast commitment to this goal, we have provided a 2% across-the-board raise for AY 2012-13, a bold move that is unequalled at any Kentucky public university. Indeed, we are the only public university in the Commonwealth to have provided a compensation increase every year since the recession began in 2008, and indeed for the past 15 years in a row. Also, it is generally acknowledged that merit raise programs are effective only when the pool is more substantial than a couple of percent, and indeed the proposed Action Plan provides, subject to the financial assumptions listed in the Plan, for merit pools of significance.

We feel obliged to point out that published base salaries do not accurately reflect the total compensation earned by faculty. Faculty can, and do, earn compensation above the published base salary for a variety of activities. Included in these is teaching during the Winter term, an activity carried out during the base nine-month academic contract period that nevertheless can entail compensation of up to \$6,000 over and above the base salary. Including such additional compensation would have the effect of significantly improving our ranking within our benchmark list. And, while it is true that "faculty and staff have not experienced a merit raise or merit pool since 2007," we suggest that this does not present a fair picture, especially during a period of significant economic challenges when many universities (and state agencies) were experiencing flat salaries, hiring freezes, furloughs, program closures, and even involuntary terminations.

Many of the proposed benchmarks are Research Doctoral universities, and simply the fact that these institutions appear on our benchmark list is a strong testament to the very significant growth in the research enterprise at WKU over the past few years. Yet WKU still ranks in the bottom half of these benchmarks in terms of total research expenditures. As we have remarked on several occasions, absent unforeseen developments in state funding, WKU's best hopes for more resources with which to provide increased faculty compensation lie in three areas: increased student retention, philanthropy, and research awards. And, while it is reasonable to expect compensation and faculty/student ratios that

would position us well within our peers, it is similarly incumbent upon us to perform at benchmark levels in all areas. Increasing the research portfolio to a level comparable to some of our proposed benchmarks would not only yield F&A dollars to support services that we must currently support with E&G funds, it would also allow faculty to support a fraction of their salary from external sources, thus opening up the possibility for substantial increases in base compensation. The Senate Resolution notes that the Senate should “encourage faculty to consider pursuing whatever means necessary to help the administration” in addressing such matters, and we strongly encourage them to consider carefully this aspect of WKU’s overall portfolio.

We agree that WKU’s “continued viability as a state-supported entity” is substantially dependent on the actions and productivity of our faculty; however, the unfortunate reality is that state funding over the past few years has not reflected this. As a result of the steadily declining trend in state appropriation over the last decade (from some 40% of our budget in 2000 to less than 18% now), we have been constrained to support and build the academic mission through tuition increases and strategic reallocation of funds. This year WKU had stood to gain some \$2M in recurring state funding on the basis of a proposed performance-based funding formula, a measure that strongly reflects the core academic mission of the university and the dedicated support of our faculty and staff. However, such performance-based funding did not materialize; instead, we were faced with a \$5M cut in our state appropriation.

Yet, despite this trend of decreasing state funding, WKU has steadfastly maintained its commitment to the academic mission. This year, the Division of Academic Affairs protected all 77 ongoing faculty searches; this was a very significant statement on the priority of academics, an action taken to ensure that we have adequate faculty to “support the essential components and mission of the university.” The number of budgeted full-time faculty positions (excluding faculty in the Libraries) has increased from 785 for FY 11 to 808 for FY 13, an increase of 23 net new budgeted full-time faculty positions, 18 of which held professorial rank (the other five were Professional-in-Residence faculty positions associated with SKyTeach). Between Fall 2009 and Fall 2011, the actual number of full-time faculty members increased by almost 5%, from 735 to 771. This growth has been made possible through strategic reallocations of funds within the Academic Affairs Division. A total of 61 budgeted vacant faculty positions were filled for FY 12 and so far 62 budgeted full-time faculty positions have been filled for FY 13. We therefore cannot agree with the contention that it has become “increasingly difficult to keep employed the quality faculty and staff that the university currently enjoys.” We have suffered very little attrition of faculty for reasons other than retirement, and the deans unanimously report that we have enjoyed strong applicant pools, and have been successful in attracting top candidates, for faculty positions. These new faculty will further enhance the already significant strength in academics at WKU.

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