



April 20, 2009

Dear Strategic Planning Committee,

The Sustainability Council and Center for Sustainable Communities are pleased to offer this letter in response to your invitation for feedback regarding Willamette's Strategic Plan. We would like to commend the SPC for the work you have done identifying challenges and opportunities that face us in the near future, and express our appreciation for the opportunity to help shape our common future.

The Strategic Planning document clearly has two functions: it provides vision for longer range planning, while at the same time it seeks to provide pragmatic guidance for fund raising and short and middle term investments. We would like to address our comments to both of these functions.

First, in terms of vision, the Center and Council hold forth a vision of the Willamette community as embedded in the natural and social infrastructures that support our educational mission. That is to say, our particular vision of Willamette is not simply of an educational institution engaged in the business of educating students, but also of an institution engaged in, dependent upon, and responsible to a wide range of natural and human resources -- locally, regionally, and globally. From our perspective, what should make Willamette distinctive is that in our research, curriculum, and our institutional practices we advance knowledge of coupled natural and human systems, demonstrate awareness of physical and social processes and their origins and consequences, and commit to making our institutional, individual, and societal relationships to these systems transparent, ethical, and sustainable. In our view, it is in this way that we can best embody the spirit of our motto, "*Not Unto Ourselves Alone Are We Born.*"

Regarding a common vision, we believe that there are many potential visions that could fragment us institutionally. However, a common vision informed by the motto has the potential to both unify us and value our differences. Under a shared vision of distinct missions embodied in "*Not Unto Ourselves Alone Are We Born,*" we believe that all sectors of our community can find ample room for relevance, support, and growth: the motto does not just stand for sustainability or equity. In addition to scientific and ecological literacy, the motto also certainly means we must foster cultural and intercultural literacy (arts, literature, history, philosophy, international education), as well as socio-political literacy (social sciences, business, and law). But what an institutional vision grounded in our motto may most importantly do is remind us that as we engage the realities of the 21st century we must integrate our "literacies." For instance, climate change, poverty, and the global health crises are all thoroughly interdisciplinary dilemmas requiring that we, as engaged researchers and our students as future leaders, bring multiple perspectives and methods to bear.



From our perspective, we see Willamette's future as that of an educational community embedded in a diverse range of natural and social systems, thoroughly engaged in their rigorous analysis and study, and dedicated to a place-based, problem-oriented educational model. As an outgrowth, we believe that vision will necessitate clarifying the link between equity and the environment on both a local and a global scale, and increasing diversity within our own community.

Finally, our vision of Willamette itself is informed by a wider, global vision of our future, which in turn has implications for how we define academic excellence. As the Planning Document itself recognizes, our graduates will be entering a world with increasing challenges due to environmental degradation, population growth, income disparity, and climate change. We need to be consciously developing students' ability to respond to these challenges by fostering research opportunities and creating curricular and co-educational experiences that emphasize intellectual agility, flexibility, and ingenuity. Broadly speaking, in our view, academic excellence will be defined by faculty and students who are:

- Well grounded in the methods of more than one discipline;
- Intellectually rigorous, yet inherently “boundary transgressors,” actively seeking information and developing expertise across fields and traditional academic silos;
- Experienced in collaborative, problem-oriented, learning and research;
- Shaped by experiences of learning in an environment which is ethnically and economically diverse;
- Risk-taking, flexible, and innovative.

As we move from broad statements regarding a shared vision to more concrete issues of short and medium term priorities, we do believe that this shared vision suggests some specific recommendations for how to prioritize institutional resources. Thus, we support the following:

- **Hiring faculty at the intersection of disciplines.** The CLA has made some efforts to do this and should continue to advance this model in appropriate sectors, including sustainability. These positions create new linkages between departments (and potentially, colleges), foster innovative research agendas, and model cross-boundary investigations (and careers) for our students. However, the University must work to reduce institutional barriers inhibiting such positions. This includes careful attention to hiring and ongoing research and teaching evaluation procedures. **This policy should apply not simply to new lines, but should also be considered for replacement lines as well.**



- **Expanding resources for faculty and student research that enriches and extends the classroom experience.** Conversations at recent faculty meetings demonstrate that even in the wake of significant hiring, internal resources for research have remained stagnant; hence, across the University we have many more faculty and students chasing the same small pool of funds. Such competition leads to conflict, and seriously undermines research productivity. Additionally, it is imperative to develop, fully fund and provide administrative support for student/faculty collaborative research programs across the disciplines and across the university, modeled on the Science Collaborative Research Program (SCRP).
- **Investing in curricular innovation and reform, especially initiatives that encourage multi-disciplinary, problem- and place-based learning.** In the area of sustainability education, there are good examples of such at the Gund Institute at University of Vermont (<http://www.uvm.edu/giee/>), the (graduate) Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability at the University of British Columbia (<http://www.ires.ubc.ca/>), and undergraduate programs at Oberlin and Wesleyan. This curricular model can be applied to other areas, such as globalization, immigration, and health care--as well.
- **Investing in people, programs, and activities to strengthen diversity.** Recent efforts by the University and Board of Trustees to improve diversity are to be commended. Yet, we must do more to make sure that once here, faculty, staff, and students of various socio-economic, ethnic, religious, sexual, and geographic backgrounds are integrated into the fabric of the University.
- **Expanding support for innovative pedagogy.** It is not enough simply to verbally suggest and encourage pedagogical innovation. Support needs to be built into the system. Two obvious needs are expansion of Hewlett-like financial support for curricular innovation, and proper recognition in the evaluation and tenure process. Yet, pedagogical innovation will also require greater attention to facilities design and staffing. Science facilities on campus are inadequate for contemporary science curricula (to say nothing about research), and our studio art spaces pose hazards to students and faculty. Faculty across the university are employing new, often technology-dependent pedagogies, ranging from GIS to digital archives, all of which require more infrastructure and on-site expertise and administration. The university should budget not simply for the improvement and upgrading of facilities necessary for 21st century pedagogies, but also the specialized staff (lab and studio techs, etc.) which may be necessary for their proper use by faculty and students.

There is one final area where we believe a shared vision of “*Not unto ourselves alone are we born*” suggests some very practical considerations. We believe this future vision of the university means addressing the social structures that support our common institutional tasks. Expansion of our research and teaching, and future development of new facilities must necessarily require additional and sufficient support personnel—from



lab techs to curators to custodians. Thus, pragmatically, we want to underscore the fact that we must carefully consider the real costs of all initiatives we pursue and how those costs are distributed. In particular, we believe that part of our strategic planning for the future of Willamette ought to include financial and institutional planning which leads to greater equity among Willamette's employees. For instance, at this particular point in time, nearly half of Willamette's full-time classified employees (97 of 203) are not paid enough to support themselves and a single child. We take heart in the President's and Board's recent efforts to address this dilemma. We believe that as we move forward with any set of initiatives designed to distinguish Willamette and deliver real value to our students, we should not do so at the expense of failing to make progress on issues of social equity within our own institution. It would be, truly, incongruent with our motto.

In conclusion, we recognize that we represent only one "constituency" among many in this strategic planning process. At the same time, however, we believe, as the Planning Document suggests, that investing institutional resources in the areas implicated in a shared, yet individually interpreted, vision focused on our motto would build on existing strengths and institutional identity at the same time that it increases visibility, addresses changing demographics, and clearly defines what makes Willamette distinctive. In other words, we believe our vision to be at least part of the core of what will allow Willamette to be sustainable in the future.

Sincerely,

The Willamette University Sustainability Council
The Willamette University Center for Sustainable Communities