

SUNY ESF

Strengthening Our Community

A Report provided in response to
Concerns about Campus Leadership,
Management and Relationships

Interview Summary,
Analysis & Recommended
Next Step Options

This Document is intended
to be

CONFIDENTIAL

for Review by the Core Group
Only prior to its meeting on
December 11, 2015

Provided by

SEARS ASSOCIATES

to the
ESF/SUNY Core Group

December 10, 2015

SUNY ESF...Strengthening Our Community

Interview Summary, Analysis & Recommended Next Step Options

BACKGROUND to this REPORT

In November of 2015 Sears Associates (Judy Saul, Ann Martin, and Scott Sears) was engaged by the SUNY Provost's Office to assist the College of Environmental Sciences and Forestry (ESF) community address current concerns related to campus leadership and relationships. The initial activity consisted of a meeting on November 17th with a "core group" of ESF faculty and administrators, together with representatives from SUNY.

At this first session it was determined that there would be two phases to the process. First would be the interviewing of a cross section of stakeholders with the intent of the consultant team learning about campus conditions and hearing concerns and ideas for future action. A copy of the interview guide/questions that was used and a listing of interviewee affiliation categories are included with this report as Appendix B and C respectively. The second phase was to be determined after the interview process, so as to ensure that it would be as responsive as possible to "on the ground" campus conditions. Appendix A on page 6 provides an overall view of the phases and their proposed foci.

This report provides a brief analysis of current conditions related to campus leadership and climate, a summary of issues identified in the interviews, and recommendation options for next steps. As the interview summaries reveal, there was a broad array of issues presented. However, consistent with the core group's original charge and the consultants' sense of which issues can leverage the greatest impact if addressed immediately, the proposed next steps focus on improving conditions and/or understanding in three priority areas. These are *leadership, communication, and governance*.

BRIEF ANALYSIS of INTERVIEWS and CAMPUS CONDITIONS

Our interviews revealed a wide variety of campus conditions and perspectives. Although most comments within the provided summary lean in the direction of "problems", many individuals did express a strong belief that these were solvable. Some interviewees even went so far as to express that if these problems are addressed properly, they could provide real "opportunities" for strengthening the campus community and its mission. Overall, although it is unlikely that many of the perspectives identified will come as a surprise to readers of this report, the intended value in having these "out" as verified viewpoints is that they can now be addressed more openly and explicitly.

Understandably, given the current backdrop of a potential vote of confidence/no confidence in the President, interviewees did express a significant degree of either upset or confusion related to the current environment. Many were unclear on how it is that the campus had so quickly sunken into a state with such resentment and uncivil dialogue. Some suggested that the new President was responsible through actions such as the appointment of the interim provost, the hiring of a chief of staff, and a "failed" strategic planning process. Many expressed surprise that the campus was having such financial difficulties, as the President has now made them aware. Still others felt that at the bottom of these issues was a culture shift in the (uneasy) transition from the operational and stylistic modes of President Murphy to those of President Wheeler. Some noted, too, that all of this has occurred during an ongoing move to shared governance, in itself a transition requiring new ways of doing things.

The above perspectives were often framed within the context of the overall unrest on university campuses related to diversity and inclusion, not only in regard to students, but faculty and staff as well. Some interviewees referenced longer-standing tensions bound-up in an ongoing dialogue on ESF's nature as a

traditionally oriented science-based institution versus one that is on the leading edge of applying science to social issues. It seemed that this narrative pre-exists the transition of presidents, yet the transition has become a “flash point” for this distinction due to President Wheeler’s stated vision for ESF.

Nonetheless, among the spectrum of opinions on the current state of affairs there were voices of optimism and appreciation for the specific forward-looking tendencies and academic competencies that the new president brings to ESF. Finally, each interviewee expressed a deep commitment to ESF and a desire to realize its potential for greater visibility and enhanced contribution to academia.

WHAT WE LEARNED...INTERVIEW SUMMARY

What follows is a compilation of what we learned from 22 interviews on campus or by telephone with members of the ESF community and (two) SUNY administrators. Obviously, this relatively small sample of interviewees must be considered as one reviews this input. Nonetheless, there was a significant degree of consistency in what these interviewees related, despite there being both similar and different perspectives offered. We have grouped our findings under headings below that capture the primary areas of interest or concern expressed in the interviews, although clearly there is a great deal of overlap. As noted above, these concerns all link in some way to matters of *leadership, communication, and governance*. As represented in Appendix A, these latter territories are offered as an overarching structure for framing the recommended next step options.

I. Campus Environment

In response to our opening interview question about the current environment at ESF, interviewee input converged on a sense that the environment on campus needs to be improved. Comments along this line included the following: ESF has had a long-standing “sense of community,” and there is concern that this is being eroded. The uncertainty about the financial future is unsettling. The hiring chill has a negative impact on morale and the surrounding uncertainty affects faculty’s ability to do their jobs. There is a need for skills and experience at having difficult conversations.

Some interviewees described tension between their role as scientists and the understanding that a new level of activism and direct engagement with social issues is being promoted. We learned there is a lack of trust in top administration and, currently, a lack of trust and respect even between some faculty members. We heard that the change in ESF’s relationship with Syracuse University, which was not generally known to be set in motion before the arrival of President Wheeler, was not adequately discussed and is a concern for students, faculty, alumni, and the overall academic experience on campus. The students’ concern with diversity and inclusion, evidenced in the Baobab statement and one faculty member’s response, generated comments that these are significant issues for ESF to address more substantively in the near future. In addition, some described feeling the effects of sexism on campus.

In contrast to the dissatisfaction expressed in many areas, interviewees also indicated that the response of most of the faculty and the administration to developments after the Baobab statement was swift, appropriate, and reassuring. Indicating that they were speaking for others as well, several said that they do feel hopeful. People expressed commitment to ESF and its potential, great even during these hard times.

II. Leadership Transition

Many interviewees identified the process of transition between President Murphy and Wheeler as problematic. Points made in this regard referred to a contrast in style and practices between Wheeler and prior presidents. Included here were comments that people were not prepared for how best to manage the transition between administrations and that they hadn’t understood the new president’s leadership style

when he was a candidate. Some examples given were that tenure decisions are handled differently now (leading faculty to feel less supported than in the past); the revelation of the financial crisis was a shock to many, having been assured by the former president that the finances would be okay; responsibility for the changing relationship with Syracuse University isn't understood; and the introduction of a new direction (STEAM vs. STEM) may not be fitting for a science-based institution like ESF.

On the other hand, we heard that some think President Wheeler has the right vision for ESF and were enthusiastic about hiring him. Some said he is doing his best to engage a faculty that is not used to being part of campus-level decision-making, and to work with administrators, some of whom are accustomed to less leeway in their roles. Also noted was that some see the President doing well at many aspects of his job in spite of all of the current challenges. We heard that it is important for President Wheeler and his team to acknowledge that there have been mis-steps because this would build goodwill and allow the campus to move forward together.

Despite the misgivings, there is recognition by some that a transition in leadership was needed and that it brings significant opportunities. Some felt that much of the unrest could be positively addressed with more transparency and discussion about how the transition should be happening.

III. Communication

Much of what we heard about those in leadership positions related to how things are communicated. While many interviewees expressed concerns about President Wheeler's leadership style, noting that he "doesn't know us," and does not relate personally, their concerns were framed in terms of not understanding why certain decisions are made or what the details are behind his actions. The examples cited were the hiring of an interim provost, perceived to be without input, and expenditures made—including the expansion of top administration—while there is a budget crisis and a hiring chill.

The strategic planning process was found to be especially problematic. It was indicated that the process began with questions that people felt did not reflect all of the disciplines at ESF. Many noted that input was gathered and much work was done by committees, but that the September 15 draft did not seem to reflect that input. This condition was stated to be met with great consternation by faculty and staff. In addition, several people felt that the 2020 strategic plan and the progress made on its vision and outcomes had been largely ignored.

On the other hand, people did note that the administration responded to concerns by setting up a new, more inclusive process for strategic planning which seems better. However, it was indicated that there remains confusion about how that process works and that the timeline for the plan's completion isn't known to those outside of the committee.

IV. Shared Governance

A lack of clarity on roles and authority for decision making was an additional theme presented by interviewees. Multiple individuals indicated that the distinction in some of the roles and responsibilities of administration and faculty are not always clear, specifically around who has what authority. Some felt that the Academic Governance Committee does not necessarily represent the diversity of faculty opinions and/or interests. Others questioned how well its Executive Committee functions or what exactly is the overall scope of its job. Both faculty and staff expressed confusion about the distinction between the roles of President, Provost, and Chief of Staff, wondering in particular what the Chief of Staff does. Furthermore, we heard that the role of the trustees in campus affairs isn't clear and that there is uncertainty about the Board's level of support for the faculty.

On the other hand, there were solutions offered by interviewees. Many stated that the move to sharing responsibility for governance was welcome, but that how this happens needs to be refined to be more effective. In addition, seeking direction on clarity of roles from SUNY guidelines and/or other outside resources was suggested.

RECOMMENDED ENGAGEMENT OPTIONS

The Appendix A chart included as page 6 reflects the consultants' summary assessment of *What We Heard* and how we believe that can be translated into a format for positive engagement within the three areas of Leadership, Communication, and Governance. These *Priority Near-Term Areas to Address* are intended to frame overarching territories to engage in response to the concerns and opportunities identified. To collaboratively address each of the three areas the consultants provide the following *Recommended Engagement Options*.

A. Individual interviews/facilitated small group meetings: Consult with individuals and/or conduct facilitated meetings with small (homogeneous) groups, including faculty chairs, tenured faculty, non-tenured faculty, administrators, Board of Trustee members, and professional staff. (January through February) The focus of these sessions would be to:

- Determine the needs and possible means for improving information sharing
- Clarify understanding of roles and responsibility for campus *leadership* functions
- Identify *communication* breakdowns and determine constructive strategies for improvement
- Identify priorities and means for changes in faculty-administration interaction
- Clarify interest in and most effective means to work toward shared *governance*

Consultants will compile results of these meetings for presentation to faculty and administration in mid-March, thereby creating the agenda for the blended group/stakeholder meetings in (C) below.

B. One-on-one consultation: Confer with selected individuals in key leadership roles to support them in increasing their abilities to respond to challenging situations and communicate more effectively. As appropriate, bring together individuals experiencing particularly challenging interactions for facilitated conversations with a goal of improving their working relationship. Begin as soon as possible. (December through April)

C. Blended stakeholder groups: Convene three individual cross-discipline/role groups to develop action steps on Communication, Leadership and Governance. Share results of these meetings as they emerge so that groups can build on the work of each other. (mid-March through April). Groups may continue to meet after April without consultants acting as facilitators.

D. Utilize external resources: As appropriate, assist in the identification of internal (SUNY) and external resources that will be useful to ESF in its ongoing capacity-building related to priority issues. This may include activities such as skill building in having difficult conversations; accessing information and assistance from SUNY or other relevant sources regarding roles, responsibilities, and governance; or other resources to be identified in the course of the above steps. (Mid-January through April)

A FEW NOTES ABOUT the RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

In undertaking the recommended engagement options we propose that the focus be directed toward looking forward, identifying productive responses, and engaging in substantive deliberation toward balancing the academic, social, and management environment at ESF. Furthermore, the territory of most immediate concern in terms of current challenges and discord resides with faculty, administration and professional staff, and for that reason the proposed Phase 2 work engages these and not students.

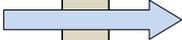
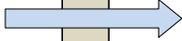
In addition, the consultants believe that the identification of issues already realized through the Phase 1 interviews, together with that proposed in Engagement Option (A), create sufficient information upon which to conduct Phase 2. For this reason conducting a significantly broader process for input on past and current campus conditions is not proposed at this time. This move for efficiency and focus on the future should not be taken to mean that there are concerns or opportunities that should be “off the table”. Rather, our sense is that energy spent now on developing constructive communication patterns and clarity on roles among leadership will provide the most potentially expedient path to a strong and vibrant institution in the future.

December 11, 2015 Core Group Meeting

Per the understanding reached at the initial core group meeting on November 17th, this report is being distributed to all attendees of that meeting in advance of the planned second meeting on December 11th. The consultants see this session as the opportunity to review this report, consider its implications, and refine and plan for the next steps of engagement. This report is intended to be confidential to Core Group members until this meeting, at which time any changes and/or broader distribution agreements are to be established.

SUNY ESF: Strengthening Our Community
PHASE 1 Analysis & PHASE 2 Recommended Engagement Options

APPENDIX A to 12/10/15 Report

| PHASE 1 | | PHASE 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|
| <p>WHAT WE LEARNED <i>Through conducting 22 individual interview discussions...</i></p> | | <p>PRIORITY NEAR-TERM AREAS to ADDRESS <i>Admin – Faculty Focused</i></p> | <p>RECOMMENDED ENGAGEMENT OPTIONS <i>To be conducted in A) one-to-one consultations, B) facilitated small group meetings, C) blended stakeholder/focus groups</i></p> |
| <p>I. Campus Environment Concerns</p> | | <p>LEADERSHIP</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess current perceptions...address issues transparently • Develop best practices/campus expectations • Acknowledge transition (Murphy to Wheeler) conditions • Clarify responsibility for external vs. internal relations • Align faculty and admin vision for ESF |
| <p>II. Leadership Transition Challenges</p> |  | <p>COMMUNICATION</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine gaps/provide specific relevant info (budget, etc.) • Clarify what info needs to be shared & how best to do so • Establish expectations for productive/respectful interaction • Develop capacity/skills for difficult conversations • Define and reaffirm sense of “community” (respect & trust) |
| <p>III. Communication Needs</p> |  | <p>GOVERNANCE</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review existing (AAUP/SUNY)protocols/roles • Clarify goals and needed improvements • Concur on decision-making process/authority • Further develop shared governance function • Support agreed-upon improvements • Develop and apply assessment measures |
| <p>IV. Shared Governance Development</p> | | | |
| <p><i>Nov - Dec 2015</i></p> | | <p><i>Dec 2015 – April 2016</i></p> | |

APPENDIX B to 12/10/15 Report

SUNY ESF: Strengthening Our Community Interview Questions for Faculty, Staff, and Students *Provided by Sears Associates 11/20/15*

Introduction

- How we work as third party consultants
- Overview of this initiative
- Confidentiality and transparency

Questions

- What is your sense of the current environment at ESF?
- What is your sense of the community issues that need to be addressed?
- Who needs to be part of these conversations?
- What suggestions do you have about the best ways to involve those groups and individuals?
- What opportunities do you see as a result of the community's engagement with this process?
- Who else should we talk to as we are gathering information to shape the process?
- What else would be helpful for us to know?

Provided by Sears Associates 11/20/15

APPENDIX C to 12/10/15 Report

Interviewee Categories & Number of Interviewees (22)

Department Chairs (2)
Faculty (5)
CSEA Staff (2)
Professional Staff (2)
USA Rep (1)
GSA Rep (1)
Administration (7)
SUNY (2)

Core Group Members

Faculty

Kelley Donaghy
Melissa Fierke
Richard Hawkes

Administration

Quentin Wheeler
Mark Lichtenstein
Valerie Luzadis

SUNY

Elizabeth Bringsjord
Peter Knuepfer