University of Pittsburgh

Provost and Senior Vice Chancellor

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August 2, 2006

Dr. Ronald L. Larsen
Dean
School of Information Sciences
512 Information Sciences Building

Dear Ron:

Despite the range and breadth of their individual missions, the University of Pittsburgh's academic units are guided by a consistent set of core academic values: education of the whole person, intellectual excellence and growth, diversity, teamwork, and engagement with our community. We have also identified a key set of strategic academic goals for the University. Together, and guided by our shared values, we then work to achieve those goals, and we do so in a constrained fiscal environment and through a sometimes difficult and yet often exciting system of planning efforts.

By a number of measures, the University of Pittsburgh has demonstrably bettered itself and come closer to achieving its goals during the past ten years. I congratulate you and your colleagues on the work you have done through our annual planning process to help make that improvement clear to observers within and outside the University. And yet I urge you to vigorously resist the complacency that can accompany any point of satisfaction. We must continue to make progress, despite the financial pressures that we feel in common with most institutions of higher learning, and we must make strategic use of what may well prove to be a rare window of opportunity for us to make further progress in moving ourselves up among America's best universities. We cannot do this by feeling satisfied with what we have already achieved. We must want more.

I write now in response to your Fiscal Year 2007 Plan, with an indication of the overall planning and budgetary environment within which you will be implementing that plan. All of our programs need to rededicate themselves to take full advantage of their opportunities and avoid having our overall progress stalled; therefore, I ask that you again do the kind of reflection and analysis needed to make most effective use of the resources available to you: examine the recruiting of students and faculty; reflect on the ongoing appropriateness of your curricula and on whether curricular goals are being attained; assess the success of our students after they leave our programs, both undergraduate and graduate, through any available measures of success, including success in achieving placement in appropriate professional employment or programs of more advanced

education; examine the use of scholarships to recruit the best possible students to high-priority programs; and allocate faculty development funds in ways appropriate to the discipline or profession, not only to develop the existing faculty but also to make the University as attractive as possible to the faculty whom we must recruit. You should be prepared to address these points in your FY2008 planning document.

The School of Information Sciences' plan is a very substantial step forward in setting the future direction of the School. The substitution of a program-driven structure for the former departmental structure positions the School to emerge as a true leader in its field, provided the School is able to articulate for potential students (and for itself) what are the characteristics of someone educated at the School, what those with such an education offer to the profession and to potential employers, and thus why a student should want the education the School offers. The plan discusses cogently the various challenges the School faces as its field, and allied fields, face enrollment reductions nationally and as federal agencies which used to fund the field aggressively have pulled back somewhat. The benchmarking that should be possible from partipation in the I-School group will enable the School to track its progress in "swimming against the current" of these national-level challenges. In the meantime, despite the real problem that funded research is down in the School substantially over the level of several years ago, the past year has brought some heartening and impressive individual grants and a praiseworthy level of activity in search of more research funding. Undergraduate enrollment appears to be in free fall (even though incoming student numbers were up slightly last year), so the new undergraduate curriculum that will be implemented this coming fall has arrived none too soon. If this curriculum restores the dynamism available in the program, then the enrollment problems can probably be addressed through a combination of articulating the characteristics offered to a student in the program and communicating those opportunities to students at both the College of Arts and Sciences and a variety of selected and promising sources of transfer students.

University-wide we are finding that the Pitt Pathway program is increasingly enhancing the freshman and sophomore experience, but its follow-on within the schools once a major has been selected appears to be much less than it could be. Please do all that you can to build on the development of self-awareness and conscious personal goal-setting that the Pathway program encourages to motivate your students to get the most out of your program and to be best positioned to move on successfully to the next stages of their education or employment. As we try to measure our successes, an absolutely crucial measure will be our record of helping our students move on to appropriate and impressive next stages of professional development or employment.

I was disappointed in reading the section of the plan that addressed how the School's programs could be protected and enhanced even if a budget cut should be needed. I will do all that I can to protect the budget while the School repositions itself, but it is important for the faculty to realize that, if continued under-enrollment should force reductions in the operating budget, the solution cannot be to reduce the funds devoted to operating the programs and recruiting the students. Rather, such an undesirable budget cut, driven by under-enrollment, could only be addressed effectively by matching the restricted size of the student body by some corresponding reduction in the size of the faculty.

We are beginning to develop a culture of assessment. As the groundwork for that development, the University has identified benchmarking data to help determine mileposts relevant for measuring progress toward long-term goals. Your plan shows real potential for effective use of benchmarking on several crucial aspects of assessing our opportunities and challenges through access to data from the I-Schools group. I commend SIS and your leadership team for all the important work you have done to develop these external relationships and position yourself to have greater understanding of the larger forces that challenge us. I hope that in the next year, serious benchmarking can help us all to assess our current situation among information science schools.

Most search committees regard a tenured faculty position to be of great value; the high standards now routinely applied to searches are essential to assuring the future quality of the University. Every member of every search committee should feel a strong obligation to identify and bring under serious consideration all promising candidates from groups that are currently underrepresented in our faculty. I recognize that a one-size-fits-all University strategy for recruiting and retaining minority and women faculty will not work. We are developing a strong faculty through targeting talent, taking advantage of couples' availability, communicating with the national professoriate through conferences, etc. Diversity is crucial.

Each unit faces distinct market conditions in recruiting and retaining faculty. Therefore, in order to pursue aggressively the goal of a diverse faculty, the School of Information Sciences must continue to refine its specific, pragmatic, and effective strategies for recruiting and retaining minority and women faculty members. I will continue to require that annual plans contain a substantive discussion of your diversity initiatives aligned with the expectations I communicated in my March 29, 2002, memorandum to academic leaders of the University (available online at http://www.pitt.edu/~provost/diversity.html) .

Another important issue in the development of a truly diverse University requires us to take appropriate steps to develop a diverse academic leadership team. All too often, women and minorities who might be interested in following a career path in academic leadership are blocked by the lack of appropriate beginning experiences. I urge you to do all that you can to identify promising faculty who might eventually bring greater diversity to our academic leadership and appoint them to key committees and to other visible roles in your unit to give them experience and give their colleagues a chance to see their abilities to take on such roles.

This year's instructions asked that your planning document demonstrate intentional consideration of the ways in which your unit both helps the University toward its commitment to a global/international focus and strengthens the connections between student and academic life. You were also asked to include a specific section identifying the ways in which you are assessing progress in graduate or professional and undergraduate education. The ability of units to successfully address these three areas ranged considerably. Please know that you must continue to include these elements in your consideration of how you will advance your unit's specific goals as well as the goals of the University; my assumption is that next year's planning documents will benefit from this year's attention to these issues and thus demonstrate more specifically the consideration with which you are including assessment, student life, and international interests in your activities and initiatives.

My own assessment of the School of Information Sciences Strategic Plan for FY07 as stated above is substantially in agreement with that of my Senior Staff and that of the Provost's Area Planning and Budgeting Committee, whose report is appended. I am very pleased with the progress that SIS has made, and I look forward to continued progress and to working with you to achieve still more through the challenges and opportunities of the coming year.

Sincerely,

James V. Maher

JVM/tmlh

Attachment

cc: Provost's Senior Staff
        Chancellor Mark A. Nordenberg

School of Information Sciences

The past year has been very eventful at the School of Information Sciences (SIS). Among several substantial changes is the abolition of all departmental structure in favor of a "single faculty." While this seems conducive to the stated goals of increasing faculty research collaboration, more readily pursuing new programs and initiatives, and opening up the process of resource allocation, it made things difficult for an outside reviewer. The difficulty is in the vague, broad definition of information and "information science." Without the labeling and functionality provided by department titles, one is hard-pressed to figure out exactly what the School is up to. Their evolution out of library science (SLIS) is readily understood, but it is hard to fathom what the School has evolved *into*. Information science and technology IST itself is very much in flux, as the report notes at some length, and perhaps one has to settle for this (maybe temporary and maybe not) vaguely defined state of affairs. But, the reorganization of the School may *not* be conducive to external recognition by students and clients of the value, scope, and direction of their programs.

Judging by their cited accomplishments (page 6), the School is currently doing very well. Particularly noteworthy are their two 2005 NSF CAREER faculty awardees, and their 2005 founding membership in the new I-Schools Consortium. They appear very forward-looking. Their programmatic activities seem in the main reactive rather than innovative, however; external forces increasingly define what directions they take. Again, perhaps this is just the nature of the beast. But, at least the School is alert to new forces, and is revising its degree programs appropriately. The long-delayed but finally realized implementation of peer teaching evaluation is critical to maintaining focus and quality in their curricula. The newly formed Board of Visitors will also benefit the School in these efforts.

The decline of 50% in research expenditures "in the past years" (?) cited on page 15 is surprising and disturbing, when IST has been so expansive; declining budgets of funding agencies are cited. Reversing a concomitant drop in enrollment at all levels in the same period has been vigorously addressed, but with modest results; the data cited on page 17 show a continued decline in entering student interest in computer-related fields. These two trends do not augur well for the future. The old flagship MLIS program appears to remain in good health (pages 19-20), but the advent of the digital library may reduce the demand there as well. The plan indicates an acute awareness of these difficulties, and proposes sound initiatives to address them (pages 20-26).

Among the checklist items on page 2 of the Provost's request, the current faculty size and targeted size could not be located. The benchmarking plan is still just that; there are no data as yet. Budget reductions (Appendix I) have been handled mainly by eliminating positions and/or programs; a small school like SIS does not have much flexibility. The School takes the liberty of giving equal space to describing what they would do with a negative reduction (an increase). Student body diversity has been aggressively and successfully expanded, and plans for the future are sound (page 23 and Appendix II). Faculty diversity is another question. The budget plan (Appendix III-a, last page of report) includes no text, but Appendix IV, development plan, addresses increasing funding through donor support. (With the capital campaign winding down, the School appears to face a difficult time with this.) The School has had traditional strength in international education, a tie-in with diversity. The School is expansively pursuing the improvement of student services and quality of life (pages 26-27), in line with the University's objectives. Perhaps the greatest strength of the plan is a realistic assessment of

where they are, and what needs to be done to improve their position, both internationally and within the University. As would be expected of such a school, SIS is at the forefront of using IT in the classroom and in laboratory settings.