Report of the Learning Environment Subcommittee

Strategic Planning Committee

November 9, 2009

Introduction

Since learning is affected by the entire experience that a student has at Washburn University, we take Learning Environment to encompass all physical aspects of the university and all programmatic aspects other than academic programs. These aspects develop, support, and enhance the student’s cultural experience, and they contribute to a sense of physical or virtual “space.” By extension the learning environment encompasses the university’s role as “teacher” to the community.

The Learning Environment Subcommittee has solicited and carefully considered ideas from university leaders, from the Washburn community, and from the larger community. Many of these suggestions appear in Appendix II. The ideas that we believe have the most merit are given below as Strategic Initiatives and associated recommendations, with rationale in Appendix I.

Generally speaking, the physical aspects of Washburn University are in good shape with some exceptions, as noted. However, great potential exists for enhancing the campus, either by creating new facilities or improving existing ones. Potential also exists for continuing to improve aesthetics. Taking advantage of these opportunities for enhancement will reap rewards in terms of student learning and public perception.

Those programmatic aspects that are in the purview of this subcommittee we judge to have both strengths and weakness. Some recommended changes are largely procedural, and require little or no investment.

We recognize the impossibility of immediately implementing all these recommendations, many of which are expensive. However, we believe that it is important that they be considered as parts of our planning.

Strategic Initiatives

Strategic Initiative I: Continuously Upgrade Facilities and Physical Environment

The Washburn University campus should have facilities, in particular facilities for teaching, learning, and research that are up-to-date, appropriate, and adequate. They should be well-maintained and enhance the image of the university and its relationship to the community. Several of the following recommendations are interconnected, which means that one change may lead to or enable others. We have attempted to avoid questions of implementation, except where addressing them was unavoidable.
A. New Buildings:
- It is recommended that a new building be erected for the School of Law, thus freeing the current building for other uses.

- It is recommended that a new building be erected to house the various health sciences, including nursing, together in a place that meets their needs for specialized spaces, and that Benton Hall be given some more appropriate use.

B. Expanded or Renovated Buildings
- It is recommended that Mabee Library be expanded to serve the diverse learning needs of the university. This could include tutoring and other special services. We consider this project to be a high priority.

- It is recommended that Morgan Hall be expanded and renovated to create a main point of entry for the campus and a welcome/visitors/student-services center on the north side.

- It is recommended that new facilities be found for the Department of Education and that Carnegie be renovated and repurposed. Options for Carnegie include Theatre, Communication/Mass Media, or a multipurpose performance space.

- It is recommended that a new facility for Theatre be created, perhaps in a renovated Carnegie.

- It is recommended that a multipurpose performance space be created to meet the needs of the Department of Music. This could be either a new facility or a renovation and reassignment of Georgia Neese Gray Theatre. Such a space would be available for other public and university uses.

- It is recommended that Henderson Learning Center be renovated to use space more efficiently.

- It is recommended that improved and expanded facilities be created for the School of Business, to permit programming that is flexible and technologically sophisticated. It would also simplify inviting groups of professionals to campus.

C. Equipment and furnishings
- It is recommended that a set of guidelines, rather than rigid requirements, be created for acquisition of equipment and furnishings, in order to balance between efficiency and the need to meet unique needs.

- It is recommended that a new approach be devised for the strategic acquisition of equipment, with appropriate awareness of the ongoing needs of such areas as the sciences and those departments that are technology dependent. This should include resources for repair and replacement.

D. Athletics Facilities
• It is recommended that better lighting be installed in several venues, including Yager Stadium, softball field, Lee arena, and the tennis courts.

• It is recommended that the east stands of Yager Stadium be renovated, perhaps with a maintenance facility or storage area underneath, permitting the removal of the remaining metal buildings and the appropriate reuse of the area between the stadium and Petro.

E. Campus aesthetics and signage
• It is recommended that the appearance of the 17th-street side of campus be enhanced by various means to create an appropriate “front door” for the university. Planning for this should involve a careful consideration of the experience of visitors and prospective students in regard to parking and signage.

• It is recommended that signage and maps of campus be used to assist visitors and the Washburn community alike and to promote campus safety.

• It is recommended that appropriate attention be given to enabling mobility-impaired visitors to more easily reach events in Memorial Union and other venues.

Strategic Initiative II: Enhance and Improve Learning through Its Support Systems

Support for learning is vitally important to the effectiveness of any university. The library and its resources, learning technology, Washburn’s public television station, and funding in support of teaching/learning excellence are important components of a superior education such as that offered by Washburn.

A. Library and information access
• It is recommended that increasing the resources of the library and its access to information be considered a fiscal priority of the university.

B. Technology
• It is recommended that the separation of academic and administrative computing be explored so that support for the learning enterprise is clear. This would include investigating the administration of distance education.

• It is recommended that adequate resources be given to issues of learning technology. These issues include classroom connectivity, research technology, specialized software, and instructional design. It is further recommended that sufficient technological equipment be acquired to support certain instructional areas, including nursing, education, allied health, mass media, and others.

• It is recommended that appropriate forms of training in technology be made available for faculty, staff, and students.

C. Programmatic support
• It is recommended that programmatic support for initiatives in teaching/learning, for student and faculty research, for new ideas/initiatives, and for student and faculty travel be increased.

D. Relationships with KTWU
• It is recommended that stronger relationships between KTWU and the campus community be developed.

E. Support for internships
• It is recommended that more internships be cultivated to permit students to work with employers. Such internships provide opportunities and incentives for graduates to remain in the community.

F. First-year experience
• It is recommended that a first-year experience program be developed, which would more effectively integrate students into the life of the university and help them make the transition to college-level learning.

Strategic Initiative III: Enhance Support for Cultural Development and Socialization

Creating a supportive campus culture, one which removes barriers to student success and which supports student excellence, should be a continuing process. While such a culture is composed of many factors, a few themes have emerged. Some of these themes reflect the long-standing commitment of Washburn University to providing opportunity and to cultivating the greatest possible level of success in its students.

A. Services for Students
• It is recommended that diligent and immediate attention be given to simplifying and coordinating such student services as application, enrollment, billing, financial aid, advisement, and degree audit, and that an attitude of “customer service” be cultivated, to include hours beyond the traditional work day.

• It is recommended that the experience of transfer students be improved by simplifying the processes, by clarifying and facilitating the transfer of general-education classes, and by creating a special orientation program for transfer students, both in August and in January.

• It is recommended that attention be given to enhancing the experience of on-line students, in particular those who cannot visit the campus, by on-line orientations and on-line communities.

B. Supportive campus culture
• It is recommended that more flexibility be developed in support of student learning, to include the development of non-traditional academic scheduling.

• It is recommended that better, more inviting, well-staffed learning-enhancement centers be created in the library and elsewhere for math, writing and other subjects. These should be available at flexible hours that reflect students’ schedules.
C. Student access
• It is recommended that programs be implemented in support of minority, veteran, non-traditional, and disabled students.

D. Community access and interaction
• It is recommended that Washburn strengthen its relationship to the community by creating and making available facilities for community use, by considering the parking needs of visitors to campus, by creating policies that support community relations, and by providing outreach activities

E. Support for student socialization
• It is recommended that all new and renovated academic construction include student social spaces to enhance the aspect of learning that takes place outside of class.

• It is recommended that adequate space be found for student organizations to call their own and to store their equipment.

• It is recommended that a means be sought to encourage students to attend/participate in university events.
APPENDIX A: Rationale

Strategic Initiative I.A: New Buildings

The committee’s recommendations include increasing the total program space of the university by constructing two more buildings, one for Law and one for the Health Sciences. A more important aspect of our recommendation, however, is identifying the places where qualitative improvement in space is needed. The need for other buildings must be considered in tandem with a plan for management of the enrollment. Additional students will, at some point, require additional instructional space. We believe that Washburn still has some capacity for growth, but that capacity will be used up fairly rapidly. Anticipating where growth might occur can be challenging, and it will dramatically affect priorities.

Some new construction may be indicated by a need to maintain currency or enhance prestige. We believe that a new building for the School of Law should be considered. Law has outgrown its current space, and would benefit from up-to-date, appropriate facilities that would enhance its reputation and attract superior students and faculty. A new building for Law would free the current building for other uses, including others on our list of recommendations.

If growth continues in the health sciences, then creating new, specialized facilities for those areas would be imperative. We see the value of planning for a new building that would unite the various health-profession majors. Such a building could include additional laboratory space for teaching the science courses that support health majors. It would also allow the Department of Allied Health to move out of Benton Hall, which is a minimally effective academic building.

All new construction should anticipate the inevitable changes in learning styles or in programs by allowing for easy reconfiguration of spaces with such devices as moveable walls. New construction should make it easy to reconfigure technology. New construction or renovations should make student interaction outside of class an inevitable enhancement of learning by providing distributed study and student-interaction spaces.

Strategic Initiative I.B: Expanded or Renovated Buildings

Several existing spaces are inadequate, substandard, or worse. The most important of these is clearly Mabee Library, which can no longer adequately or appropriately support the learning needs of the university. The committee has heard repeatedly from the faculty and others that improving and expanding the library is imperative. The library should serve as the academic heart of the university, a place where many kinds of activities in support of learning can take place. It can no longer be just a large box of books. This project should be a high priority. See also the rationale under recommendation II.A.

Morgan Hall, which in some ways is the most important academic and administrative building on campus, is showing its age. It no longer makes the kind of positive impression that it should. Yet it is still the university’s main access point for visitors and for prospective students. An expanded north side to Morgan Hall could provide exactly what is needed: an inviting and attractive access point to the university. Such a facility should house a variety of student services, especially admissions, and an information center for visitors. This welcome/student services center should be open evenings and weekends as well as during traditional work hours.

Carnegie, a beautiful survivor of the infamous tornado and one of the few connections to “old Washburn,” is in terrible condition and completely inadequate for the Department of
Education. It is not completely ADA compliant. It could not easily be renovated to meet the needs of a program as large as Education, one that should be even larger. Thus, Education should be relocated to another, more appropriate site. However, Carnegie could be renovated for some other purpose and be a jewel in the campus. Such a project might be attractive to alumni and to the community.

*Georgia Neese Gray Theatre* needs a major renovation just to make it safe and functional for the Department of Theatre. However, doing so would still leave the department in inadequate facilities, which are not truly suited for theatre. Cost estimates are now likely in excess of $1,000,000 to make basic renovations to bring the technical and other aspects of the theatre up to standard. A better solution is to find new facilities for Theatre. An intriguing possibility to explore would be to create a home for Theatre in a completely renovated Carnegie.

Another long-standing need of the university and of the *Department of Music* is a second, smaller multi-purpose performance space to take pressure off White Concert Hall. White is used hundreds of times each year, often for events that do not need a space so large. It also is one of the places on campus most frequently used by community groups. Consequently complications in scheduling continue to grow. An obvious strategy would be to turn Georgia Neese Gray Theatre into such a multi-purpose space. It would require far less renovation for music than it would for theatre.

The *School of Business* needs expanded facilities—and somewhat different ones. Whether or not this indicates new construction is yet to be determined. However, the School of Business would like to be able to explore innovative kinds of education not possible in current facilities. One of these is executive education, which would bring groups of professionals to campus.

**Strategic Initiative I.C: Acquisition of Equipment and Furnishings**

Many types of equipment and furniture in a university are general in nature. For example, one general-use classroom can be furnished very much like another. One computer for typical faculty use might be identical to others. But a certain number of specialized spaces and uses exist, and these require unique furnishings and unique equipment. A procedure should be implemented whereby the university can gain maximum efficiency and cost savings by using common types of equipment and furniture, but which will allow for special circumstances.

Certain academic departments are very dependent on specialized equipment. Among these are the sciences and the fine arts. A new approach should be devised whereby their needs can be met more adequately, and funds for repair and replacement of equipment are made predictable.

**Strategic Initiative I.D: Athletics Facilities**

An appropriate level of attention should continue to be given to athletic facilities, recognizing that, although these are an important part of the university’s public image, they are not central to the mission of the university. The university has provided well for athletics, and we are justly proud of our superior athletics facilities. Thus, these are not high-priority recommendations. All the same some improvements should be considered when possible. Lighting is very old in Yager Stadium and in Lee arena, leading to dim areas in the playing surfaces. A properly illuminated softball field will ease the scheduling of intercollegiate softball games, simplifying travel for visiting teams. Lighting on the tennis courts will make them available in the evening for student use.
On a grander scale, the east stands of Yager Stadium have not been renovated, and the maintenance facilities behind them are unattractive. If a new set of stands were constructed on the east side, it might permit creation of valuable space for storage or maintenance beneath the stands. In turn this could permit the removal of the unsightly metal buildings between the stadium and Petro, an area that could then be put to appropriate use or landscaped.

**Strategic Initiative I.E: Campus Appearance and Signage**

The Washburn campus is very attractive. Its coherent look and spacious layout make it a pleasant and effective place to learn, to work, and to visit. Nevertheless, the experience of visitors to campus is sometimes frustrating, and the “front door” of the campus on 17th street is far from inviting. Careful attention should be given to the north side of campus to create a main entry point for visitors, one which reflects the quality of the education available here. This should include working with the City of Topeka to widen and repair the street and to bury the utilities. The plan should also give consideration to visitor parking and access to information about the campus.

**Strategic Initiative II.A: The library and Information Access**

Mabee library and its collections are inadequate. The very meaning of “library,” as well as its role in a university’s life, has evolved. No longer is a library only a collection of print materials and a place to read them. A library now should provide an academic heart for the university, with a mission that encompasses learning and community in a wide variety of senses. Washburn University now has the great opportunity to create a 21st-century library, both in the physical sense and in the terms of its role on campus. Appropriate resources should be developed to provide access to information, to support aggressive acquisitions, and to develop programs in support of a community of learning.

**Strategic Initiative II.B: Technology**

No important issue has been more contentious at Washburn University than technology. At the same time, the goal of technology in a university is clear: technology’s chief purpose is to support the teaching, learning, and research activities of the university. These activities all take place under the direct supervision of the faculty. Other roles for technology, such as record keeping, finance, and so on, have different requirements from those that support the academic enterprise. This suggests that we should explore separating academic computing from administrative computing, as it is at many universities.

Some academic departments and disciplines are heavily dependent on technology, and the list is growing. Significant use of technology (hardware, software, and specialized equipment) is an expectation of prospective students and a means toward enhancing learning. Adequate investment in technology should reap benefits in the form of additional and better students.

Faculty, staff, and administration all too often acquire skills in new technologies by “asking around” or by experimenting. We believe that a more systematic program of training WU personnel in making use of technology would pay dividends.

**Strategic Initiative II.C: Programmatic Support**

A Washburn education is marked by, among other things, access to unusual opportunities for supervised research and for international travel. WU is a place where new ideas and
initiatives, whether from faculty or students, are valued. Resources allocations for these kinds of activities should be increased.

**Strategic Initiative II.D:**

KTWU, Washburn’s public television station, is an important component of the university’s public image. Increasing the ways in which KTWU and the rest of the university collaborate will be to the benefit of all.

**Strategic Initiative IIE:**

Access to internships is an important distinctive in many academic programs at Washburn, in part, because of location. Topeka offers WU the potential for partnerships with state government, health-care organizations, businesses, and other organizations that either use or could use our students as interns. There are multiple advantages in this. Our students receive a substantial enhancement of their education, businesses and organizations get well-prepared and enthusiastic interns, and a meaningful number of those interns may be hired permanently and reside in Topeka. Thus, an active program of promoting internships is highly desirable.

**Strategic Initiative II.F:**

The research is clear that a student’s experience in the first year of college is critical in promoting retention and long-term success in college. A program that takes into account the diversity of WU’s students, that eases their transition to college, and that prepares them for the remainder of their college experience should be developed and implemented as a high priority.

**Strategic Initiative III.A:**

In a complex organization like a university, it is possible and even likely for portions of the organization to evolve in isolation from others. Over time, the independent nature of these functions may no longer work to the advantage of the students they seek to serve. A student (prospective or current) may be shuffled, with the best of intentions, from office to office in search of an answer or a solution. The student-service portion of the university should be rethought from the viewpoint of the student—actually of the several types students, each of which having unique needs and circumstances—in order to provide complete and responsive support.

For traditional, on-campus students, this may indicate a student-service center, where various appropriate agencies are located near one another and where hours of work reflect students’ schedules.

Transfer students require efficient answers to questions that are often unique. Simplifying the process of transferring into WU should be a priority.

On-line students need some sort of electronic analog to the community-building opportunities enjoyed by on-campus students. An on-line orientation program for these students should be developed.

**Strategic Initiative III.B:**

A supportive university culture means seeking ways to increase flexibility in scheduling and to consider instructional modalities that meet the needs of a variety of students. It also means developing “learning-enhancement centers,” places where academic assistance and support are readily available for all students, not just those in need of “tutoring.” In particular, a program that
ensures that students gain sufficient competence in writing and in mathematics is essential. This might be located in an improved university library.

**Strategic Initiative III.C:**
Washburn University has a great tradition of reaching out to special student populations, such as minority, veteran, non-traditional, and disabled students. However, we believe that more work remains to be done. Programs should be put in place to discover the particular challenges faced by these students and to meet their needs.

**Strategic Initiative III.D:**
An important part of Washburn’s role as a municipal university is its strong relationship to the community. This relationship is demonstrated in both directions: WU students and personnel serve the community in numerous capacities, and community members come to campus for a wide variety of purposes. This relationship is healthy and in Washburn’s best interests. To enhance this relationship, the experience of community users on campus should be examined. This may include such things as appropriate signage and also parking for those who cannot walk long distances.

**Strategic Initiative III.E:**
Research is clear that a significant portion of learning takes place outside of class in unstructured relationships between students. This should be enhanced by the purposeful creation of student social spaces in all new construction and all renovation of academic spaces.

Similarly, the university has something over 130 student organizations, few of which have space assigned to them. As an encouragement of student involvement on campus, space should be found for them, as it becomes feasible.

Student involvement also means participation in events of all sorts, such as lectures, cultural and artistic events, and athletics. A program should be developed to encourage such participation.