

February 1, 2018



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WESTFIELD STATE UNIVERSITY
STRATEGIC PLANNING ADVISORY
COMMITTEE REPORT

SWOT Survey Content Analysis



This report provides a synopsis of the SWOT analysis conducted in concert with the current institution-wide strategic planning effort underway at Westfield State University. It is one of the discovery tools routinely utilized in such a planning environment that allows stakeholder engagement and input into the process from a broad base of internal and external stakeholders. It functions to identify and, to a large extent, quantify the magnitude of key issues, needs, concerns, and factors. The volume of verbatim responses received from the WSU community through the survey resulted in more than 170 pages of text. The consultant team, therefore, conducted a detailed content analysis, and provides below a summary for each open-ended survey item, and identifies key differences between respondent groups (students, staff, faculty, administration, and alumni), when applicable.

As an institution, what does Westfield State do very well?

When asked what WSU does very well as an institution, survey respondents from all cohorts echoed some overarching themes:

- **Community:** WSU engenders a sense of a campus community, with connections between members of different groups and between the campus and the outside world. Collaboration, interaction, and communication with others also contribute to the WSU sense of community.
- **Education:** WSU educates students well, with specific pre-professional and graduate preparatory programs. Teaching and learning opportunities serve students with a broad range of preparation and aptitude, with strengths in both liberal arts and pre-professional education.
- **Students:** WSU has a strong focus on students and student success central to its mission, with a broad variety of student services and opportunities designed to foster student development. Affordable rates and institutional priorities allow first-generation and disadvantaged groups to benefit from a WSU education.
- **Faculty:** WSU's energetic and dedicated faculty are committed to student achievement and focus on teaching over research or other priorities. Faculty are creative, offer opportunities for engagement with students, and genuinely care about their students.
- **Environment:** The campus is attractive and most facilities are more than adequate, allowing WSU to offer small class sizes in a welcoming setting. Comparing favorably to a small private college, the facilities are well maintained, and there is a feeling of being part of the WSU family.

For most groups, comments relating to students were most common; alumni focused more on the quality of their education. Faculty may have attributed a higher value to their role, while staff valued the role of a WSU education and the senior administration and board emphasized community successes. Students and alumni valued less the WSU environment.

What could Westfield do better?

Common themes from faculty, staff, and students include:

- **Inclusive Climate:** WSU could do a better job of addressing diversity and racism on campus. Recruit more diverse and low-income students and provide support and training to faculty and staff. Recruit and retain faculty in minority and under-represented groups. Students ask for more

security measures, such as cameras, to feel safe on campus. Focus on the mission and goals of the university.

- **Academics:** Create learning communities across disciplines. Faculty ask that student who are admitted to WSU be better prepared for college-level work. Some feel the core curriculum is not rigorous enough. Improve advising structure, provide more academic support for students, increase civic engagement, and expand programs that teach skills that are needed for future employment. Provide flexibility and more class options for the increasing number of non-traditional, working, and continuing education students. Make scholarship money available to more students.
- **Physical Structure:** Build more innovative classrooms to include technology. Provide adequate faculty offices. Staff want more weekend programming and more informal gathering spaces on campus. Provide updated facilities and workspace for staff members. Computerize and update billing process. Build more parking. Improve dining services and housekeeping services in residence halls. Renovate older buildings. Develop a welcome center for prospective students and their families – create a positive first impression.
- **Resources:** Add tutoring for other subjects besides reading and writing. Provide more resources for faculty and staff professional development and travel. Update computer equipment and software. Provide better support for students when job-hunting like interview skills, networking, and inviting recruiters to campus. More research equipment is needed. Rely less on part-time contingent labor and fill faculty vacancies; replace specialized faculty lines in departments where specialists have retired or left for another reason. Assess staff salaries and add staff to areas that are short staffed. Train faculty and staff on proper lockdown procedures and defensive strategies.
- **Communication:** Improve communication campus-wide, especially from administration to faculty, staff, and students and between departments. WSU needs an administration that is more transparent, and understands the unions and the needs of faculty. Consult the experts on the front lines of service and department heads before making decisions for that department. Provide more opportunities for interaction between faculty and students. Communicate more clearly the university's mission to the public, students, and the faculty/staff. Create procedures and better communication methods for emergency notifications. Listen and respond to student concerns. Foster relationships with students so they become active alumni. Include a comprehensive orientation for new staff and faculty and host more workshops on civility, social justice, and diversity. Improve external relations. Update the website. Promote school activities, events, and programs.

Senior administrators and board members agreed with most of the same themes highlighted by faculty, students, and staff but these also stood out:

- **Technology:** Improve technology to ease application and billing processes. Increase IT programs on campus. Embrace change.
- **Finances:** Improve fundraising. Make more funds available for student aid. This would have a direct impact on WSU ability to recruit more diverse students. Coordinate support to identify and secure grant funding. Improve financial planning.
- **Assessment:** Pay attention to data on retention and student learning. Use data to adjust programs. Support these programs with financial resources and staff.
- **Marketing:** Use diverse marketing techniques showcase WSU and its unique qualities. Upgrade the level of expertise in the marketing department.

Alumni reacted similarly to the other cohorts in areas of inclusive climate, academics, resources, and communication with additional comments related to engaging with the university and wanting to build an active alumni base and educate young alumni on philanthropic goals. Hosting casual receptions close to where alumni live could increase their connection to campus, pride in graduating from WSU, and lead to financial gifts to the university. WSU should also be more inclusive of the local community.

What does Westfield State's competition do differently?

Four themes rose to the top for all cohorts:

- **Academics:** WSU seems to be 10-15 years behind the times, still using chalk and carbon forms in a world that has moved on to technology and online forms. The competition has higher standards for admission. Its sister institutions have implemented new programs and structures. WNEU has combined continuing education and day divisions so the university is one and students can get the best schedule for their needs. WSU's competition offers more on-line learning opportunities, although this may not be beneficial to students. WSU competition has strong language programs, culture programs, and courses. They also host cultural events that enlighten both faculty and students. Bigger universities have the staff and enrollment to offer more sections of classes. WSU's competition has more advanced degree options such as masters, and doctorates.
- **Faculty:** Other institutions have more diverse faculty and staff. They build up academic departments with more teaching faculty and more course offerings. Bridgewater offers paid writing retreats for faculty and offers public speaking support. Some allow for 3/3 or 3/4 teaching load to accommodate research demands. The competition offers much more support for faculty travel.
- **Communication:** Other institutions communicate in better ways, using texts, phone calls, and emails. There are opportunities for staff and students to meet and discuss current concerns. Our competition seems to be spending more money on marketing. They have a brand and are better at marketing their brand - we are not sure what our brand is. They update their website regularly. They are not in the news negatively every week. WSU's competition speaks freely about today's issues and makes students of all backgrounds feel welcomed and safe on their campus.
- **Students:** WSU's competition recruits from out of state, they offer instant admission, have better financial aid packages, and offer incentives for high GPA students. WSU's competition does better with retention. Other schools seem to give students opportunities to succeed and to feel safe and have an enjoyable college experience. Some regional institutions do "drive through" scheduling where a cohort of students is moved through a sequence of classes based on registration. WSU could offer more for disabled students. Smith College has a mentorship program that pairs up new students with others who share their disability to help plan for classes and better understand the college process. WSU's competition is at registration and showing students what they will be charged for. They help their students find jobs; some have co-op programs to help students get work experience. The competition has a stronger alumni base. They house more students on campus, and serve better food. Some sister schools have a far more extensive career center. The competition is building state-of-the-art facilities, (i.e., fitness centers, sports facilities, dining halls), and some offer daycare.

What external or outside factors do you believe might significantly influence Westfield State in the future?

When asked what external factors might significantly influence Westfield State in the future, we found five overarching themes:

- **Enrollment and Demographics:** Faculty, staff, senior administration, and the board showed a high level of concern over declining enrollment and changing demographics. WSU is competing for students and there is a decrease in high school graduates expected. Fewer students are choosing a four-year institution.
- **Budget Issues and State Funding:** All cohorts, except students, believe that the impact from reduced state funding will significantly impact WSU in the future. Lack of an endowment to supplement state funding will hurt the university. WSU will have to increase fundraising efforts. Rising costs of benefits for staff are an issue. Financial aid, capital projects, and faculty and staff salaries need to be better funded. Economic uncertainty in the country is also of concern.
- **Political Climate:** Groups most concerned with today's political climate are faculty, staff, and students. The larger political and social influence of the current U.S. president has affected the way higher education is funded, respected, and supported by businesses. Federal funding cuts will challenge institutions to provide services that students need to succeed academically and in their lives in general after graduation. Increased partisan politics has and will likely continue to bleed onto campus.
- **Racial and Cultural Tension:** Faculty, staff, and students find the climate of intolerance must be addressed nationally, as well as across campus. Discriminatory campus practices and increased racial tension are mentioned as having a negative effect on retention, recruitment, and admissions. Diversity and inclusion are needed. Hiring more faculty and staff of color will help others understand that everyone is different yet share many of the same principles.

Other themes mentioned by all groups but less frequently, include the public perception of WSU, effects of social media, competition from other colleges, the economy, changing technology, changes in the job market, and the relationship between WSU and the Westfield community.

What do you consider to be the greatest opportunities for Westfield State now and in the future?

Three major themes emerged related to future opportunities:

- **Prepare Students:** All cohorts agree that WSU needs to prepare students for the job market or graduate school. WSU must continue to hire quality faculty and staff. Start or expand programs in health care, computer science, biomedical sciences, business, management, etc. Focus on STEM. Include online classes and programs. Align academic programs to workforce needs. Add more graduate programs.
- **Affordability:** Staff, alumni, senior administration and board members commented most often on the cost of attendance and the suggestion that WSU tap into funding sources that are not tuition

or state driven. WSU should offer cost-effective programs where they have a niche or strength. WSU is still a good value; capitalize on this.

- **Civic Engagement:** Faculty, and to a lesser extent, staff, stressed the need for more civic engagement and social justice considering the recent incidents on campus. WSU's small size allows for personal relationships between students and faculty, which can support work on diversity and civic engagement. WSU should assess and meet the needs of the community.

Minor themes include collaboration with other schools, particularly community colleges and area school districts, hiring qualified and committed faculty and staff and offer substantial salaries, and increased alumni leadership and mentoring. Cohorts also suggest that WSU market themselves regionally to promote their identity and create a better sense of community on campus; providing more housing may help with this. Students and alumni are interested in WSU providing more internships and using alumni for leadership and mentoring.

What do you consider to be the greatest threats to Westfield State now and in the future?

When considering threats to WSU now and in the future, four primary themes emerged:

- **Budget Constraints:** All cohorts expressed concerns related to budget constraints. With continued loss of state support, public institutions are becoming less "public." Education costs are increasing while funding is decreasing. Faculty and staff feel overtaxed and underpaid. Sometimes the university tries too many new things without adequate resources. Student debt levels are increasing as well.
- **Racism:** Faculty, staff, and student believe it would be a mistake to not address issues of systematic racism, and all "isms," in the U.S. down to the classroom. An effective response to individual incidents is necessary. Create a safe environment for students of color. Create an inclusive campus community to embrace a serious commitment to diversity. Similar comments were primarily heard from faculty, staff, and students.
- **WSU Administration:** There are too many "top-down" solutions without faculty or staff input. Consistent and steady leadership is needed. Staff does not feel supported by administrators. At times, the administration emphasizes elements that are not aligned with the mission of the university.
- **Enrollment:** Decreasing enrollment is of concern and a threat to WSU. There is a decline in the number of applicants, due in part to the declining number of high school graduates in Massachusetts. More people are considering trade school or community college. But, there has been an increase in non-traditional students.

While not as critical, all groups mentioned competition from other institutions as being a threat, as well as staff shortages, contract labor, adjunct faculty, and unions. Some believe that offering skills-based learning without liberal arts would be a mistake. And, negative media coverage would be detrimental to WSU's reputation.

Assume that Westfield State has been successful addressing critical weaknesses and taking advantage of its opportunities, what's true about Westfield State five years from now that's not true today?

When asked what would be true about Westfield State five years from now that is not true today, assuming that Westfield State has been successful addressing critical weaknesses and taking advantage of its opportunities, responses fell into several categories:

- **Diversity:** Students, faculty, and staff from different backgrounds feel comfortable on the WSU campus of the future.
- **Community Engagement:** The successful WSU of the future has a greater impact on the local community, better integrating the campus with the needs of both employers and residents. For example, five years from now, WSU offers increased opportunities for interaction between the campus and area residents, and works closely with local businesses to connect more students with jobs and internships.
- **Reputation:** The successful WSU five years into the future is perceived to be a safe and exciting place to learn. It is a strong academic institution that focuses on teaching.
- **Resources:** Five years from now, WSU has been successful at increasing and enhancing physical assets, grants, student funding, and professional development, and has developed state-of-the-art facilities.
- **Quality:** A successful WSU of the future has been directed by strong, effective leadership and has decreased the use of adjunct faculty, and relies more heavily on full-time faculty. The campus is characterized by respect and communication which fosters collaboration. WSU is known for producing qualified members of the work force and successful graduate students.

For both faculty and students, more comments echoed themes of diversity than other areas, with the quality of education and preparation following in frequency. Staff, senior administrators, the board, and alumni most often mentioned the quality of education and preparation, followed by improved reputation. While staff had nearly as many mentions of more diversity, senior administrators, board members, and alumni seldom mentioned this issue.

What do you consider the critical mission of Westfield State University?

(Note: Students did not receive this question.)

When asked the critical mission of WSU, key issues emanating from the comments included:

- **Populations Served:** WSU should continue to serve students for whom it is important that it remain affordable. At the same time, increase diversity and admit underserved populations in a welcoming, safe, and secure environment.
- **Regional Focus:** It is important that WSU retain its role of contributing to the economic, social, and cultural vitality of the region, with service to the local community, Western Massachusetts and the Pioneer Valley, and the entire Commonwealth.

- **Career:** WSU trains students for jobs, careers, and workplace success; some viewing this as part of a well-rounded graduate along with liberal arts. Others view the two educational goals as in tension or contradictory.
- **Liberal Arts:** WSU should graduate leaders who as citizens are well informed members of society, with critical thinking skills, an understanding of social justice and world affairs, and life-long learners. Again, some view this in contrast with preparation for employment, while others consider the two complementary.
- **Teaching:** WSU's mission should be academic excellence—to provide a quality education to students, with the emphasis more on teaching than on the liberal arts/job preparation distinction.

For faculty and alumni, the mission of delivering a liberal arts education was most mentioned, followed by serving various populations and educational affordability, while staff most often mentioned teaching and the populations served. Senior administrators more often valued the liberal arts tradition, followed by career preparation. Students did not respond to this question.

What specific changes would you recommend at Westfield State to increase student engagement on campus, particularly among specific student populations (e.g., commuter, non-traditional, under-represented populations, and international students)?

(Note: Only students received this question.)

When asked what specific changes they would recommend at Westfield State to increase student engagement on campus, student recommendations fell into several groupings:

- **Events:** WSU students see engagement growing with events and activities on campus, including carefully scheduled opportunities for students from all groups to meet one another and interact in a welcoming, fun environment. Participation should include the broader off-campus community.
- **Issues:** Recent campus occurrences lead students to hope WSU will address racism and other diversity group issues on campus with mandatory classes and other direct approaches to the problem.
- **Commuters:** WSU commuters feel disengaged by inconvenient or impossible event scheduling, a lack of facilities, and parking challenges, all of which WSU can address to improve commuter engagement.
- **Organizations:** WSU clubs and organizations—which can attract a diverse mix of participants—can play a role in developing engagement if given better promotion, more resources, and other institutional support.
- **Classes:** Under-represented populations and the rest of the WSU community would benefit from additional education, whether by required classes or programs for all students or a required sessions in every class that address topics like racism and social justice. Alternatively, expand support services related to the work of that course.

Student responses most often mentioned activities or events, in general or sometimes more specifically, that could drive engagement. Next in frequency, commuters discussed obstacles to their engagement or non-commuters suggested ways to involve more commuters. Educational solutions and direct

approaches to recent campus issues followed, with most respondents mentioning one or the other, but not both. Only a few participants mentioned clubs or other organizations as part of their solution.