Standard One: Mission and Purposes

Description

Eastern’s mission was clarified by its designation as the state’s public liberal arts university in 1998, which provided Eastern with a distinctive position within the Connecticut State University (CSU) system. That designation brought with it, however, an imperative for a kind of reflection and re-definition that the University has been engaged in for much of the last twelve years. In the first instance, the faculty and administration worked together to overhaul the university’s general education program to reflect more accurately the goals and objectives of a liberal arts education. The thinking that went into that major curricular revision carried over to inform the crafting of the most recent Strategic Plan, which marked a kind of watershed in Eastern’s project of institutional reinvention.

Rather than simply clarifying the then-current mission statement, it was determined, Eastern needed to articulate a new statement, one that would more clearly explicate the University’s role as a publicly-funded liberal arts institution. The resulting Mission and Core Values Statements served as the cornerstones for the entire strategic planning process, providing clear explanations of the University’s values and expectations for the future of the institution. The Mission and Core Values Statements are readily available on Eastern’s website, in the Course Catalog, and in several other university publications (an abridged version of the Mission Statement is used for some purposes).

The University’s institutional purposes are closely tied to its mission. Even as it forges ahead in its transformation from a public comprehensive university to a liberal arts institution, Eastern remains committed to its traditions and to its responsibilities as a publicly-funded university. Eastern aims to make a liberal arts education accessible to a wide range of students, regardless of race, age, gender, or physical ability. The University seeks to prepare students who are both intellectually engaged and socially responsible, who leave their studies with both expanded intellectual horizons and an appreciation of their obligations to the communities where they live. There is more to this process than simply creating appropriate curricula: faculty scholarship and creative activity contribute to the intellectual milieu that surrounds students at Eastern, and offices across the whole institution work to promote the University’s larger educational ethos through efforts to involve the entire campus in community service.

Eastern’s designation as the state’s public liberal arts university, the subsequent changes in the institution’s general education program, and the impact of the mission on the creation of the new strategic plan all demonstrate the extent to which the University’s distinctive mission and purposes are recognized and embraced by its various constituencies (the governing board, the administration, staff, faculty, and students.) Together, the Mission and Core Values Statements serve as a touchstone for all of the University’s decision making. From the development of broad institutional strategies to individual departments’ creation of new courses, every decision is weighed in the light of the University’s mission. As a result of the most recent strategic planning process, the university is in the process of implementing mission-driven and mission-focused programs: all assessments require all programs to measure themselves relative to the mission.

In the last ten years, Eastern has re-evaluated its mission, and it is expected that the mission will be revisited every five years as part of the strategic planning process so that the University can continue to grow and adapt.

Appraisal

With the most recent iteration of the university’s Mission Statement and the adoption of the new Liberal Arts Core Curriculum (LACC), Eastern is well on the way to confirming its role as a public liberal arts institution. The Strategic Plan provides the University with a structure to ensure that its commitment to
an affordable and accessible liberal arts education is an achievable goal. Eastern’s Mission Statement is rather longer than similar statements from the kinds of institutions whose company Eastern seeks to join. But that Mission Statement serves to address explicitly several key points that require deliberate articulation at this still relatively early stage in the University’s reinvention: the distinctive character of the institution; the advantages of a liberal arts education; Eastern’s commitment to diversity; and the values the institution seeks to instill in its students, faculty, staff, and administrators, including public service and global awareness.

The extent to which an awareness of the University’s mission and purposes is woven through the campus culture can be seen in the university’s Liberal Arts Core Curriculum (LACC), its First Year Program (FYP), and other new requirements that grew out of the strategic plan. The LACC outlines Eastern’s general education requirements; it is a three-tiered system, purposely designed to extend across a student’s four years of study. The FYP, as the name implies, is specifically tailored for first-year students. Like other programs elsewhere in the nation, the FYP works to encourage student success by promoting students’ familiarity with University resources. Eastern’s FYP embeds the introduction of University resources in the context of a course cluster in which small groups of students (20-25) take two linked classes together, forming close connections with two faculty members and with each other. The cluster program thus sets the development of academic “survival skills” in the context of genuine academic inquiry. The FYP also includes an interdisciplinary Liberal Arts Colloquium. Part of the first tier of the LACC, these seminars stress the importance of thinking creatively and critically—benchmarks of a liberal arts education—in a small class setting (20 maximum) with an emphasis on discussion and writing. After their first year, students continue through a tiered system of classes in a variety of disciplines. Just as the tiered LACC spans all four years, new requirements including Liberal Arts Work and Global Citizenship ensure that, throughout their four years at Eastern, students consider, on the one hand, how their major disciplines are connected to the broader traditions of the liberal arts, and, at the same time, how the ideas they study in the classroom can be linked to life in their communities and the broader world.

But the fulfillment of Eastern’s mission cannot simply be achieved through curricular changes or the creation of new documents. It also requires the whole community—students, faculty, and staff—to “buy-in” to a vision of the University’s identity. Such buy-in isn’t automatic, however, but requires cultivation. The mission does face some challenges. The concept of the “liberal arts” remains poorly understood among some sub-populations, for instance, and particularly among many of the university’s target populations, i.e., those with little or no family history of higher education. There are efforts to clarify the mission for the whole institution. For example, the viewbook explains to prospective students what it means for Eastern to be a liberal arts college, and the institution emphasizes this point in a number of other documents. The University’s identity as the State’s public liberal arts university is addressed as well in orientations, admissions sessions, and so on.

In some ways, understanding of and consensus about the meaning of the University’s mission is developing organically. The remarkable increase in student housing in the last ten years, for instance, has had a dramatic and positive influence on Eastern’s campus culture. Students come to understand the University’s distinctive mission because they are, quite literally, living it. Having more and more students living on campus has, among other things, increased students’ engagement with the surrounding community. In the academic year 2008-09, Eastern eliminated the requirement that students living on campus be required to complete community service, replacing it with a mission-based strategic planning initiative on community engagement. The high volume of volunteerism experienced by our new Center for Community Engagement and the various organizations on campus indicates that there is a lasting commitment to community service on campus. Many community service activities are joint ventures involving faculty and staff, who act not simply as advisors or supervisors, but as fully-participating members themselves. The Liberal Arts Work requirement reinforces Eastern’s core value of engagement, as service learning is one means of satisfying the requirement. Where the previous community service
requirement was formerly seen by many students as a mere formality (and an irksome one, at that), students now approach community engagement as an integral part of their Eastern experience, one that dovetails, in many cases, with their academic work.

Similarly, while Eastern (and the CSU System generally) emphasizes teaching, the University’s faculty continue to distinguish themselves with research and creative activity in every field represented in our academic programs: every year, Eastern faculty publish and present new research or creative work, and win national and international grants and fellowships. Over the last five years it has become increasingly common for faculty to involve undergraduates in their research and to promote extensive independent research and creative projects by students. Just as Eastern’s newfound residential character has provided a natural context for the University’s core value of social engagement, the increasing interpenetration between faculty members’ research and their teaching gives students a close-up view of the kinds of intellectual engagement and curiosity that the University seeks to promote. Here, too, the Liberal Arts Work requirement serves to reinforce Eastern’s core values, as students can fulfill this requirement with a research or pre-professional experience.

While the University community seems to be converging on a common understanding of Eastern’s mission, that process is not without its tensions. The increased emphasis on faculty scholarship and on incorporating various forms of engaged learning and “high impact practices” (as called for in the Academic Plan) has highlighted the demands placed on faculty who teach 12 credits of coursework each semester (generally 4 sections of courses). Nearly everyone embraces the ideals behind the University’s mission of providing a liberal arts education that promotes engaged learning: those ideals are consonant with a culture that emphasizes individual attention for students. Faculty feel the strain, however, of trying to re-tool their curricula and pedagogy at the same time that they seek to maintain (indeed, increase) their own scholarly and creative output—and all the while, of course, the campus governance structure relies heavily on faculty service. The convergence of these demands has focused increased attention on faculty workload, though it is not yet clear what the solution might be.

Just as individual faculty members experience increased tension among teaching, research, and service, departments face challenges as they seek to serve the needs of the new core curriculum (the LACC and the FYP) and the needs of majors. Though most faculty applaud the tendency of these curricular changes, it is not always clear how departments that already feel themselves straining to meet their responsibilities to their majors can contribute to staffing new initiatives. Eastern’s collective bargaining agreement, its budget situation, and its culture currently produce tensions as the University works to realize its goal of becoming a “first choice” liberal arts university. This issue is examined more thoroughly in the Faculty chapter.

Projection

Eastern faces two potential hurdles in the full realization of its mission: on the one hand, the University must clarify its mission for key populations; on the other, the University must bring the community to a unified understanding of the mission.

First, the University must continue to develop ways to help clarify the mission for all students and their families, as well as for faculty and staff. In particular, the University must stress what it means for Eastern to be a public liberal arts university and why a liberal arts education is advantageous. The Offices of Institutional Relations, Advisement, and Admissions will continue to include statements that address these points in publications and internal documents. Faculty advisement for communicating the mission directly to students will also be addressed in the next five years. The Offices of Student Affairs and Academic Affairs will continue to incorporate statements about the meaning of “liberal arts” in presentations and orientation sessions.
In order to address the second challenge of unifying the community in a common understanding of the mission, the University’s Academic Plan directs that the Office of Academic Affairs will sponsor a series of events beginning in Fall 2010 to promote a discussion of how curricula and pedagogy should be modified to increase compatibility with our mission as a public liberal arts college that promotes engaged learning. The groundwork for this effort has been laid by sharing with departments information about levels of student participation in high-impact practices across academic programs. The Office of Academic Affairs will support continued integration of the experiences emphasized in the Mission and Core Values statements through support of the Liberal Arts Work, Global Citizenship, LACC, and FYP programs and through related faculty and curriculum development. Several Strategic Initiatives, including Campus Culture and Residential Life, have spawned ongoing discussions and activities that ensure that all aspects of campus life reflect the university’s mission.

The CSUS Board of Trustees will continue to review and approve any changes in the mission.

To ensure that programs, resource allocation, and activities are consistent with the university’s mission, formal review processes are in place, as detailed in Chapter Two. An Exemplary Program process is being developed to provide a structure for closely aligning resource allocation with mission.

**Institutional Effectiveness**

Eastern’s mission will be reviewed every five years as part of the strategic planning process. The university has linked assessment and affirmation of mission to planning and resource allocation. This occurred most recently with the implementation of the 2008-2013 Strategic Plan which spawned 18 initiatives that are the focus of Eastern’s planning and allocation of resources.