

**Cultivating Excellence:  
UW-Madison's Challenging Undergraduate Academic Experience  
Presentation to UW Board of Regents Education Committee**

**December 8, 2005**

**Virginia Sapiro, Interim Provost**

You all know the stereotype of undergraduate education at the big public research universities. The large research publics may be great at research, hooked in with the world of knowledge around the globe, they are wonderful places for graduate or professional education but, it is often said, they short-change their undergraduates because we are too big, too impersonal, and not enough focused on undergraduate education. I am here to tell you a different story about undergraduate education at UW-Madison, a story that can make us – and you – proud.

Size is an issue for impressions of a campus like ours. But having a huge number of students, faculty, and staff is by no means purely a negative. A campus like ours offers a tremendous range of choices to undergraduates. Of course, some things about having lots of people around are terrific, like cheering crowds or the mass of thrilled students and parents at our graduation ceremonies. But here's a crucial point about size and quality: The greatest world class cities are not just undifferentiated masses of humanity. Great cities are really networks of many textured and interlocking neighborhoods that allow residents to use the richness and diversity of the whole in accessible pieces. Likewise, the great large university campuses, like the great cities, are composed of neighborhoods, a multiplicity of social spaces in which people find the right context in which to live, work, study, and play, and through which people can move as they grow and change. The problem for us as university leaders is to think strategically about how to create those wonderful academic neighborhoods that foster a challenging but welcoming and successful academic experience.

In 1998 a commission of the Carnegie Foundation issued a report entitled, *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities*. The so-called *Boyer Report* offered a famously stinging indictment of undergraduate education at the major research universities, charging that we too often failed our undergraduates by offering them a second-rate education that did nothing to draw on the special human resources a university like this contains.

We should be proud that well before the Boyer Report was issued, UW-Madison had already embarked on what would become a dramatic reform of our undergraduate education. I'm going to spend my few minutes here outlining some of that transformation.

The first two major pieces which I will mention briefly, were the vast expansion of advising services and the introduction of a new, coherent platform of general education on which the remainder of the academic experience can stand.

Until the mid-1990s our system of advising was uneven and inadequate. Following internal study in 1994, we constructed an increasingly comprehensive advising system in which the majority of the personnel are student academic affairs professionals. We know that without this kind of advising system, the academically vulnerable would fail more often, and the academic high-flyers would fly somewhat lower. Today, providing a good, professional system of advising is part of the basic, essential business of higher education. We are out ahead of many of our peers.

In the mid-1990s we also refreshed our approach to defining the foundational skills and knowledge essential to a high quality undergraduate education. Every campus has its own definition of general education, each based on a core set of principles if it is done right. Our refreshed version has been first, to review the core principles on which our general education program stands; second, to review and re-structure the requirements; and third, to develop a rigorous program of assessment based on well-developed social science research techniques to find out whether our requirements are having the desired impact. This presentation is part of a fourth piece of the strategy: to engage in a communication campaign to help our students and faculty understand general education as more than just a set of requirements.

The change I want to underscore today, is our commitment to integrate challenging academic enrichment experiences into the academic career of all of our students. Wide-ranging discussions led us to define these as the core academic enrichment experiences that we would use as our indicators to measure success:

- Living in a residential learning community
- Participating in a hands-on research experience
- Doing an internship/ fieldwork for academic credit
- Taking a service-learning course
- Taking an honors course
- Taking a seminar
- Doing an independent study with a professor
- Studying abroad through a UW-Madison program

We want to be able to say that every undergraduate who chooses to can have at least one of these experiences. Moreover we want to help them *want* to do so.

Why these particular experiences? Research suggests that student development and academic success hinge on becoming well-integrated into the university and becoming actively engaged in it, especially through academic and broader learning experiences. We also know that creating coherent links between what used to be called “academic life” on the one hand and “student life” on the other is important for student success. Research shows that getting to know even one faculty member very well in the academic setting is a great contributor to student development and academic success, as is engaging directly, in a hands-on way, with the processes and excitement of discovery – finding things out for themselves rather than reading or hearing about discovery. These things are crucial for nurturing our most academically vulnerable students into success, and stretching our strongest students to fly even higher.

These core academic enrichment experiences also strongly support the key goals in our strategic plan for undergraduate education.

- All of them, we believe, help to facilitate students in developing a foundation of knowledge, skills, creativity and love of learning to serve them throughout their lives because they are all forms of active academic engagement with a strong emphasis on developing personal experiences and skill in discovery.
- Most extend outside the traditional classroom to integrate learning throughout the undergraduate experience.
- The student must be personally active in choosing, designing, and executing most of these experiences, and they offer a tremendous breadth of possibilities which, we believe, is key in creating a learning environment that responds to students' diverse needs and backgrounds.
- And many of these, most notably, the service-learning and study abroad options, are pointedly relevant to assisting students in preparing for citizenship in a diverse and global world.

Finally because a few of these represent either relatively new pedagogies, or require new approaches to working with students, we are working to provide the kind of professional development and support faculty and academic staff need to be do the kind of work this aspect of our undergraduate program requires. In the tight budget circumstances we face, this is not easy, but we are making some inroads.

We were pleasantly surprised when we started measuring our progress in 2002-03, to find that 69% of our graduates had at least one of these experiences, and we were most gratified to find, recently, that 80% of last year's graduates had at least one of these experiences. And a large percentage of students have had more than one type of enrichment experience.

How could we have embarked on this enrichment program in a time of increasing budget constraint? First, we have been developing elements of this program for a long time without thinking about it as a single coherent program. A key goal now is coherence and integration across the different aspects of undergraduate education to create a unified notion of what constitutes a UW-Madison undergraduate education regardless of a student's college or major.

Our progress in bringing these disparate elements together into a core undergraduate experience has everything to do with the dedication of our faculty and staff to go above and beyond in the work they do with undergraduates and the eagerness with which the undergraduates have snapped up these opportunities as we offer them. We are also indebted to some important friends of the university, who have made generous contributions that provide the resources essential to this program. A great example is the Morgridges, who endowed our Center for Public Service and its program of service learning. We are on the lookout for more such supporters.

Let me spend my remaining few minutes giving you a little more detail on just two of these enrichment opportunities: residential learning communities and research opportunities.

Many universities have established residential learning communities, ongoing learning programs based in a residence hall. Every campus has its own definition of an RLC, but ours combines the following features in an unusual way. First, our six current offerings, each has a distinct theme and mission that is woven systematically through many facets of life in the residence. For example, the Bradley Learning Community involves only first-year students, and is especially aimed at helping them with the transition into and through the first year of college. The International Learning Community, includes five language communities; one each in German, Spanish, Japanese, Arabic and Italian. WISE is a successful living learning community for women in science and engineering.

Second, our RLC's are distinguished from most of our peer institutions by having faculty members serve as directors. This leadership helps draw in unusually substantial faculty involvement in the RLC's from across the university. About 135 faculty are directly involved with the RLC's in any given year, about 100 of whom receive no compensation of any sort. Roughly half of those are involved on a regular basis with no compensation other than just the joy of working with our students.

Third, we integrate regular academic programming into these residences, so that we have sections of courses that meet in them. There is an outpost of our Cross-College Advising Service in every residence. The number of students residing in the RLCs has risen from 290 in 1995 to over 1,400 in 2005.

Why are campus-based residential learning communities so important? Consider the summary of research by Professor Aaron Brower, a former director of one of our RLCs and a national leader in research on their effects. Students in residential learning communities are more engaged with other students and faculty, better academic records, more involved in constructive activities, less involved in risky activities: everything we could want in a student population.

The second element of our academic enrichment program I want to discuss is the integration of hands-on research into the undergraduate curriculum. Students, of course, can learn much from demonstration, but nothing beats experiential learning, and we aim to involve students directly in research and discovery of all sorts.

As the Boyer Report said years ago, if there is one thing that must be made special about undergraduate education on a campus in which the faculty are world leaders in research in their fields, it is the opportunity for undergraduates to learn the passion, skills, knowledge, habits of mind, and plain old persistence and hard work that go into a life of discovery by working closely with the world-class teacher/scholars who serve on our faculty. We have many programs that do this.

One of the most exciting opportunities we have is the Undergraduate Research Scholars, which originated as a program to involve students of color in their first and second year of college in hands-on research with a faculty member. It has expanded tremendously. It is traditional for advanced undergraduates who are especially good in their fields to have this kind of opportunity – and so they do here – but *we* also emphasize involving students right from the start, including students who might be more academically vulnerable. Research shows that involving undergraduates in real research with a faculty member is certainly one of those activities that helps academically vulnerable students become successful, and helps the strongest students fly even higher. These partnerships between students and faculty are remarkable. As many of you have learned personally, student and faculty alike stretch well beyond what is required of them to participate.

The best way to learn is to discover and then to teach what we have discovered. That is what the scholar/teachers who are our faculty do, and that is increasingly what our students do. At our Annual Undergraduate Symposium, students from around the university gather to present their work in public.

The bottom line: Undergraduate education on our campus has changed over the years, and our great faculty and staff have worked to push that change forward because it matters to them and will continue to do so. They have done this because of rising expectations about what we must accomplish, and despite the increasing pressures on their work and the decreasing resources to do this work. They are grateful for your support as Regents of the University of Wisconsin and for your part in helping our stakeholders around the state understand the great work they are doing, and the terrific opportunities for our students.

Thank you for your time. If you want to learn more about any of these aspects of our undergraduate program, please feel free to contact me.

[See the related PowerPoint *Cultivating Excellence*]