Comments on University of Tennessee Board of Trustees June 2019 Presentations on the System Effectiveness Study and Strategic Plan Refresh

Louis J. Gross
Chancellor's Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and Mathematics, UTK
lgross@utk.edu
June 25, 2019

My comments here arise from my roles as a faculty member for forty years, extensive participant in shared governance (including service as a Faculty Senate President and many years chairing the Faculty Senate Budget and Planning Committee) and as the current elected faculty member on the UTK Chancellor's Advisory Board. The Chancellor's Advisory Board is charged with submitting a recommendation regarding the strategic plan for UTK. I begin by noting that the insightful presentation by the current UTK Student Body President, Natalie Campbell, given at the start of the Board meeting, provides a strong indication that the UT System will not achieve the success desired for our State unless it changes its policies and treats UT students across the System with the respect they deserve. The current policies legislated by the Board regarding student organizations disenfranchises our students, rather than empowering them. The policy places the UT system as a unique outlier among southeastern public universities with regard to how student organizations are supported and student activity fee allocations. In March at the UTK Advisory Board meeting I had suggested a means to alleviate some of these concerns and detailed them in a follow-up email to Interim Chancellor Davis.

System Effectiveness Study

The Board presentation by CFO David Miller provided a summary of the work over several months of a System Task Force to consider coordinated efforts to enhance System administration and management. This was based as well on a consulting report from Deloitte. A major component of this report involved the planning for a new Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system to replace the current IRIS and Banner systems. It was stated that a new ERP would be cloud-based and less flexible than the current system, with strong indications throughout the summary of the need for standardization of various practices.

A major missing aspect of this report was any statement akin to what I believe should be the underlying mantra of any new ERP: ***Software should not drive policy***. I believe this mantra should be central to all areas outlined in the Task Force summary, should be posted at the desks of all involved, and should be included as a key component of every discussion in the planning process. While I cannot argue with the need for a much better system than is available presently to foster a data-enabled approach to UT administration and management, my comment is based on watching the development and constraints on effective practice that have arisen over the years that the current ERP has been developed. While those who work with the current system regularly can provide many examples of the constraints imposed by the system, I will give just one example from my own experience. Due to the class registration constraints

built into the current system, I regularly have to "fix" the system to allow students to register for classes that are appropriate for them. This involves the time of the student, their advisor, me and a staff member in the appropriate department. I deal with this issue several times a month and though there is a simple general "fix" (e.g. empowering students to override the constraints built into the system), the current system doesn't allow this. Not only is the current system inefficient in terms of faculty and staff time, many students adhere to the constraints built into the system and take courses they do not need to, thus delaying their graduation.

Strategic Plan Refresh

I have a few general comments concerning the overall Plan. First, there is no clear articulation of any over-riding vision of what makes the UT System unique among higher education for the State or the nation. The Plan doesn't articulate how each component directly connects to the System Mission Statement and includes major components that are not in the mission statement at all (e.g. Administrative Excellence and Advocating for UT).

Second, though I understand the intent of having Diversity and Inclusive Excellence as an underpinning of each of the components, this misrepresents my understanding of the meaning of inclusive excellence (e.g. as the ASU Charter states at the very start, that the institution is measured not by whom is excluded but by whom is included and how they succeed, and only then followed by comments about research and community health) which is better placed at the top not the bottom of all the graphics. Simply put, excellence cannot arise without inclusion and far too many of the Plan components have inclusion appearing as an add-on in the explicit benchmarks, if at all.

Third, there are numerous benchmarks included in the Plan components, with no indication I could determine for how these benchmarks were chosen. Were they chosen because they were viewed as feasible to achieve over the five years, as a major stretch so that though not likely achievable they would place significant pressure across the institution to advance, or were they based on data associated with UT's past performance and the history of performance at aspirational peers? Each of these methods might be appropriate but depending upon the intent of setting the benchmarks, responses of the various System units could be quite different.

Regarding particular Plan components:

Educational Excellence: There is no statement at all about creating invigorating and innovative new programs to meet the changing needs of the State and nation. The benchmarks outline standard metrics of student and teaching success and say nothing about success of programs. Why not have metrics which deal with how UT programs compare to those at peers, or other evaluation metrics such as how the System has responded to changing workforce patterns? As just one example, nowhere in the UT System (or anywhere in the State that I can determine) does there exist an undergraduate major in data science, yet these are the fastest growing undergraduate programs at virtually every institution that has established them and UT is years behind in this. Why not have metrics that encourage UT to be at the forefront of changes in

educational programs rather than at the rear? Similarly, there is no metric associated with encouraging the utilization of modern educational pedagogies that have been shown to be effective (e.g. active learning in its various modes).

Research Capabilities: Even in name, this component essentially disenfranchises a large fraction of our faculty who carry out scholarship and creative activities, which are not considered "research" at all. Research is not the same as scholarship and creative achievement. The Plan emphasis is clearly on the activities in those areas which generate revenue and citations – our colleagues in many fields are evaluated not at all by their number of publications and citations but by the quality of the books/art/music they create. There is also no mention of the importance of student awards – the quality of student scholarly activities for those who are mentored here, or those who choose to come here. The research quality of faculty and our programs may be assessed in many fields by the quality of the students they attract at all levels. The "Enhance ORNL Partnership" as the single focus of the big picture graphic for the Plan is misplaced for much of the System, including UTK.

Workforce and Administrative Excellence: Although there is mention of "evaluation metrics" in this, there is no emphasis on establishing evaluation procedures throughout the multifarious components of the System that could benefit from an explicit evaluation planning process. We have an entire department at UTK devoted to educational evaluation, yet there are mighty few units around the System that establish anything like an evaluation plan to guide their activities and interventions. Such a focus on evaluation should underlie any effort for data-driven decisions and planning. The statement about succession planning seems to be around pools of qualified applicants, rather than a strong need for effective transition processes at all levels across the System upon changes in leadership. Having a metric associated with "build-your-own" to enhance the depth of expertise across the System makes sense but is different from having processes in place when transitions occur so that they are as efficient as possible in maintaining and expanding the capabilities of units.