BACKGROUND

The University at Albany Board Visitors met at the University at Albany on May 9-10, 2006 to help UAlbany shape its future. The board, chaired by Dr. Stephen Portch, chancellor emeritus of the University System of Georgia, offered its insights on advancing UAlbany’s stature as a highly competitive higher education institution through selective investment. This meeting followed an inaugural visit of the board in March where members received a thorough introduction to the university. At the May session, members came prepared to discuss the compact planning process and the recommendations of the Selective Investment Committee. After a series of meetings, the board offered the view from “30,000 feet” to the university’s leadership groups, giving the campus community kudos for its hard work and accomplishments during the compact planning process. Portch reported on the board’s findings and recommendations in two back-to-back meetings—first, with the Executive Committee and University Council and, second, with the Deans and University Senate Executive Committee. The following is a report from the board based on that summary.

REPORT

Our first task as the Board of Visitors was to assess how to be of greatest assistance to the University at Albany in the selective investment process. Rather than try to recommend specific projects for which we may not have sufficient information or expertise, we have taken a higher-level strategic view. Our feedback thus addresses: (1) Observations and recommendations on compact planning in general, and (2) Observations and recommendations regarding related opportunities and issues. We also have made some general comments about projects and approaches which are noted where relevant in these two areas.

1. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON COMPACT PLANNING

   General

   • **Endorsement of compact planning.** Compact planning is a relatively new approach to strategic planning and is new to many of us. However, after reviewing the materials and funding proposals provided as well as listening to presentations by officials, we

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1 The Selective Investment Committee, a faculty body of distinguished campus leaders, was composed specifically for the compact planning process. This committee reviewed compacts, debated them over a series of meetings, and ranked them as to their merit for investment by the University.
strongly and unanimously endorse compact planning. One of its great strengths is the strategic allocation of resources and the relative discipline it provides for selective investment. It also has an underlying value of building on strength.

- **Positive unintended consequences.** We believe that the compact planning process will have positive unintended consequences. These include an improved understanding of the university as a whole by many faculty and staff beyond the Selective Investment Committee. Further, compact planning has the ability to focus people on the strengths of the institution and its future as well as areas of importance to that future. In addition to improved understanding, focus and institutional learning, the process is also of value for its relative collegiality, forging conversations that might not otherwise happen. It requires a great deal of communication within the university community which is beneficial.

- **Breadth of involvement.** The planning process attracted an encouraging range of participation with over 100 proposals submitted. Even though in the grand scheme, up to 100 faculty lines over five years and $1 million in one-time funds for each of five years are a relatively small resource pool when considered across the entire university, still faculty and staff had the ambition to go through the process. This drive is commendable.

- **Emphasis on new faculty positions.** The real strength in the university's compact planning process is the new faculty positions to be added over 5 years—that is where the "bang for the buck" will come from. Such targeting of funds provides a positive statement at the university about the long-term focus on academics, and it is evident that the Selective Investment Committee has supported the undergirding of academic strength.

- **External review.** The board respects the willingness of the university to expose both the compact planning process and the work of the Selective Investment Committee to external review. And for our own part, the board took the charge seriously for providing independent outside feedback.

**Future Adjustments to Compact Planning**

- **Strengthen process.** Based on this first year of compact planning, the university now has a shared learning experience of how the process has worked and how it can be refined going forward. The board sees compact planning as evolving and proposes several opportunities for adjustments.

- **Clarify mission, vision, values, focus, identity.** While compact planning is a very healthy process, it should be strengthened by traditional strategic planning. A great strength of compact planning is that it starts with the strategic allocation of resources—a critical area that the traditional approach often doesn't get around to doing. However, it misses some of the key elements that emerge through the traditional approach: that is, the clarification of mission, vision, values, focus, and identity. Thus the board suggests that either as a lead-in to the next round of compact planning, or as a parallel process to it, that the university work on gaining greater clarity in these areas. While the
mission of the university is largely defined as part of the SUNY system, the development of the vision and other elements has greater leeway.

- **Create incentive for expanding interdisciplinary collaborations.** There is no question that the trend in higher education institutions today is towards greater interdisciplinarity. The University at Albany has undoubtedly been part of that trend. We see the potential for stimulating much more in the way of interdisciplinary academic programs and research through compact planning in future years. Towards that end, this value must be stated clearly up front, and potentially even made a criterion that, if met, will increase the likelihood of funding. Some thematic areas, possibly that come out of work across units, could be identified at the outset so that planning will cut across university departments, colleges, and schools. Unit-based planning won't necessarily create true interdisciplinarity. The process going forward needs to “incentivize” the desired result.

- **Invest more in less.** Sprinkling relatively small amounts of funding around to many initiatives when new funds become available has a certain appeal and value, especially when the first round of compact planning has yielded so many innovative proposals for low cost. We commend the faculty for their innovation and resourcefulness. We also commend the Selective Investment Committee which, we understand, looked carefully at where other resources could supplement funds requested to reduce university outlays. In going forward, however, the board recommends articulating an investment strategy that targets the long-term interest of the university. The strategy would require that a significant concentration of new resources go into building programs and initiatives of stature. In practice that would mean dividing up, for example, the $1 million in one-time funds into two resource pools, one for relatively large grants supporting a few major initiatives, and the other for advancing a number of smaller scale efforts. The decision about where to make that split—whether 50/50 or another allocation—will no doubt require considerable discussion, but this is the type of resource planning that would best serve the larger goals of the university.

- **Leverage one-time funds.** Also related to the development of the university’s investment strategy is the purpose and use of the $1 million in discretionary funds that is to be available for each of five years. The sum of $1 million does have a nice cache to it, but frankly, it doesn’t go as far as it once did. We propose using a healthy portion of these discretionary dollars for planning grants. Small allocations for specific activities won’t have a particularly high impact, but they could bring in many more dollars if they are given as planning grants to develop ideas and seed research projects as well as leverage funds from corporations and foundations. We think external sources would be interested, and leveraging requirements should be put in place. This planning strategy would facilitate the subsequent development of grant proposals. Consideration should also be given as to who determines the allocation of discretionary funds — whether it should be a part of compact planning or determined administratively. Finally the use of one-time money to reduce the deficit is a good strategy if this is one of the main goals of the administration.

- **Direct the future process.** The board recommends that the compact planning process be more bounded and directed with regard to selective investment in future years. The
process should be guided by creating aspiration and ambition. Defining that level of ambition is key and goes back to the board’s recommendations about mission, vision and values. What should the University at Albany achieve in five years were it to stretch and optimize its human, financial and other resources? We advise being wary of simplistic goals that some institutions adopt such as “reaching the top 20 research universities” and no doubt many at the university share that same wariness too. Nonetheless it is important to articulate the university’s ambition.

- **Seek directed proposals and a balance with “random” opportunities.** The planning process should solicit directed proposals by defining boundaries, or, at least it should seek some proportion of targeted rather than random proposals. This is consistent with the board’s view of strengths at the University at Albany -- in a few significant, large areas, we believe the university has the opportunity to be a nationally ranked institution. However, it is important that the process still allow for capturing unexpected opportunities. For example, if the university had a small institute in a certain field, and faculty learned that the world’s expert in that area wanted to come to the Capital Region for personal reasons, the process should be flexible enough to permit taking advantage of such unexpected opportunities for excellence—so long as these opportunities complement the university’s ambitions.

- **Additional adjustments recommended**

  - **Strengthen metrics and evaluation.** The Board found the initiative evaluation plans presented in the first round to be uneven in quality and rigor. While the compact planning process includes provisions for measures and evaluations to accompany proposals so that the university can rightfully assess the future success of its investments, it is recommended that more formal and systematic means for detailing proposed measures and evaluations be developed for future rounds of selective investment.

  - **Require integration consultation:** The process should require units to consult with each other and integrate proposals where possible. A mechanism for integrating proposals should be developed and incorporated into the planning process to take advantage of possible synergies. This needs to happen early in the process, and it may be necessary for this to occur at the Provost’s level.

  - **Leverage more collaboration.** Prior to release of funds, an additional step is needed whereby recipients would show they had leveraged additional collaboration among faculty from different units. In other words, units need to show, wherever possible, that they are willing to put their own resources toward these priorities. This may require units to reallocate their own resources from current activities toward these new initiatives.

  - **Leave opportunity/reward funding possibilities.** Sometimes developing a new idea takes a significant commitment of time on the part of individuals. Providing options that recognize this as part of the compact planning process could be useful. For example, allowing faculty or staff time away from regular duties to devote to a particularly salient idea is one strategy that could be considered.
• **Provide feedback.** In the spirit of collegiality, the compact planning process should include offering explicit feedback to those who submitted proposals. We understand that this is planned, and we applaud this effort.

• **Refine criteria.** In future years the priority areas and criteria for funding should be tightened and/or clarified. More guidance is needed for those submitting proposals.

• **Assess future-year distribution.** The allocation of funds in one year, as weighed against the availability of funding over multiple years, needs careful examination. Specifically, more clarity is needed regarding whether the number of faculty positions that can be funded in a given year is set at up to 20 or is variable. The same issue applies to the allocation of discretionary funds. If funds are encumbered for multiple years, the incentive for proposing future opportunities will be diminished.

2. **Observations and Recommendations on Related Opportunities and Needs**

• **Revise overall budget process**

  • **Scope and integration.** The board recommends modifying the overall budget process, incorporating compact planning and making all elements complementary. Compact planning is a small though very important piece of the university budget. The process should include both principles, such as transparency, and guidelines that are easily understood. Greater clarity of purpose in the mission and vision would facilitate an effort to revise the budget process.

  • **Flexibility.** The university also needs to be much more nimble to capture emerging opportunities. Though UAlbany has done a good job in the past, it has got to be even more agile in today’s environment. Universities around the country are looking at their budget processes and the need for flexibility is one area that they are addressing. An important aspect of that would be to recognize the unusual constraints placed on UAlbany’s leadership by the decentralized budgeting process that has evolved. If nearly all funds are allocated to academic and administrative departments, little is left to central administration to direct to high-needs areas. The board recommends improving leadership’s ability to address critical areas through the budget process. As new funds become available, a new strategy will be needed that allows for the direction of an appropriate level of funding to central administration so that leadership can execute priorities from the budget process, compact planning, and strategic planning.

  • **Return on Investment.** We also suggest that the university consider building into the budget strategy a Return on Investment (ROI) component, something much more common as a practice in higher education today.

  • **Leverage external resources.** Finally, the board recommends considering the possibility of a revolving loan fund as a tool for making resources go further and “incentivizing” faculty and staff to look for external funding. The fund would seed
new ideas, allow faculty to seek resources elsewhere, and then recapture the initial investment for recycling in another idea.

- **Address basic infrastructure.** Compact planning is designed to strengthen and build academic infrastructure. A concern with it, however, is that it is not suited to deal with basic infrastructure needs. The board has identified two critical support areas that require attention. The university requires both: (1) an ubiquitous information technology infrastructure, and (2) a strengthened development infrastructure. Both will require significant funding that is clearly outside of the compact planning process.

- **Clarify "Common Good" vs "Selective Excellence" (e.g. research areas).** In resource allocation, it is not unusual to have some tensions about what is in the common good. That notion, however, is missing in compact planning which is aimed at selective excellence. The board believes that strong undergraduate academic programs and student life are critical. At the same time we believe that there are opportunities for nationally-ranked "star" programs in some areas where the university has built sufficient strength. The investment in such areas should not be done at the expense of the former, however. Excellence in teaching and research is not an “either or” discussion.

- **Strengthen undergraduate education and life.** More emphasis is needed on improving the quality of undergraduate programs and student life and strenuously marketing them. The board is not convinced that there has been enough stress on this area after reviewing materials provided and listening to various leaders across the campus community.

- **Integrate the College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering into the intellectual fabric of the university.** The board shares the university's excitement about catapulting into the lead in nanotechnology. There is a great opportunity to build on and integrate this strength throughout the university, for example, in education, public health, life sciences, policy studies, ethics and art. Further, with its strengths in nanotechnology and education and emerging strength in biotech fields, UAlbany could be a leader in developing innovative teacher training programs in science and math and other fields to address educational needs in the U.S. Integration of nanosciences should be a two-way street, though, with nanoscience also being strengthened through the richness of the disciplines. The university could seek out and tap programs funded at the federal level that make important connections between nanoscience and other fields – e.g., contemporary writing (a possible opportunity for the Writer’s Institute); teaching students nanoscience; research on the delivery of medicine in the body; research on the health effects of nanoparticles. Finally, the development of an undergraduate program in nanoscience engineering would be an important part of this integration, build undergraduate quality, and at the same time help to strengthen the enrollment of math and science students.

- **Identify emerging areas with competitive advantage.** In academia it is important to assess and develop competitive advantages. The board notes the university’s strengths in policy programs and the opportunities to build on policy studies. We recommend building on three to four “big areas” such as those in the policy arena along with a handful of “small areas” as discussed on p. 4—“Seek directed proposals...”
• **Internationalize more.** Competition in the global environment, whether for intellectual talent, workforce, or leadership, requires greater emphasis on internationalizing American youth. A research university of the stature of the University at Albany must “internationalize” more. This means more students in study abroad programs and more foreign students both at the graduate- and the undergraduate-level.

• **Work with SUNY, a new state administration, and legislators to gain more flexibility in operations and agenda.** The board encourages the University Council to work with SUNY to gain more flexibility in both metrics used to assess performance as well as in operations and agenda. The fact that SUNY has a new Chancellor and that there will be a new governor provides an important opportunity to reconsider old ways of functioning and the Council should position itself to influence the direction. Presently, we believe, New York is on the wrong side of the curve to manage the future of public higher education given all the constraints in place. Other public higher education institutions are gaining far more freedom. This is a good time to work with SUNY on giving the university more latitude to achieve its ambitions.

• **Emphasize forward-thinking culture.** The university should intensely focus on the future, making forward thinking its mantra. It is important to fight the fights of the future, not the past.