May 11, 2016

Reed Dasenbrock and David Ericson, Co-Chairs
UH Manoa Strategic Planning Committee

Dear Reed and David,

I write at the request of the UH Manoa Faculty Senate Committee on Academic Policy and Planning (CAPP) to provide the feedback you requested from the Manoa Faculty Senate on the draft of the UH Manoa Strategic Plan 2015-2021. The Plan was forwarded by the Senate Executive Committee to all senate committees, and CAPP informed the SEC that we would focus especially on matters relating to our primary charge of undergraduate education. We have therefore focused especially on SERG. The committee discussed this at several meetings and also had a briefing on the Guided Pathway System and Velocity Analysis. Rather than writing a resolution for the Senate, the Committee asked me as chair to write you a letter addressing our concerns.

We have three major concerns on both the Strategic Plan and especially SERG. We would like to see more emphasis on international education, as was present in the two previous strategic plans, more indications of support for faculty, and especially more concern for the quality of education students receive, as opposed to focusing primarily on the numbers associated with student engagement, retention and graduation. We hope that there is a possibility of taking account of these in drafting the final version.

On international education, while we believe that being a Native Hawaiian Place of Learning and Indigenous-Serving Institution is very important, we also believe that it is important to be a place of international education as well, and hope that this could be recognized in some part of the plan. We have major strengths in international education, including the various centers associated with Asia and the Pacific as well as our specialized programs in language education, and upholding continuation of their excellence should be an important priority in the plan. Increasing the presence of international students, where we have had declines with tuition changes, is also important to the excellence and diversity of the education we provide to all students. Strengthening international education overall will also continue to maintain Manoa’s international reputation.

Our main concern is for excellence in undergraduate (and graduate) education. We are not certain that the rather narrow emphasis on Student Engagement, Retention and Graduation sufficiently focuses on this question of excellence. In fact, it may be important for the Plan to recognize that there may be tradeoffs between some kinds of initiatives in increasing retention and graduation rates and the quality of education. It would be helpful if the Plan could recognize the risk that too much emphasis simply on improving our numbers in retention and graduation rates may lead to a reduction in the quality of education, and that the Plan acknowledge a
commitment to guarding against that. We're concerned with the increasing emphasis in society at large and in Hawaii on a college education simply as a private rather than a public good. Manoa in particular, as the flagship campus of the system, needs to emphasize in its Strategic Plan that we provide an education that is for more than just getting jobs. Learning for life, and learning how to learn for life, is as important as learning in order to provide for the job market.

On SERG more specifically, we have been impressed with the velocity analysis added to STAR, but are concerned that the mechanical aspects of the Guided Pathway System that is intended to guide students toward progressing to graduation do not take sufficient account of the complexities of different choices students face, and may end up in fact misleading students. Our briefing on this strengthened our views on the problems with reliance on this mechanized system.

The section on the Manoa Graduation Promise is improved over previous drafts, but there is still the risk that substituting course requirements could lead to a dilution of department programs. In particular, in paragraph three, we noted that the language still retains the phrasing “Requirements will not be waived…” This needs to be changed to “adjusted” to reflect the changes made in previous paragraphs.

Moving transfer registration to an earlier time is an excellent idea. Surveying non-resident students as to why they leave at the end of the first year is also useful, but could be usefully extended to resident students as well. Improving communication is important, both with faculty and students, but the idea of a “Why Retention Matters” presentation to faculty seems rather limp. We suspect that faculty are already aware of this and do not need to be lectured on it, but that overall communication, including making more information, both on policies and on who is responsible for overseeing them, on the website would be more useful. At this point lack of transparency is difficult for faculty as well as students.

With respect to low success rate courses, we believe that it is simplistic to group together all DFIW courses. D and F are very different from W, which is in turn different from I. Disaggregation of these data would help us understand better what is going on. It is important also to find out more of the why on each of these. For example, while there is not much that can be done when a student has a heart attack and has to withdraw from all courses in a semester, there is a great deal that could be done when a student flunks a mid-term exam and then tries to withdraw in order to avoid a bad final grade.

This leads to our final point, which is that the Plan needs to reflect the centrality of supporting faculty as well as students if we are to achieve both the excellence in quality of education goals and the retention and graduation goals. Faculty morale is problematic and recognition of all that faculty do to help student learning would be useful (and we do not mean by this giving artificial and symbolic awards). Improving communication would help, as would reduction of bureaucratic hurdles. By supporting faculty we do not necessarily mean financial support, although that
would be nice, and do not mean artificial workshops to tell faculty how they should teach, but changing the climate of the university so that there is a general sense of the key role of faculty, as well as their inclusion in key decision-making on all of these matters. We note that the SERG committee included only two instructional faculty members on a committee of 15 including the chair.

We would hope that at least some of these questions can be addressed in a final draft, and are happy to work with you on these matters.

Sincerely,
Carolyn Stephenson,
Chair, Committee on Academic Policy and Planning

Cc: Robert Bley-Vroman, Interim Chancellor