Final Report from the University of Iowa's 2020 Phase II Committee

Our Charge

We, the 2020 Phase II Committee, were charged by Provost Sue Curry in October 2017 with conducting "a comprehensive assessment of our university structure and facilitate broad campus engagement in developing recommendations to help us optimize our academic organization." We were to define academic organizational structure broadly. It could include how academic units are configured, evaluated, and administered. It could include how the faculty enterprise is designed, resourced, and rewarded. It could include how the curriculum is developed and how education is delivered. In short, we were encouraged to involve the campus community in a wide-ranging discussion about how we can be a better university. Our timeline was ambitious. Provost Curry asked that we report to her before the end of Spring semester 2018.

We decided to focus on big ideas that may take a decade or more to implement and possibly longer to reap benefits. This is unusual. When thinking long-term, universities normally do so through five-year strategic plans. UI is no different – our 2016-2021 strategic plan is our current road map. Several groups, termed the Path Forward Working Groups, are engaged in developing annual objectives and tactics for implementing selected critical tasks from the plan. In addition, there have been other efforts in recent years that have solicited and examined short-term ideas that speak to the plan, such as the Strategic Implementation Teams. We wanted our work to reach well beyond the next five years, in part because the strategic plan covered the near term, but also to give the university community a rare opportunity to imagine collectively what our institution might be in 10 or 20 years and how we might get there.

Our Listening Tour

The first part of our work consisted of engaging with the campus community to solicit big ideas for improving the university. We did this in a number of ways. A web page was created to allow groups and individuals to post their ideas. If they preferred, they could request an in-person meeting with committee members. We also held three open forums for the campus community to express ideas. In addition to engaging the campus community, we interviewed three national higher education leaders to learn what they see as the long-term challenges and opportunities in higher education. The leaders were Michael Crow, President of Arizona State University, Richard Miller, President of Olin College, and David Skorton, former president of UI and Cornell University, and now the Secretary of the Smithsonian.

We started this data gathering portion of our process in late October, 2017 and finished in late January 2018. A list of in-person meetings can be found on the 2020 Phase II Committee Meeting Schedule web page. Over two hundred people connected with the committee through one or more of our engagement tools, and they expressed a number of ideas. A sizable majority of the ideas could be accomplished in the short-term, rather than the long-term; that is, they were ideas that could be accomplished in five years or less,

often in less than a year. While many of these ideas are potentially very good, they were outside the scope of our work. Our focus was sizable ideas that take a decade or more to implement. As noted above, the Path Forward Committees are currently generating plans that can be implemented in the short-term to accomplish our five-year strategic plan. We felt it best not to enter this space by endorsing various short-term ideas that we heard.

We did hear some big ideas. Most were expressed in very general terms, without sufficient detail for us to assess them and make recommendations about which ones the university should or should not pursue. For example, many people told us that UI should designate various research areas as targets for excellence and invest in them. We agree that targets for excellence should be identified, but our committee did not have the time or expertise to do the necessary in-depth analysis to confidently recommend some areas over others. As another example, some people recommended forming various new colleges, while others advocated for dividing or combining existing colleges. Changing our collegiate structure is a big idea that needs extensive study by a wide range of stakeholders before decisions are made. Yet another example is the call by several people for UI to build significantly on our existing strengths in writing. This idea is not new. The Writers Workshop, International Writing Program, and other writing initiatives have long distinguished UI as a writing center, and there have long been calls to invest further in writing to give us even greater distinction. What we did not hear were well-developed ideas to make this happen. Expanding interdisciplinary teaching and research was another big idea. Again, this idea is not new. In this case, UI has already made significant progress, but many people said more needs to be done if we are going to compete successfully for research grants, prepare our students for successful careers, and help solve 21st-century problems. We did not, however, hear many specific recommendations for how to do this, but we did hear concerns that the new budget model may have unintended negative consequences on interdisciplinary teaching and research. If this is true, it is a problem that needs to be addressed now, not a decade out.

Barriers to Big Ideas
There are at least a couple of reasons why we did not hear more big ideas. One is that the Phase I 2020 process, which was completed right before we started our work, caused significant angst in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences. Many in CLAS were convinced that the Phase I committee favored breaking up the College and there was suspicion that our Phase II committee was also targeting CLAS for division. In addition, there was widespread concern that a search for a new dean in CLAS would not go forward until Phase II was complete and any recommendations regarding CLAS were implemented. In many of our early meetings with CLAS faculty and staff, the conversation focused on these fears, not on big ideas for the university's future. Unfortunately, much of the rest of campus paid little attention to our committee because they, too, saw our work as primarily concerning CLAS. Thus, the "big idea" focus of the Phase II committee was not the focus of many faculty and staff, especially early in our listening tour.

The other reason why we did not hear many big ideas is systemic. University communities, including our own, are seldom encouraged or rewarded to think about big ideas – ideas

that transcend home units and take a decade or more to accomplish. Most of us, including the members of this committee, are dedicated to improving the university and we do so primarily through short-term initiatives in our home units and our disciplinary communities. Given this, it should probably not be a surprise that we did not hear many big ideas, especially well-developed ideas. It takes time to develop big ideas and our committee had a short time frame, one that was further truncated by the initial angst toward the Phase II process in CLAS and indifference toward the process outside of CLAS.

Encouraging Big Ideas

We remain convinced that universities should periodically – indeed, regularly – think long-term, longer that the five-year increments of strategic plans. Universities should also think big, bigger than most of the good ideas that go into accomplishing a five-year strategic plan. Some of the very biggest long-term initiatives at other schools are the tuition-reimbursement partnership between Arizona State University and Starbucks, the partnership between Cornell University and Technion – Israel Institute of Technology to build the Cornell Tech campus on Roosevelt Island in New York City, and Purdue University's purchase of Kaplan University and its repackaging as Purdue Global University. These particular initiatives may not have been right for UI, but there are big ideas that probably are right for UI, and we should put in place processes to encourage them to be imagined. We should also have processes for vetting big ideas and selecting a few for implementation. This does not happen in a systematic way today. For example, suppose some faculty members had an idea for a new school that would offer undergraduate and graduate academic degrees, provide outreach and engagement across the state, and serve as a hub for research. To whom would these faculty members take their idea: a dean, the provost, the associate provost for outreach and engagement, the vice president for research, the president, or someone else? Whomever they approached would probably not have expertise in the area and would not have the staff to assess it. Moreover, with the exception of the president and provost, only part of the idea intersects the purview of each of these administrators. Too often in these situations the idea would probably be turned down, not because it lacks merit but because there is no process to assess its merit, compare it to other ideas, and make an informed decision. It seems to us that if the university is going to be the best it can be in 20 years we need an ongoing systematic process to solicit, vet, and select among innovative ideas that have the potential to make us shine. Otherwise, we run the risk of choosing suboptimal ideas or worse yet, no ideas.

Selecting and Supporting Big Ideas

What might a process for soliciting, vetting, and selecting big ideas look like?   It could take many forms, but it needs to keep the new university budget model in mind. Under this model money flows to the colleges and it is the deans, along with several other senior campus leaders, who allocate the funds as members of the budget review board. This is a huge change from the old budget model; indeed, the new model might be the biggest idea implemented on campus in decades. It will take a few budget cycles for the details of this new model to iron out. We feel it is best to wait until then to develop a process for choosing big ideas.

Regardless of how big ideas are solicited, vetted, and selected, it is important to be able to support the ideas we want to pursue. It does us no good to have an efficient, effective, and responsive process for choosing big ideas if we do not have financial resources to realize them. We have a few suggestions for what UI can do to increase the money available for new ideas. The funds must come from either reallocation or new sources. Reallocation, obviously, requires shifting money from existing programs to the new initiatives. This is something that universities traditionally have not done often or systematically. To do it right requires evaluating programs on a regular basis to determine which programs to downsize or sunset in order to free up resources for new ideas. We think UI should build into the new budget model a process for doing this. As for new revenue, it is not likely to come from the state any time soon, so we must look for it elsewhere. In our view, it is not smart to raise tuition to fund new ideas unless we have exhausted all reasonable reallocation opportunities and the new ideas benefit students directly. One possibility for new revenue is philanthropy targeted to a "big idea" endowment. We do not know whether such a fund would attract significant donors, but it seems plausible that some donors would welcome supporting important future big ideas in research, teaching, and outreach – ideas that are undreamed-of today.

Conclusion
At the time of this writing, UI is in the midst of substantial change. We are introducing a new budget model, state funding continues to fall (and it looks like tuition will continue to rise), and several leadership positions are in flux, including the provost, vice president for research, chief diversity officer, and the dean of liberal arts and sciences. This was probably not the best time to ask the UI community to think long-term. Indeed, we got a strong sense during our listening tour that people are focused on near-term changes and challenges. That is perhaps part of the reason that we did not hear many big ideas. But we also got a strong sense that people seldom think purposely and deeply about big ideas, even in less turbulent times. If they did, we should have heard more ideas and more fully developed ideas. Our tour has caused us to worry that the modus operandi at UI often works to discourage "big idea" creativity. We do not have a regular and efficient institution-wide process for soliciting, vetting, and funding long-term big ideas that span individual units. Without such a process, the immense creativity in the UI community will be primarily limited to ideas in individual disciplines, labs, centers, etc. where ideas can be realized. This is, indeed, where much of our creativity should be focused. But we should also have a process that encourages big idea thinking.

Submitted June 2018 by the UI 2020 Phase II Committee