

Prospective Students and Their Parents Ask: Why (or Why Not) Enroll at Shippensburg?

We believe that the Academic Master Plan process now underway at Shippensburg can be an effective and worthwhile path to providing the university with something that the institution has never really had and clearly needs—a comprehensive and inclusive mission and vision of whom it can and should serve and how to educate that population mostly effectively. All research emphasizes that the most effective colleges and universities are those that focus on student success and that work across traditional institutional silos—academic, student affairs, administration—to achieve it. In short, they know who they are, plan with that knowledge and then execute that planning accordingly. Since becoming a comprehensive regional institution in the 1970's and 1980's, Shippensburg has lost its previous exclusive focus on teacher training but has substituted no carefully considered alternative. We have grown in numbers, we have added programs and services, and we have been conventionally successful—particularly with regional and discipline-based accreditation—but we have rarely looked closely at what this means and how it informs university-wide practice beyond immediate circumstances or possibilities. What we believe is needed is a framework that can guide the entire university toward its clearly stated goals for student success and that provides accountability in achieving them.

As retired Shippensburg faculty, our role in the creation of such a framework is necessarily limited, but we are frequently asked by prospective students and their parents how we feel about the institution where we both worked for so long and to provide reasons why Shippensburg should be their school of choice. At the same time, we often have to share some of our concerns that might suggest to them consideration of available alternatives. We believe that both the strengths and weaknesses outlined below should be taken into account as the Academic Master Plan is developed.

Shippensburg's Strengths:

1. Shippensburg is public. We admit to bias here; we suspect that many private colleges, costly as they are, try a little too hard to retain students, even if they aren't working very much. Public colleges perhaps do a better job of assigning the responsibility for success to the student.
2. Over the past 25 years or so, Shippensburg has acquired an outstanding faculty. However, there seems to be concern that retention of talented faculty has become an issue, given the current economic situation and the attitude of the Chancellor's Office, although the new chancellor seems more reasonable than his predecessor. Of perhaps even more concern are reports that faculty are stretched thin, with a much higher total workload than in the past, and that they are just not as enthusiastic as in the old days.
3. Shippensburg has a variety of well staffed academic programs with appropriate curricula. Two questions: 1) What programs related to health care are offered? Such programs offer hope for future employment and are attractive to better students. 2) Do students who complete the first three years of the pre-engineering program at SU with good grades have any trouble transferring to Penn State? University

Park indicates that transfers are at the discretion and convenience of Penn State. If this is so, Shippensburg might want to consider taking some action here. This is a really good program that deserves respect.

4. Shippensburg remains undergraduate-focused. Faculty can concentrate on undergraduate teaching without the additional priorities of doctoral programs to supervise and heavy research expectations. Also, class sizes have historically been reasonable. However, we have two possible concerns: 1) Research expectations for faculty seem to be on the rise, perhaps beyond the point of diminishing returns. For example, the AACSB has historically focused on counting publications, with the attendant distortions that accompany such an approach; we wonder if disciplines outside of business are faced with similar pressures. 2) History faculty at SU report that class sizes in their general education courses average around 42. This phenomenon could be a problem if it is widespread. Penn State University Park offers some lower-division general education classes of 200 or so, but with excellent lecturers at the podium. Other general education courses average about 25. This mix will appeal to many students who would rather not attend classes that are all in the 35 to 45 range.

5. Put another way, Shippensburg is just about the right size. While some might argue that the current undergraduate student body (6,942) is a bit too large, the institution is big enough to offer a reasonable range of programs, and small enough to be reasonably intimate.

6. Shippensburg is admissions-friendly. If a high school student fails to graduate in the top quarter of his or her high school class, gaining admission to Penn State University Park is unlikely, given that 86% of that institution's entering class is drawn from the top quarter, as indicated by the College Board. So Shippensburg offers an opportunity to many who didn't really apply themselves until the junior year of high school or who scored below 1100 on the SAT, which is the quartile cutoff at Penn State University Park. This is undoubtedly a major stress reliever for many students. On the other hand, some might say that Shippensburg is *too* admissions-friendly, given that 31% of admitted students in 2009 and 38% in 2007 were from the bottom half of their high school class. As recently as the early 1990's, this percentage at Shippensburg was under 10%.

7. Finally, Shippensburg is by far the lowest priced alternative. Annual tuition, fees, room & board are currently \$14,530 while Penn State's are \$23,206. One suspects that the \$8,678 difference subsidizes doctoral programs and research. Shippensburg's relatively modest price tag is partially a reflection of the state subsidy of perhaps \$5,000 per student, but even without the subsidy the total would be far less than for Penn State, not to mention the private colleges. Shippensburg is therefore pretty efficient. In an atmosphere where price is one of the bigger threats to higher education in general, Shippensburg's tuition, fees, room & board represent about 30% of the median U.S. family income; Penn State's is 49%. (One caveat: an estimate of the corresponding Shippensburg figure for percentage of median family income 50

years ago is about 15%. If this trend continues, parents and students may well turn more than ever to community colleges and other lower priced alternatives in higher education.)

Some Shippensburg Weaknesses:

1. Evidence from some parents indicates that Shippensburg's financial aid office seems unhelpful while other PASSHE schools, such as Millersville, seem more cooperative, even to the point of providing real assistance with the dreaded FAFSA. This is hearsay, of course, but if true this shortcoming is a definite concern. Moreover, many would suggest that the SU financial aid office needed improvement even decades ago. We wonder what it says about the administrative culture at Shippensburg that these kinds of straightforward issues can't get fixed.

2. Shippensburg suffers from recognition deficiency. Just about wherever you go, people recognize the Penn State "brand" favorably. It's not just football anymore; Penn State scholars and scientists are often in the news. But if you mention Shippensburg in Washington, D.C., which is only 1.5 hours away, you are likely to get one of the following responses: 1) What's/where's that?, 2) Is it a branch of Penn State?, or 3) Is it private? This need not necessarily be the case. For instance, if one compared the performance on the CPA exam of Shippensburg and Penn State students graduating with a 3.2 or better GPA, the results would be similar. Shippensburg should gather evidence like this for as many fields of study as possible and disseminate it effectively. Such material is not currently apparent on the SU website.

3. Shippensburg's academic culture seems to have been put together in the late 1960's and 1970's by a group of people including Gilmore Seavers, Jim McCormick, John Hubley, and Bob Orndorff whose backgrounds were in student and administrative services. Bob Orndorff once explained their philosophy as follows: "We're here to serve the students in the "solid middle." This observation implies an "ideal" Shippensburg student with above average high school grades in the second through perhaps the fifth decile, good work habits, and often a highly structured academic major—for example, education or accounting. (Note: Because these types of programs have externally verifiable outcomes, it is easier for the student to overcome the recognition issue.) It would seem that this model has worked pretty well historically, and it also explains the favorable reviews given by many graduates.

But about one-third of the current students entering SU finished in the bottom half of their high school class, and half of them score below 1000 on the SAT. These students do not fit the Orndorff model. Put another way, they probably are not keen on another four years of "academic abstractions"—that is, language, literature, mathematics, science, history, and the social sciences. Maybe Shippensburg does serve these students well, but it would be nice to see some objective, verifiable evidence that it does. It does not exist in the current promotional literature. In this case, advising such students to consider community college or technical schools as well as Shippensburg might seem appropriate.

By the same token, in the late 1970's about 20% of Shippensburg's entering students finished in the top decile of their high school class, and over 40% finished in the top quarter. As a result, these more academically accomplished students would seem to have had a major impact on the academic culture and were therefore likely to have been as well served as the "solid middle." But today, averaging the percentages for 2007 and 2009, only 8% finished in the top decile and only 28% in the top quarter. These students are outnumbered by those in the bottom half. Why these decreases should have occurred, given what Shippensburg has to offer, is an interesting question. Competition from Pitt, Penn State and private universities is a factor; another is that Shippensburg does not seem actively to recruit high performing students, except those that enter the small and limited Honors program.

It is plausible that the academic culture has changed to match these shifts. In recruiting or advising, top decile high school students should be told that they will be in a definite minority, unlike in their high school where most of their senior year classes—Honors English, AP history, Calculus, and Physics—were with students like themselves. Perhaps Shippensburg does serve these students well but, as is the case with students from the lower half of their high school classes, the university does not provide any evidence of this in its promotional literature. The website features the inevitable smiling faces with quotes from students emphasizing the "friendly, caring atmosphere ... that is challenging when it counts," whatever that means. Further, the SU institutional research website reveals that while 52% of the students spend 10 or more hours per week socializing, only 10% spend more than 10 hours studying! Talented students expect a quantum increase in the level of academic challenge in college, and look for colleges that will meet that expectation. They have said that they might have considered Shippensburg, but did not because SU did not proactively seek to show that the university would meet their needs. Accordingly, such students give Shippensburg a look, but they more frequently choose the alternatives that are available to them because of their high school performance.

It would be informative if the Shippensburg academic community were seriously to reflect on the extent to which the university serves students outside of the "solid middle," and to publish the results of this work. It would also be interesting to see if there is any desire to proactively recruit students in the top tenth of their high school class. Shippensburg could say, "We provide a highly intensive university experience in an undergraduate friendly setting," and then elaborate convincingly about how that gets done. Or not. Either response would be illuminating.