

## Focus Group Notes

### Goal 3: *Cultivate the mutual interaction of theory and practice.*

#### Strengths of Shippensburg University related to achieving this goal

- *Strength defined:* organizational factor that the university/college excels in – performs better than competitors – factor that differentiates us from our competitors – reason students choose Ship, factor that makes the university/college successful.

What resources, capabilities, and competencies does Shippensburg University possess that place it in a strong position to achieve this goal? Think of these factors both in an absolute sense and relative to competing institutions.

- Smaller class sizes {30 max.} [5]
- Faculty's close interactions with students
- Variety of schools in close proximity
  - Proximity to Urban /sub-urban/Rural sites [3]
  - Lab School & Child Development Center [4] Strong Head Start program [3]
  - Grace B. Luhrs Laboratory School [3]
- School Study Council – with 67 school district participants [4]
- Specific examples:
  - Tax Assistance program [for low-income families] and other service-learning opportunities exist in Franklin & Cumberland Counties [2]
  - Early Childhood practicum sites {approximately 30 per semester in Franklin, Fulton, Cumberland, Dauphin and Adams counties}
- Quality internships in many departments [2]
- Undergraduate/Faculty Research opportunities [3]
- Strong Honors program
- Support for students through many offices on campus
- Foundation Office [more funds available than other PASSHE schools]
- Field and Lab courses
- Awareness of national trends
- Location
- Ship has provided a wonderful space for the Learning Center that students love.
- There are many support programs in place.
- AVSO organization that supports service-learning.
- Provides grants for research for both undergraduate and graduate research.
- Great faculty and administration.
- A good faculty exchange program.
- Positive atmosphere
- Productive relationships between faculty and administration.
- High quality field experiences (internships, practicum).
- Embedded field experiences within classes.
- Service – learn and serve.
- Partnering with institutions.
- Strong focus on undergraduate educations.
- History of partnerships with local schools, government, industry, etc. (good reputation).
- Large number of alumni in region.
- Teaching loads can include supervision of, for example, student teachers.

- CRJ internships are successful largely because of long-standing relationships with regional stakeholders.
- We enjoy an excellent reputation with the agencies who accept our interns.
- Giving back to the community (i.e. – civic engagement).
- As a department, we stress and push internships which evaluate us above our institutional peers.
- Field experiences have a long history in teacher preparation and are designated in program and accreditation guidelines.

## **Weaknesses of Shippensburg University related to achieving this goal.**

- *Weakness defined:* obstacle or weak link in the university/college that may prevent progress or hinder performance – organizational factor or practice that the university/college does not do well – performance is weaker than competitors.

Are there deficiencies in resources, capabilities, and competencies that may weaken Shippensburg’s University ability to achieve this goal? Think of these factors both in an absolute sense and relative to competing institutions.

- Need faculty time {reassigned time}/additional personnel to organize field experiences [3]
- Lack of experiential learning opportunities with minority populations for all students
- No intentional learning for service learning interactions {prof. dev. needed}
- Lack of coordinated communication/centralized office for awareness/information of faculty & students for experiential learning opportunities [7]
- Transportation not provided to sites [2]
- Faculty not rewarded for practicing ‘in the field’/promotion issues
- Time consuming
- Diversity of perspectives within Arts and Sciences makes reaching consensus difficult.
- Lack of poor guidelines for the promotion process.
- Lack of funding for programs, projects, and initiatives in the Learning Center – we are limited in services we can provide yet the needs are great in the study body, especially in writing support.
- Need to clearly answer the questions: Who are we? What do we do?
- Clearly define ‘values’ regarding interaction of theory and practice – “Best Practices”.
- Promotion process privileges: research over service, education, CAS.
- Ensuring consistency and quality across internships.
- Uncertainty in how to categorize a professor’s time spent with theory-to-practice (e.g. pre-service/in-service teachers) within current tenure and promotion guidelines. Is it service? Scholarship? Teaching? All three? Something else like engagement?
- Resources (release time, travel \$, etc.) to enable oversight of theory-to-practice programs.
- Like overfishing or overuse of American land, we keep using the same resources/internship sources over and over again. Burnout may be a real weakness.
- A narrow regional focus of our outreach is a deficiency.
- Underutilizing alumni connections, especially those placed/hired in agencies where we have placed no students.
- Time and course credit for field supervision is a challenge
- Lack of understanding that field placements are intended to extend and support both theory and research; not be a corrective from the “real world”
- One obstacle to establishing programs like the ones identified above is the process of achieving tenure. Professors must see service in the public schools as a means of making them not only better professors, but as a step in obtaining tenure. The balance between service and research in granting tenure must be recognized as being of equal value. Absent of that balance there is little to no incentive for college personnel to become involved in a public school program.
- I disagree that service learning is a strength. I think it is an extreme weakness. There is not a centralized service-learning program. There are pockets of faculty doing service well. It really should be a student affairs coordinated program that includes in class and out of class opportunities. It should be campus

wide. There are some student volunteer programs - but it is not service learning. And even then I wonder if it is really accomplishing the two main tenants of service: reflection and reciprocity.

- Internships - here too I don't hear undergraduates speak to how they were supervised during an internship. I hear too that there is little reflection. As the book asks, "Where is the learning in service learning." I would offer the same about internships - where is the reflection that leads to meaning making? Students may be "doing" but are they encouraged to 'be' a professional identity?
- I was hoping too the focus group could deal more with how to apply theory in the classroom. How is it that we can use classroom time for students to better experience theory and not rely on internships? I guess this is an opportunity - creative assignments and activities that encourage students to make the connection between theory and practice.
- At many institutions, career exploration and development is considered a part of experiential education (that is Dickinson and Gettysburg's philosophy). However, that does not seem to happen here. There is an opportunity here - it certainly could.
- While we are well respected, I believe the University has a poor relationship with the Shippensburg Community. I am speaking directly about those who are not affiliated with our work in environmental issues, local education, our service to local businesses, etc. Over 1/3 of Shippensburg lives in poverty, and only 16% of the community has above a high school diploma. While I realize we will not be liked/loved by all, I do believe we can do a better job of reaching out, investing in and caring for our neighbors.
- Related to student experiences outside the classroom, we are severely weakened by not having a centralized office/database to facilitate student service learning, civic engagement and internships. Many of our peer institutions are decades ahead of us in this area. And while this does not impact all departments equally, as related to internships, it does affect many in the college of arts and sciences. In the end, students suffer. Indeed, they never really know what they could have had.
- I also feel another weakness is that we do not offer a Speech Language program (Bloomsburg does and is the nearest program). As we age, the needs for these professionals is great. My wife, no lie, gets anywhere from 4 to 9 job offers a week (direct phone calls and mailings). Jobs are in nursing homes and rehab hospitals and pay \$40K to \$75K a year. A program would certainly take time to establish, but this is a growing need and it will not stop.

## **Opportunities in the external environment of Shippensburg University.**

- *Opportunity defined:* favorable event, trend, or circumstance in the external environment that the university/college could take advantage of to enhance performance or competitive advantage.

Are there opportunities in the external environment of Shippensburg University that can be seized upon to enhance its ability to achieve this goal? Think of the environment at both micro and macro levels.

- Urban experiences for diversity ed.
- Action Research [2]
- Grants available
- Students crave and thrive in practical experiences in the community and are eager to participate in experiential learning that integrates theory in classroom with practice in the field
- Opportunity to develop student personal skills { communication, teamwork, program-solving, etc. in these experiences }
- General ed. Reform so that more students & faculty are visible in the field
- Take advantage of lack of resources in schools to make our students/faculty more engaged in the field
- Collaboration w/school districts, businesses, companies
- Because of proximity we can use various settings {urban, rural, suburban}
- "Perfect storm" – General Ed. Reform, AMP, grant focused on experiential learning
- Letterkenny {wants to work with us}
- Reviews such as NCATE, Middle States, and PA Inspired Leadership provide opportunities to reform our programs.

- Partnering with local institutions – business, community, environmental.
- Can speak to research, teaching, and services.
- Partnering with R1 institutions (e.g. education and field-based research)
- Provide more incentives to local schools and other organizations to mentor students (e.g. after-school tutoring).
- The expansion of Federal Law Enforcement, Homeland Security, and Border Patrol will bring more theory-to-practice opportunities for our students, as long as students are interested in moving away from South-central PA.
- New teacher certification requirements related to field experiences
- Potential to form partnerships and provide students with practice in a variety of settings
- Professional development school models that support student placement, dialog with schools and involvement of faculty with programs and districts
- The problem becomes the answer. Public schools are more than willing for the college to be involved if done in the correct manner. One superintendent asked me “What has the college done for me lately? We place all of these student teachers and pro-sem students but what do we get?” A great question that speaks volumes for opportunity. *They need a college that is willing to reach out and work with the school district to meet its agenda; not the other way round.*

## Threats in the external environment of Shippensburg University

- *Threat defined:* unfavorable event, trend, or circumstance in the external environment that the university/college needs to protect itself from or try to minimize the impact of.

Are there factors in the external environment of Shippensburg University may threaten its ability to achieve this goal? Think of the environment at both micro and macro levels.

- Lack of funding [3]
- Lack of Human resources needed to keep relationships with schools, businesses, community [2]
- Prof. dev. for faculty for experiential learning & service learning experiences
- Valuing and Rewarding faculty for participation/leadership in experiential learning/field work – not just research
- Quality issues in supervision/training
- Lack of centralized office for resources/information/guidance of field experiences on campus [3]
- Coordination needed
- Grant-writer needed
- Funds needed to develop sites
- More competition from on-line universities
- Government requirements [PSSA] inhibit schools from allowing field experiences/student teachers [2]
- Economic pressures and limitations
- CBA and rigid workload model does not allow for faculty to be creative
- Larger class sizes and 4/4 course load are disincentives for faculty to initiate field work without reassigned time
- Grant funding for ‘Internships & Experiential Learning’ will cease
- CBA is not flexible of what “on-load” is
- Travel funding for getting to sites & time for establishing contacts in a variety of settings
- Enrollment continues to increase with no increase in faculty or support staff
- Students are not prepared when they come to college.
- Obviously funding – much of this is out of our hands.
- More demands for non-academic activities.
- Changes in the state system that run counter to the University’s mission.
- Constraints on local schools: standardized testing and other accountability measures.

- The lack of preparation (academic) of current high-school students. Students who cannot process information well will make lousy interns, which will threaten our program success.
- False bifurcation of univ. vs. “real-world”
- Public school teachers feel the increasing burden of accountability in student achievement. Their willingness to accept SU students in the classrooms as student teachers, professional seminar students or secondary methods students declines as accountability increases and they have less time to deal with undergraduates. Undergraduates must be better prepared today, more than ever, to be of assistance to the classroom teacher and not just another needy student.
- The threat becomes fewer schools for students to obtain field hours at a time when the state requires more hours earlier in the program.

### **Other comments: “Framing the Issue”**

The public schools in the SU service area are responding to the State testing program with new programs and curriculum designed to increase student performance on the PSSA; especially those districts that do not do well on the testing. Examples of those changes include all day kindergarten and identification of at risk students and tutoring and remedial programs. As a result, classroom teachers become less willing to accept SU students into the classroom as the demands of today’s public school classrooms increase.

Three professors established programs in public elementary schools in the area. Undergraduates work with students on a scheduled basis at the schools (through the classroom teacher) using techniques learned in the college classroom. The public schools find the program to be highly effective; the undergraduates are able to connect instruction with practice and the college professors are able to design curriculum that is relevant to the needs of elementary children and college students.

The programs I have observed are very well received by administration and breaks down the barrier that often exists between the college and school districts. The undergraduate’s education becomes more relevant as the public school students benefit from the additional instruction.

Our University's reputation in the region is its most significant strength. We are well respected--many programs. I also believe our regional location is a benefit. While there is competition, we certainly have access to a good portion of the educational market, and we offer what many need but can't afford at some of our other, smaller, college neighbors.