

Measuring Progress

The overarching goal of Lehigh's strategic plan is that the quality of the Lehigh faculty, students, and their productivity should compare favorably with those at the top 25 universities in the United States. This is explicitly stated in the first paragraph of A Vision for Lehigh and very evident throughout the Strategic Goals. Therefore, the metrics by which we measure our progress toward achieving the Seven Goals for Lehigh should be built on the principle of comparing ourselves with a set of peers who arguably meet this criterion.

Measuring our progress, however, does present some challenges that must be addressed logically. First we must rationally define an appropriate set of peer institutions. Second, we must select a small set of specific metrics that broadly measure progress toward our overarching goal. Third, we must develop a rational methodology for measuring progress toward our goal in each metric. These issues are addressed in the following paragraphs.

A reasonable assumption from which to start the selection of peers and metrics is that the mythical top 25 universities in the nation are among the top 50 universities in the U.S. NEWS and World Report rankings of schools. Even if one is critical of the methodology used by U.S. News, it is hard to argue that anyone of the universities ranked in their top 50 does not compare favorable in some areas with the true top 25, if we had the wisdom to know exactly who was in that group.

Composition of the Top 50

When we examine the composition of the U.S. News Top 50 for 2001, we find 15 large-public universities having well over 10,000 undergraduates except for Georgia Institute of Technology, which has about 10,000 undergraduates, and one small public institution, The College of William and Mary. Although it is important to compete as much as possible with these public universities in hiring faculty, for research funding, and by the reputations of academic departments, comparative analysis of campus data with them is usually not productive because of the fundamental differences between a large public university and a medium sized private university.

The remaining 35 private institutions contain only a small number of institutions whose undergraduate enrollments differ from Lehigh's in the extremes. (Because of ties there are actually 51 universities in the top 50 for 2001.) California Institute of Technology has just over 900

undergraduate students and the next smallest are Yeshiva University at 2500 and Rice at 2800. (These enrollments are the number of traditional undergraduates reported to U.S. News by each campus. They may differ from IPEDS data, which include non-traditional students.) At the other end of the spectrum, Cornell University, University of Southern California, and New York University have undergraduate enrollments from 13,000 to 16,000. The remaining 31 range from 2500 to just under 9500 full time undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania. The average enrollment of these institutions is slightly under 5,500 and the median is about 4900.

Selecting a Set of Peers

Without a doubt medium sized private universities have played a significant role setting the standard of excellence in American higher education. For the last five years over 60% of the U.S. News Top 50 universities are private universities with between 2,000 and 10,000 undergraduates. Similarly in the NRC rankings one finds across a broad spectrum of subjects many universities from this group in the top 25. Thus it is certainly possible to construct a very good set of peers from medium sized private universities and use them to set metric goals for Lehigh, but it should be a fixed set for the next 5 to 10 years, not one that changes with the yearly publication of *America's Best Colleges*.

During the last 5 years, 5 private institutions have been part of the top 50 for some but not all of those years. For example, this year Pepperdine is one for the first time and RPI has returned after a two-year absence. We should certainly expect some of the private universities who are currently not in the Top 50 to be also be setting high standards for themselves and achieving greater national recognition, in effect becoming our competitors for the same goals. Consequently, it would seem wise to include some subset of the Tier 2 universities in any peer group constructed using the premise that the selection of a set peers and metrics should start with the Top 50 universities in the U.S. NEWS and World Report rankings of schools.

During the last 3 years we have constructed a set of peers based on undergraduate enrollment and built an interesting database for them. Specifically, we have looked at private universities with a Doctoral or Research Carnegie classification and between 2,000 and 8,000 undergraduates (using IPEDS enrollment data) from the Top 50 and Tier 2 universities. The current strategic planning process presents an opportunity to refine that process and begin analyzing trends in the data.

Given the distribution of undergraduate enrollments among private universities in the Top 50 and given the planning assumption of modest

growth in Lehigh's undergraduate enrollment, we should enlarge our definition to include undergraduate enrollments of between 2,000 and 10,000 students, using U.S. News enrollment data. There are 14 Tier 2 universities meeting this criterion for 2001 and who have been either in the Top 50 or Tier 2 for the last 4 years. Including them would produce a sample of 45 universities to serve as a rational set of peers for Lehigh in the coming years.

Selection of Metrics

Turning now to the selection of metrics, one of the fundamental principles of the existing database has been to only use readily available national data with good collection protocols. It should continue to be a key fundamental principle. The sources of this national data have been U.S. News and World Report, the College Board Survey, and IPEDS Fall Enrollment Survey. The data has been organized into four broad categories: undergraduate academic data, graduate and research data, faculty data, and financial data.

We should now examine the data fields we have started tracking and make sure they are broadly linked to the overarching goal through the Strategic Goals. We may wish to delete some and add others to measure better our progress. However, we should not attempt to select a metric for every item in every Strategic Goal, rather we should focus on being comparable with the top 25 in important areas. Moreover, we should only select metrics that are available from reliable national sources.

An expanded database for the above set of 45 universities and an appropriate set of metrics could easily be constructed for this year and back to the 95-96 academic year so that with the current year we would have a five-year record to analyze.

Defining Top 25 Performance

Finally, we must in some rational way define for each selected metric what it will mean for Lehigh's performance to be comparable to the top 25 universities in the country, and we must do this without specifying which universities are in the mythical top 25. This can be accomplished by defining the desired performance level independently for each metric one after another.

Given that 19 or more medium sized universities have been among the top 25 in *"America's Best Colleges"* for the last 5 years, a second reasonable assumption for each specific metric would be that for the next 5 to 7 years at 15 to 20 medium sized universities will meet the criterion that the quality of their performance compares favorably for that metric

with those at the top 25 universities in the United States. In particular, it is understood that the 15 to 20 universities setting the standard will change from metric to metric and year to year. Consequently, only the data for a specific metric is important and the names of the universities can be ignored.

We now have the following methodology for measuring our progress toward achieving the overarching goal that the quality of the Lehigh faculty, students, and their productivity should compare favorably with those at the top 25 universities in the United States: select a relevant metric, obtain the metric's current data for the sample of 45 medium sized private universities, order it, see how close Lehigh is to being among the top 15 to 20. For example, in freshman retention the range for the top 15 to 20 starts from 94% to 96%, and we are within striking distance of the desired goal at 93%. At 94% we could claim to be competitive with the top 25 and at 96% definitely to be part of the top 25 in freshman retention.