



*Transforming the University*

**Culture Task Force**

**Report Summary**

**Submitted on:**

**July 25, 2007**

## **Preface**

The Culture Task Force included a wide variety of members who brought perspectives from all levels throughout the University and greater community. Each member took on specific assignments and actively participated in the research and analysis that yielded insights into the current culture and the culture to be.

Joining them was a team of President's Emerging Leaders (PEL) who organized and managed a wide range of focus groups and interviews to unearth people's ideas about what works, what doesn't and what strategic positioning means to their work and to the University as a whole. The PEL team report summarizing those sessions reflected the intensity of their experiences as hands-on witnesses to these honest, passionate discussions.

Overall, the task force members and staff, along with the President's Emerging Leaders team, dedicated significant time and energy to the process. The members were:

Linda Thrane, Chair, Vice President, University Relations  
John Adams, Faculty, College of Liberal Arts  
Amy Anderson (former member), External-Himle Horner  
Jan Batt, Administration, College of Human Ecology  
Lynn Casey (consultant), External-Alumni Association board member  
Chuck Denny, Jr., External-Chair, Humphrey Advisory Council  
Dana Donatucci, Civil Service, Facilities Management  
Theresa Glomb, Faculty, Carlson School, and organizational development expert  
Wokie Freeman (task force coordinator), University Relations  
Diana Harvey, Communications Director, School of Public Health  
Nancy Hugg, Administration, General College  
Sandy Korlath (task force staff), University Relations  
Allison Ling (from 5/06-present), Student; Minnesota Student Association; Twin Cities Student Unions Board of Governors  
Vince Magnuson, Vice Chancellor, U of M, Duluth  
Scott Martens, Service and Continuous Improvement  
Maria Pabon (member from 9/05-12/05), Ph.D. candidate in Social Psychology  
Jessica Phillips, External-Alumni Association board; former undergrad; former Regent  
Regina Sullivan, Intercollegiate Athletics  
Maggie Towle, Director, Twin Cities Student Unions & Activities  
Tom Zearley (member 9/05-5/06), Student; past president, Minnesota Student Association  
Beth Zemsky, Human Resources

### **President's Emerging Leaders**

Kari Branjord, Enterprise Application and Web Development  
Erin George, University Libraries  
Twila Jensen, Energy Mgmt. & Accounting Svcs., University Services  
Emily Johnston, College of Biological Sciences  
Shelley Carthen Watson, Office of the General Counsel

For any questions regarding this work, please contact Wokie Freeman, Culture Task Force Coordinator ([wokie@umn.edu](mailto:wokie@umn.edu)). The following is a summary document of the Culture Task Force Final Report.

Culture is not a thing. It is a manifestation of actions and behaviors that are in turn driven by aspirations, expectations, values, systems and programs. It characterizes organizations but is embodied by the humans who populate them. It means different things to different people. It can be an inspiration or an excuse. It can be embraced or an afterthought.

The concept seems much clearer now, but at the time that the Culture Task Force began its work in September 2005, it is understandable that the direction was not so transparent. The group was charged “to define “culture” in the context of strategic positioning and to identify effective ways to communicate and inculcate that culture throughout the university.”<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the need to research the topic thoroughly, a wise course of action was selected. “Before delving into the task at hand, many task force hours were spent consulting with University faculty and administrators as well as organizational change and culture experts,<sup>2</sup> researching other theories about organizational culture,<sup>3</sup> and discussing the nuances of University culture. The task force also examined several University vehicles for collection of information, such as the Pulse Survey and the Student Experiences Survey, to determine whether additional data might be needed. With that solid base of information as a starting point, the task force decided that efforts should be targeted towards supplementing these avenues rather than creating new ones. That included adding several questions to the Pulse survey in time for the February 2006 rollout. In addition, the group liaised with leaders of other Strategic Positioning task forces to ensure alignment and unity of purpose and to access their surveys and other research.”<sup>4</sup>

To aid further in defining the culture, the task force, with the help of its President’s Emerging Leaders team, conducted eleven focus groups from January through March 2006, with a total of 82 participants. Focus groups included undergraduate, graduate, and professional school students; faculty; and P&A, Civil Service, and Bargaining Unit staff. The sessions were held on the Twin Cities, Crookston, Duluth, and Morris campuses. Concurrently, twenty-three senior university administrators were interviewed from February through April 2006.

“The Culture Task Force determined the key focus group questions would center on:

- What are people’s perceptions of the University’s current culture?
- How do people envision the culture of a top three public research university?
- What changes would the University need to make including strengths to emphasize and obstacles to overcome to maintain a culture for a top three public research university?

This work captures a snapshot in time of University culture from key campus audiences

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<sup>1</sup> Charge Letter from Chair, Linda Thrane to Culture Task Force members, 15 September 2005

<sup>2</sup> Appendix C of the Culture Task Force Interim Report, 9 January 2006 – Submitted to Administrative Steering Committee

<sup>3</sup> Appendix A of the Culture Task Force Interim Report, 9 January 2006

<sup>4</sup> Culture Task Force Interim Report, 9 January 2006

while those groups and the University are in the midst of the Strategic Positioning process.”<sup>5</sup>

“As expected, the focus groups represented a wide array of people involved with the University of Minnesota and an equally wide array of opinions about its current culture and its aspirations to become one of the top three public research universities in the world. The over-arching attitude and the closest that was observed as a unifying thread for the focus groups was the idea that the **people who work or study at the University are contributing to a better future**. The University’s vision is to improve the human condition through the advancement of knowledge and, through indirect language and other indications, the participants conveyed this vision.

### **Strong Points**

Many participants expressed **pride** in the University, the work they do and the role the University plays in Minnesota and globally. Others expressed a feeling of **stewardship or responsibility** for the University and its resources (physical space, public funding, time, employees, students, Minnesota, etc.) *“When you make a mistake, they don’t see it as you made a mistake, but the U of M made a mistake.”*

### **Obstacles**

Participants expressed a feeling of **isolation** in their departments and units and referred to a **silos effect** that leads to a lack of collaboration among the various segments of the University. *“(The University) is 100 different departments doing their own thing.”* They saw the potential for fewer silos and more collaboration as a way for creative and efficient work.

Others expressed **confusion** about the goal to be a top three public research university and just what this goal will mean for the University, which made it hard for many participants to embrace it. *“We can agree there is room for improvement, but it is unfortunate that we chose this lofty language.”*

Some participants articulated that there is a perception that the University uses a **top-down decision-making process** that involves little to no consultation with people from across the University. Participants said that staff and students have ideas, views and knowledge that could be helpful in the decision-making process, but many felt that University leadership underutilizes this expertise. For a different perspective, it would be fair to point to the reports from 35 Strategic Positioning task forces, including the work of over 400 faculty, staff and students.<sup>6</sup>

In general, participants were gratified that they were invited to share their views on University culture and said they would like to be included in future discussions as plans emerge for creating a culture that supports the top three aspirations.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> President’s Emerging Leaders Team Focus Group Report to Culture Task Force, 2 June 2006

<sup>6</sup> Transforming the U Web site: [http://www1.umn.edu/systemwide/strategic\\_positioning/](http://www1.umn.edu/systemwide/strategic_positioning/)

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from President’s Emerging Leaders Team Focus Group Overview Draft, 17 May 2006

These findings mirrored those from the interviews with senior administrators.

“The tone of the interviews was predominantly positive. Interviewees recognized the University’s strengths. There was general consensus that the University is a valuable public asset, and there was great pride in being a part of the institution.

There appeared to be strong opinions about what was lacking in the University culture, what barriers are impeding excellence, and what changes will be necessary to achieve “Top 3” status.

The general sense of the culture among interviewees was that while the University is diverse and vibrant, it is also fragmented, risk averse, diffuse in its vision and lacking a performance-driven rewards system.”

### **Recurring themes**

#### **1. Cross-disciplinary collaboration is essential in order to achieve excellence.**

- “We need to figure out how to be a unified university and not a confederation of colleges.”
- “We have a tendency to operate in silos.”
- “Colleges compete with one another for students.”
- “We need more synergy and a more simplified curriculum.”

#### **2. Human Resource practices (accountability standards and performance management systems) are needed to develop employees and demonstrate our value for them.**

- “Reverse the underinvestment in human resources and professional development.”
- “We lack the tools to identify and prepare future leaders.”
- “We must reward differently. We cannot allow tantrums to be rewarded.”
- “Reward excellence and don’t reward or put up with mediocrity.”
- “Young faculty members are hired for their research potential, not their leadership potential.”
- “We are great at compliance and penalties, but we don’t make leadership development a part of the fabric of our culture.”

#### **3. “Top 3” status should be more fully explained and appropriate metrics defined to measure progress against our goals and values.**

- The path to Top 3 is not clear and is “the beauty and the terror of it.”
- “The goal of becoming a top three public research university is aspirational, but the worry is there that this will open the flood gates and there will be no prioritizing.”
- “We are a public-minded, socially active, engaged culture.”
- “Top 3 are the right words. The public...research...institution. That doesn’t resonate with the public.”
- “Strategic Positioning is huge, and things that are hard take time.”
- “The way we state the goal of being a top three research institution is a limitation because it sounds hollow and does not inspire people.”

- “There is no sense that the aspirational goal was created with all the campuses in mind.”
- 4. The University culture must be willing to accept appropriate risk.**
    - “Accepting risk and uncertainty is essential to being tops.”
    - “Culture should be driven by inquiry, not by the bottom line.”
    - “We need to reward innovation with recognition.”
    - “Risk taking is important to being in the top three.”
    - “We need to lead more than manage. Reward the good instead of trying to catch people doing something bad.”
    - “We don’t empower employees and give them the tools they need.”
    - “Excellence means taking risks.”
  - 5. The vision and goals of current senior leadership must be clearly aligned.**
    - “We need clear priorities set from the top administration.”
    - “We are political to a fault, reactionary, and lack focus.”
    - “We have to have priorities, and we can’t be everything to everyone. We need to prioritize our needs.”
    - “We change our priorities too often before they become firmly established.”
  - 6. A balance should be achieved between centralization and decentralization.**
    - “The University is 1,000 fiefdoms connected by a central heating plant.”
    - “We should be more streamlined on the academic side. Lots of turf issues impede this.”
    - Things are too much about “me and my turf.”
  - 7. There should be incentives to embrace change with new leaders and consequences for failure to do so.**
    - “Reward leaders who drive the change & desired culture and dis-incent those who do not.”
    - “Leaders have to change.”
    - “It can be easy to say where we want to go, but as the administration changes, the direction and priorities of the University change.”
    - “Many people, because of a revolving door mentality, have a “wait it out” mentality.”

Almost a year later, it is apparent that many of the participants of the focus groups found it difficult to envision what a “top 3 public research university” would look like. It was a time of uncertainty and turmoil for some, with the announcements to close 6 Twin Cities colleges and create 3. In retrospect, it may have been more helpful to ask questions that did not focus so heavily on the goal of becoming a top research university. Of course, hindsight tends to enable people to discern the types of trees that make up forests.

### **University Values**

Culture is guided by values and supported and defined by behaviors in the organization. So, taking the data obtained from all the focus groups, senior administrator interviews, Pulse Survey results and other task force recommendations, the task force attempted to

distill the list of values that the University considers important to carry out the mission of research and discovery, teaching and learning, and outreach and public service.<sup>8</sup>

The Culture Task Force derived this list of overarching values to guide the University community individually and institutionally. They are alphabetized to emphasize their equal importance.

- **Accountability**: Holding ourselves accountable and rewarding individual and organizational performance.
- **Collaboration**: Sharing ideas, pooling resources and ignoring borders.
- **Community**: Promoting a sense of community that fortifies the University's vision, mission and objectives.
- **Excellence and Innovation**: Supporting high performance and high potential faculty, staff and students.
- **Integrity and Respect**: Operating with integrity and valuing individual dignity and diversity of ideas and experiences.
- **Leadership**: Identifying and training future leaders and valuing stewardship and an appreciation for a long-term view.

Understanding that culture change occurs over time, depends on systemic capabilities that build support for University priorities, and instills the motivation to excel and achieve at all levels of the organization, the task force also identified four major levers to drive change.

### **Leadership**

- Goals
- Modeling
- Informed decision-making
- Resource allocation

### **People**

- Recruitment and selection
- Performance and talent management
  - Reviews
  - Compensation, reward and recognition
  - Promotion
- Training and development
  - Skills
  - Management

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<sup>8</sup> Derived from the Strategic Positioning Report, *The University of Minnesota: Advancing the Public Good*, 2005.

- Leadership

### **Communications**

- Communications organization, vehicles, resources
  - Consistent themes and messages
  - Audience and results driven
  - Tiered, two-way: Listening, discourse
  - Training
- Identity and reputation management
  - Marketing and branding

### **Change Management**

- Goals and tracking progress
  - Metrics and measurement
- Systems that institutionalize change and foster continuous improvement
  - Systemic tools and techniques

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the Culture Task Force was to define culture in the context of strategic positioning and to identify effective ways to communicate and facilitate adoption of that culture throughout the University. With the publication of this summary, this work has been communicated to the executive leadership of the University.

As is expected, there is much more work to be done with respect to the University's culture. It is hoped that the findings of the Culture Task Force will serve to inform the ongoing process.

## **Addendum**

Following completion of the core charge, the Culture Task Force offered this plan as a way to implement and affect culture change.

### I. Communication

- Multimedia marketing campaign: Continue to roll out Driven to Discover initiative internally and support its adoption by campuses, colleges, departments, centers and units.
- Administrative transformation: Support implementation of Administrative Structure Task Force recommendations to build a better model for the delivery of communication services to achieve maximum effectiveness, efficiency and results.
- Strategic positioning communications: Continue to highlight examples that demonstrate what world-class education, research and public service look like, and celebrate the people who make them happen.
- Internal communications: Complete the internal communications audit and make recommendations for enhancements that better reflect the culture of a top three university.
- Develop communication plan.
  - Incorporate recommendations into work plans.
  - Communicate task force results with focus group and interview participants.
  - Communicate cultural values and principles to University community.
  - Communicate senior leader priorities.

### II. Alignment with Human Resources Policies and Practices

- Communicate recommendations with Office of Human Resources.
  - Incorporate recommendations into work plans.
  - Develop communications strategies that recognize and reward the values and behaviors of the desired culture.

### III. Measurement

- Develop appropriate measures and processes to gauge culture change.
  - Use the 2006 Pulse survey results and external market research survey results as baseline measurements.
- Establish annual review process.
  - Identify a demonstrated increase in ownership and recognition of desired culture, based on internal and external market research, including Pulse Survey.

- Progress toward desired culture reflects and indicates progress toward the University's goal and is captured in the measures and metrics that track progress to the top three goal.

#### IV. Other unit-specific culture change initiatives.

- Designate leadership as necessary.