

Student Policies Committee  
Final Report

*Enhancing the Academic Quality and Stature of Southern Methodist University:  
Analyses and Opportunities*

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## **1. Defining Academic Quality at SMU**

When it comes to defining academic quality there are two quite relevant concepts that must be included in the discussion. Number one - the value of quality must invariably supersede the value of quantity. As a number of people have argued, in some cases (e.g. Biology) quality is inseparable from quantity. We just don't have the people for the kind of program we aspire to have. Number two - the value of life and citizenship knowledge must weigh heavily in the quantification of the overall academic value provided by an institution.

The Student Policies Committee would like to pose the following pertinent question: Have we spent more on physical capital than human capital?

In principal we agree with the list of "core commitments."

Ostensibly the financial benefits reaped from the OE2C are intended to not only maintain but also improve the stature of SMU faculty. We question the recent practice of switching out a percentage of merit increases to one-time bonuses. Many faculty have seen 3% merit increases pared down to 2% merit increases combined with a 1% bonus. We do not believe that this is an effective way to reward and/or retain the highest level of faculty.

We question whether the document demonstrates a real commitment to enhancing graduate education. A commitment to graduate education means first of all providing adequate stipends for an adequate number of Ph.D. and M.F.A. students and the research space they would need. In addition, graduate education requires a first-class library, which we do not currently have. An assessment of the state of our current graduate programs could at least be a start in a positive direction moving forward. What data do we have on the history and effectiveness of graduate education at SMU? Where are we strong, weak, developing, etc? Which schools truly thrive with a strong graduate program and which schools have no real need for graduate students? Since SMU advertises a low student to teacher ratio (with the students being taught by world-class faculty), how does the nominal concept of graduate student instructors fit into this scenario?

We respect the concept of the Residential Commons model but after meeting with the FiRs this past month and hearing some surprising disgruntlement, we believe there is work to be done to improve the current model. Where does the Residential Commons model currently stand with regard to the RC 2020 document? Maybe it is time for a dedicated Director of Residential Commons Life who oversees both student and Faculty-in-Residence activities.

## **2. Analyzing SMU's Academic Stature Relative to Other Universities**

Our committee found it challenging in our attempts at parsing out the myriad defined values presented in the Relative Stature charts! Our takeaway from this data is it supports the belief that improving overall visibility (via increasingly innovative and aggressive marketing strategies) may be our best and most economical approach in raising our stature (or more aptly, perception of stature) compared to our aspirant universities. The dissemination of digital information is easier and more fluid than ever. Key factors are 1) consistency and credibility of branding (not sure World Changers Shaped Here is the most catchy and/or believable slogan), 2) multi-platform digital saturation (which demographic constituencies are using what formats when it comes to social media and news sources? Facebook, Instagram, digital newspapers, digital Washington Post, NY Times, etc.), and 3) how do we shift the stereotypic perception, commonly held by national high school seniors via social media, that SMU is a school of wealthy, Caucasian, fraternity and sorority legacy kids, who perennially hit the bars by Thursday night, to the more marketable (higher stature) image of a diverse group of tolerant centrist innovators and entrepreneurs, passionately collaborating to change the world for the better. Maybe the new slogan should be something along the lines of "SMU-Better Yourself: Change the World"?

It is imperative that external perceptions of SMU be driven by factual evidence of improvement and not simply by PR spin. Increase faculty support, improve libraries, research space and research support and the ensuing Scholarly Research report will state these improvements as proof of positive change. Relative perception of stature will follow suit.

## **3. Opportunities for Strengthening SMU's Academic Quality and Stature**

The Northeastern University example provides a clear and strategic model for success. One key phrase however is "significant financial investments." In what are WE investing? Are the powers that be here at SMU truly following the Northeastern model? Our committee is not convinced. When we see two multi-million dollar sports facilities constructed within the past two years (aquatics and tennis) concurrent with reduced staffing and an ostensible bonus for merit "switch out" system as our current reward structure for retaining top faculty, we must honestly question our current model for strengthening SMU's Academic Quality and Stature. A major point that is left out of the *Quality* report with regards to the success of

Northeastern is that the true novelty of the Northeastern model is its “co-operative” design. Students alternate between classes and professional experience throughout their college tenure thereby gaining footholds in the proverbial “professional door” prior to graduation. THIS is the progressive and innovative model that truly separates Northeastern from its peers and yet this fact is not highlighted in the *Quality* report.

### **Opportunity 1: Strengthening SMU’s Scholarly Research and Creative Impact**

There are many solid ideas in this section. This is where the money should be going. Rewards for **bold interdisciplinary ideas** and collaboration and **increased financial support for faculty and graduate research** are proven methods of increasing national visibility and strengthening academic quality and stature.

We do, however, question the exclusive emphasis upon technology and data—and on the promotion of science and technology, and on the quantifiable, **even within the arts and humanities**. The two “bold” ideas articulated in this section are 1) Data Science and Analytics and 2) Creative and Interactive Technology. We regret that boldness here is equated with the sheen and polish of the latest device created in Cupertino, or rolled off the assembly line of an Apple factory. What about ideas that are smaller and (more importantly) *not* data- or technology-driven—and therefore, much less expensive to implement, but still *bold*? These, too, have the potential to enhance our stature.

For example, SMU could fund one or more important yearly symposia in the human sciences similar to the Feminist Theory Workshop at Duke University. This two-day event brings scholars and students of gender issues from all over the U.S. (and beyond) to Duke’s campus each spring for a series of talks by top and rising scholars, plus panel discussions and break-out sessions. (See <https://gendersexualityfeminist.duke.edu/conferences>.) Could SMU establish a Critical Race Studies Workshop (to suggest just one vital interdisciplinary topic) that would advance important thinking about one of the most significant topics of our region, our society, and the larger world?

Another model, combining elements of a high-level academic conference with a public humanities project (which guests pay to attend), is the week-long “Dickens Universe” that convenes every summer at UC Santa Cruz. It began life as a multi-unit research project in the UC system but has grown over 40 years to attract an international audience of scholars and a (mostly west-coast) following of ordinary folks, many of whom attend year after year, plus some outreach into L.A. high schools with low-income student populations. (See <https://dickens.ucsc.edu/universe/>.) An annual summer arts and/or humanities event sponsored by SMU would presumably work better on the Taos campus, where the weather would be an inducement rather than a disincentive. Could the

*Southwest Review* provide an intellectual/creative foothold and inspiration for such a yearly immersion project, perhaps building on summer programs already extant?

We suggest these examples less as working models to be copied or (better) adapted to our purposes (though why not?) than as a reminder that if the liberal arts really are, as we say, the heart of the university, we must invest in them—and do so in ways that celebrate their appeal to the imagination, heart, and mind together. Among the many benefits would be bringing people from other campuses to ours, putting us on their mental maps.

## **Opportunity 2: Strengthening Faculty Excellence at SMU**

“Knowledge Integration Fellows”, “Target of Excellence” recruiting initiatives, and “faculty cluster” initiatives are all excellent ideas. These, along with school/division awards, elevated titles and responsibilities, and monetary incentives are likely high yield strategies for strengthening faculty excellence.

On-site childcare will be a major and welcomed asset when it becomes a reality.

## **Opportunity 3: Enhancing the Quality of SMU’s Students and Their Educational Experience**

### **Undergraduate Student Academic Quality**

Two things: 1) Spend the financial aid money to increase ACT scores until there is an obvious loss on investment. 2) Continue to refine and improve the Residential Commons experience for both students and FiRs. It is imperative that FiRs and students are both satisfied with the experience. When all is well the students will positively advertise their happiness via social media and the FiRs will continue to re-enlist thereby vesting the program with the stable image of the helpful, wise, and caring parent-on-site figure, living down the hall.

We would also like to see a return to having a number of residence halls built around shared academic interests: that is, let those students who make academic life central to their time at SMU live with other such students. These should not be honors *exclusive* dorms but residences of choice. We sense that we have begun to lose too many students because they do not find an adequate academic/intellectual community. Unfortunately, the university does not know why students leave, which is a big problem.

### **Graduate Student Academic Quality**

Creating the positions of Director of Graduate Recruitment, Director of Career and Professional Development, and Graduate Student Life Coordinator are highly important if SMU wants to seriously reinvigorate graduate student life on campus. Again, the importance of having a very good research library and more substantial

graduate stipends must be emphasized as an effective strategy for improving graduate student academic quality.

SMU finds itself at a major crossroads and the committee believes we are at a point of equal parts potential and equal parts liability. If we simply go about business as usual with regards to graduate education then we can forget about increasing our national stature. Given our current model of having no medical school, no centralized school of graduate education, no graduate housing, and deficient monetary compensation for graduate health insurance, we find ourselves standing on the precipice of mediocrity while simultaneously looking out over a metaphorical valley of abundance.

#### **Opportunity 4: Deepening Partnerships with Regional, National, or International Institutions**

##### **Leveraging SMU's Academic Vitality and Link With the North Texas Region to Serve the Community: The "SMU Compact"**

We feel that it is time to fully invest in the proposed "**innovation and entrepreneurship district**" on east campus. A primary component of this district could be a graduate school of collaboration, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Core subject classes could still be held at their respective schools on the main campus but an entirely new and cutting edge graduate curriculum could be created through educational and professional partnerships with the region's most successful businesses. The "Co-op" model that is the basis for Northeastern's evident success could be implemented here at the graduate level. As Stanford was the incubator for Silicon Valley, it is clearly plausible that SMU could be the incubator for the next great step in the digital/communications/data evolution, particularly given the fact that the Maneframe II is just across the highway. Many birds could be taken down with this one far-reaching stone!