MEMORANDUM
Academic Council
Fairfield University

TO: President Jeffrey von Arx, S.J., President
Kevin Lawlor, Executive Vice President

FROM: Academic Council

DATE: December 18, 2013

RE: Response to your presentation to AC on 12/2/2013

Thank you for your presentation to the Academic Council “Fairfield 2020, Building a Sustainable Future, Strategic Plan Refresh” on December 2, 2013. The faculty appreciate very much that we are moving forward on a strategic planning process, and appreciate the administration’s acknowledgement of the faculty’s important role in strategic planning by bringing an outline of the process to the Council. As you know, last spring, at a meeting on April 29, the Council passed the motion below calling for a strategic vision. It is in this context that we acknowledge with deep appreciation the first steps in the new strategic planning process and provide you with this formal response from the Academic Council, the executive arm of the General Faculty.

MOTION [AC 4/29/2013]; The faculty call on the President to join with the Fairfield University community in the development of a written, formal, and comprehensive strategic plan reflecting both a five year and ten year vision for the institution. The document thus generated will reflect professionally accepted format and content guidelines for institutions of higher education. The document will also incorporate best practices assessment mechanisms across all levels and all divisions of the University. It is thus understood that all of the content of this document will span all divisions, without exception, across the institution.

To be clear, the Council’s 4/29 motion came out of the faculty’s understanding and acknowledgement of the real challenges facing higher education today. This motion was our collective call, with an appropriate sense of urgency, for data-based, comprehensive planning for Fairfield’s future. Now that the process has begun (and in our view there is no need to describe it as a “refresh”), the Council would like to take the opportunity to articulate further the faculty’s position. Faculty want our strategic planning process to be comprehensive, constructive and aspirational. Faculty are here for the long haul. For many of us, Fairfield is a much stronger University now than when we started and the faculty’s role in this drive toward excellence cannot be underestimated. We don’t want a strategic planning process that leads merely to a “sustainable” Fairfield. Faculty are ready and willing to work on a strategic planning process that will continue
our pursuit of excellence by articulating our vision – based on our mission, our values, our strengths, and our aspirations for the University as a whole – and then to determine strategies around that unifying vision with appropriate resource allocation, detailed timeframes, measurable outcomes, and ongoing review and revision.

The outline presented to the Council was brief and, to our understanding, you welcome input and feedback. The Council is providing specific feedback on two of the central pillars: the Steering Committee (page 8) and the Potential List of Teams (page 9).

The composition of the Steering Committee is a concern to the Academic Council. It is critical that the all members of the University community contribute to the process, but as an institution of higher learning, it is essential that the faculty embrace and own the process in a deep and meaningful way. The faculty understand the mission of the University and see it in action every day - in our classrooms, in our research and in our day-to-day interactions with students. Faculty are, in a very real sense, the front line and the most consistent members of the University community in carrying out our mission. Faculty expertise touches on every aspect of the mission. The Steering Committee will not have the legitimacy it needs unless there is broad and deep faculty representation on the Steering Committee. The Council proposes a composition as follows: 4 senior administrators, at least 2 of whom are academic Deans (and one of these four to Chair the Steering Committee), 7 faculty members broadly representing schools and disciplines, 1 student and 1 alumnus. In order for the faculty to be legitimately represented, the Council should elect their representatives.”

Clearly, it is the Steering Committee that will be responsible for articulating the comprehensive vision for the strategic planning process. Any strategic planning process begins with this most important task. This constructive over-arching vision must be developed with very broad input and with transparency, and be the first order of business for the Steering Committee. The Council would elaborate on bullet 2 on page 8 (Establish guiding principles and key themes) to more clearly state the need for the Steering Committee to articulate the unifying vision and goals that will guide us all constructively to Fairfield's better future. In our judgment, the initial tone of this initiative has been unduly apocalyptic. While acknowledging the serious challenges that higher education faces in the years to come, we believe that the strategic planning process can succeed only if this constructive vision is the aim of our energies. Ultimately, we expect the Steering Committee to be responsible for shaping the process, framing the Task Forces, defining the timeframe, assessing outcomes, and overseeing implementation, supervising, monitoring and broadly reporting on progress and setbacks.

As you indicated in your presentation, the “Potential List of Teams” on page 9 is the beginning of a brainstorming process to begin moving the strategic planning process forward. As noted, it is crucial that a rigorously selected Steering Committee have a free hand in defining and appointing Task Forces to study and report on the matters placed under their purview, based on the constructive and unifying mission-based vision.
In our judgment, the list of potential Task Force topics on page 9 is a good starting point for more discussion and brainstorming. As you know, some faculty members are concerned that the strategic planning process appears to focus primarily on academics, although this may be a misunderstanding based on differences in how certain words and phrases are used in higher education versus business. For example, “portfolio review”, “cost competitiveness” and “student competencies” can mean many different things to different people. This further underscores the faculty’s insistence that the Steering Committee define appropriate Task Forces, once a constructive, unifying, mission-based goal is in place. Ideally, the Steering Committee should define middle-level objectives to organize the process – objectives that would lead to our aspirational future and be based on the mission-based vision. For example, a middle-level objective on “men and women for others” could be supported by Task Forces that include one on service learning.

What is most important to the faculty as we undertake this process is that all divisions of the University – athletics, advancement, student affairs, marketing and communication, finance, human resources, etc., be subjected to outcome-based metrics to assess their organization and functioning. Over the last few years, in the face of budgetary shortfalls, severe cuts have been imposed on the academic division. The academic division, by all available metrics, consistently performs very well in terms of providing the value that generates our actual revenue. Faculty, as we are sure you know, are deeply concerned with what appears to be a long-term, demonstrable shift of resources away from academics to non-academic expenditures. The constructive unifying visions, the middle-level objectives, and the ground-level Task Forces must study all aspects of the University in the context of our core academic mission.

The Council is excited about moving forward with a new strategic planning process. We hope you have come to realize in your time at Fairfield that the faculty are deeply invested in our University. The faculty fully embrace our mission and values, and are fully cognizant of the changing landscape and challenges facing higher education now and into the future. Many of us have devoted our working lives to Fairfield, and we know more than most the importance and the value of Fairfield University. We believe wholeheartedly in Fairfield, and its Jesuit and Catholic mission. We want a strategic planning process that leads not just to a sustainable future, but to a vibrant, stronger, better, sustainable future.