

Viewpoints

Weber State University positioned to meet the needs of its students

Top of Utah Voices



Michael Vaughan

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Commentary

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personalized attention. Small classes and personalized attention are more frequently associated with small liberal arts colleges than large, state universities.

Nonetheless, WSU has successfully blended the elements of a large university and a small college for much of its history. Weber's ability to do so is generally accepted and perhaps taken for granted. In fact, this accomplishment is quite remarkable.

The extraordinary nature of the WSU undergraduate experience was reinforced for me several years ago at a national conference sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. On the last day of the conference, the participants were matched with other participants

from what were intended to be peer institutions. Participants were then asked to share effective practices with their peers, and peers were invited to offer comments and suggestions.

During this exercise, Weber State University was paired with Vassar College. It was both helpful and productive to discuss undergraduate education with our colleagues from Vassar College. The faculty from Vassar were insightful, articulate and unfailingly gracious. It was also apparent that there were many similarities between the educational experiences that WSU and Vassar were seeking to create for undergraduate students.

Yet, despite our common desires, Vassar and WSU are very different institutions. Vassar only enrolls 670 incoming students each year. These students are carefully screened and fewer than a third of those who apply are accepted for admission. The students who are accepted for admission into Vassar will pay an annual tuition of \$35,520. In contrast, WSU enrolls more than 2,000 new students each year who pay an annual tuition of \$2,988. The task of engaging students is easier on a small campus with abundant resources. Creating an excellent educational experience in the type of environment found at Vassar is far less daunting than the task WSU has undertaken. Yet, WSU

excels at its mission.

Yesterday, classes began at WSU, and more than 2,000 new, first-year students began their college education. These students have a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. A large number are recent high school graduates. Some are entering college after interrupting their studies for a decade or longer. Many are the first in their family to attend college.

At WSU, all these students will find small classes and an educational experience that compare favorably with the best colleges and universities in the nation. WSU is a large university, and enrollment projections from the Board of Regents indicate the school will become even larger, growing to an enrollment of 26,000 students by the year 2030.

In the coming years, the challenge for WSU will be to serve the needs of these additional students without sacrificing the university's reputation for small class sizes and personalized educational experiences.

WSU has embarked upon an ambitious planning effort to ensure that over the next two decades it will continue to offer the variety, energy and innovation of a large university and the personalized attention of a small college. The history of WSU suggests it is likely to achieve this laudable goal.

In July, The New York Times educational supplement printed a list of the largest colleges and universities in the country, based upon undergraduate student enrollment. Weber State University was listed among the largest schools in the nation, with an undergraduate enrollment of more than 18,000 students.

WSU wasn't at the very top of the list. The top places were occupied by schools like Miami-Dade Community College, Ohio State University and the Arizona State University system. Nonetheless, WSU held a prominent place among the largest universities. In terms of undergraduate enrollment, The New York Times ranking placed WSU ahead of many respected universities including: George Mason University, Kent State, the University of Nebraska, Ohio University, the University of Pittsburgh and the University of North Carolina.

According to the Department of Education, there are more than 6,000 colleges and universities in the United States. WSU's undergraduate enrollment places it among the top 2 percent of all colleges and universities.

The New York Times list also contained several statistics about the colleges and universities listed, and the schools could be ranked on these

various statistical measures. One of the statistics related to class size. Small classes are frequently equated with individualized instruction and educational quality.

In The New York Times article, WSU was ranked ninth in the nation based upon the proportion of classes with fewer than 20 students. At WSU, half of all classes have enrollments of 20 or fewer students.

The ranking in The New York Times supplement provides a glimpse into a fundamental conundrum: WSU is a large, comprehensive university which serves thousands of students with highly varied backgrounds and desires. Yet, even though WSU serves thousands of students, the most important element of its mission is providing all students an excellent educational experience based upon