

Auburn University  
Auburn, AL

**Auburn University's "Agenda"**

January 7, 2002

William A. Weary, Ph.D.  
Fieldstone Consulting, Inc.  
Washington, D.C.

## Table of Contents

Introduction and methodology	3
Summary statement	4
Auburn University's "agenda"	7
1. Assess the quality of "customer service" and ensure that it matches need	7
2. Plan for necessary renovations of facilities and additions to them	8
3. Fund the University in the manner required to advance its excellence	10
4. Focus and develop the University's advancement functions	14
5. Identify and begin implementation of a shared academic vision	16
6. Create an administration capable of working with the board and constituents to catch the University up and prepare for its advance	20
7. Build a board of trustees and an entire governance structure appropriate to the needs of Auburn University in the 21st century	25
8. As a whole institution, prepare and adopt a strategic plan that advances a shared vision and implements Auburn's mission	37
Conclusion	38
Summary agenda and specific tasks	39
Summary agenda	43

## **Introduction and methodology**

The assignment from which this report derives began with an AGB-sponsored presentation to the Auburn University board and community, July 23, 2001, on approaches to presidential search. At that time, University leaders asked that this consultant come to know Auburn better through a series of interviews, and, at the board's meeting of August 31, a preliminary report was delivered. That report suggested that the year 2001-02 would be better spent identifying the work now to be done within the University than in searching for a new president. Members of the board agreed and asked that this consultant prepare a draft of Auburn's "agenda" -- that list of a half-dozen or so tasks the University needs to complete within the next three-to-five years. A summary of this report was delivered orally at the meeting of the board of trustees, November 16, 2001.

The following "agenda" springs from interviews with over 160 individuals, sometimes more than once. Conducted July 31 through August 4, October 11-12 (by telephone), and October 16 through 19, 2001, the interviews were arranged by John Heilman, assistant to the president, with assistance from other senior administrators. Included among those interviewed were members of the board of trustees, president, provost, executive vice president, vice presidents, secretary to the board of trustees, athletic director, information technology leaders, assistant to the president, legislative director, facilities coordinator, deans, administrative codirector of the SACS reaccreditation steering committee, faculty leaders (current Senate, former Senates, AAUP, Peaks of Excellence, and Reorganization Committee), two groups who responded to a general invitation to faculty and staff to meet with me, leaders of the Administrative and Professional Council and the Staff Council, undergraduate and graduate student leaders (Auburn and AUM), members of the Joint Assessment Committee, alumni and development office leadership and staff, University relations leadership and staff, athletic department leadership, AUM administration and faculty leaders, Foundation president, and Alumni Association President and board members. There also was a three-hour walking tour of the campus and its facilities. Many thanks are due to all of these individuals -- and many more -- who graciously worked to help me understand Auburn and its future. Of course, the opinions expressed are my own. They also are meant to open and not end discussion.

It is hoped that this report may further University-wide conversation and consensus-building about the work that Auburn must do. Envisioned is board appointment of a multi-constituent task force -- chaired by a trustee and including one or more other trustees as well -- charged with bringing back recommendations on Auburn's "agenda" in the spring of 2002. According to this scenario, the task force sponsors a series of constituent workshops that analyze the University today and identify the tasks to be performed. The output of those workshops provides the basis for the task force's recommended "agenda." That agenda, as adopted by the board, leads to a series of board-led projects, and those projects open the way into the next strategic plan.

This moment is in many ways charmed: During the course of the months I've watched Auburn, I've had the impression of a descent, a plateau, and, now, the beginning of

a rise. Much powerful work already has begun. Indeed, the areas that have jumped out at me increasingly are subjects of discussion throughout the administration and beyond.

This report attempts to capture the University's current situation and needs. Following a brief summary, it identifies eight major tasks on which I believe the University must focus in the years to come. My expectation is that the completion of these tasks will inaugurate the greatness foreseen as the University became "Auburn" 42 years ago.

### **Summary statement**

The complex history of Auburn University's last decade or so best can be understood as an erosion, deterioration, and even failure of "the commons." "The commons" consist of the shared culture, history, values, and community of an institution. When healthy, "the commons" draw the institution together and give it identity, purpose, and strength. From a more pragmatic perspective, healthy "commons" allow the institution, as a unit, to:

- Build consensus around desired mission.
- Set a shared vision.
- Set priorities that implement the mission and reach the vision.
- Make sound and timely decisions and bring closure.
- Set and maintain standards.
- Ensure justice and equity.
- Coordinate the work of the institution's units, with respect to each other, and in the context of the institution's broader agenda.
- Maintain continuity in institutional values.
- Communicate ideals and progress in realizing them.
- Hold itself publicly accountable.
- Support and provide meaning to constituents.
- Create unity and harmony, satisfaction, pride, and even joy.
- Learn as an institution and apply the lessons learned.

- Define the “reality” within which the institution does and must work.
- Assume leadership positions within the community.
- Fund itself adequately.

With sound “commons,” an institution displays vitality, confidence, and direction.

In the absence of healthy “commons,” an institution experiences a range of predictable behaviors, largely within its various “units”:

- Isolation and autonomy, as if no one else existed, within or around the institution.
- An entrepreneurial and empire-building spirit.
- A strong sense of turf.
- Holding others responsible for one’s own condition.
- Competition.
- Frequent eruptions of warfare.
- End-runs.
- Coalition-building.
- Appeals to “the top” for friendly decisions.
- A steady pulse of demands “to get together and talk it out.”

In such an environment, success and/or virtue tend to be defined in various measures and combinations of:

- Survival.
- Leaving others alone to do what *they* were meant to do, so each unit can do as *it* was intended to do.
- Insistence on the status quo (inactivity).
- A spoken desire to revert to an earlier and happier era.
- Warmth, accessibility, and collegiality.

- Consultation with anyone having any impact on one's business: "We want to work with everyone to solve this problem."

Even in the presence of a stable working environment, a "crisis of the commons" prevents the institution from doing its work. Normally, of course, such stability is absent, and flux in the environment only exacerbates the crisis. Of course, in the absence of a "crisis of the commons," flux in the environment is sufficient to create one. Examples of shifts in the working environment usually include the competition, market and constituent expectations, funding, governmental regulations, politics, best practice, greater knowledge, and technology. Within the institution, changes also can occur, as facilities age, clientele shift, age groups alter in mix, and attempts at correction fail.

In such situations, the results unfortunately tend to resemble each other. The institution has difficulty coping with reality or itself, with lifting itself out of what can feel like a prison. What once worked no longer does, and the harder people try, the more frustrated they become. Individuals -- and groups within the institution -- become increasingly devoid of hope, express their despair, vent their anger, and/or withdraw and retreat. As internal and external change continues to occur and as the institution becomes ever less capable of responding, the despair and the rage mount more. And as individuals and groups prove ever less successful in obtaining satisfactory responses, their contempt for "the commons" grows yet further, and yet further diminishes any potential "the commons" still may have to effect change.

How, at Auburn, did "the commons" come to decline and, in some ways, even to die? The reasons are, as one would expect in as old and large an institution as Auburn, multiple, complex, and interacting. Among them are:

- Long and traditional dispute in a 150-year-old institution that was founded in conflict, that has been threatened with extinction more than once, and that has experienced multiple names and missions. Given Auburn's current stature, it can be hard to remember that, as "Auburn University," it has existed for less than one-third of its history.
- A State environment increasingly hostile to public higher education.
- Relative "newness" as a university that grants doctorates and conducts research, offers both sound liberal arts education and an overall balanced program, raises substantial funds, communicates effectively within itself and with the outside world, and upholds principles of sound governance.
- Frequent isolation from "best practice."
- Denial: "Write down no policies. We'll only have to change them."
- Outside interference in the life of the University. See AGB's 2001 policy statement, *Governing in the Public Trust: External Influences on Colleges and Universities*.

- Inadequate funding, made yet more inadequate in the face of growing enrollment, increasing institutional complexity, and greater demands from the outside world.
- A long-mounting feeling that “real” life takes place within the University’s various units, and, therefore, that “the commons” are to be distrusted. Accordingly, “the commons” have received less attention and also had less “exercise.”
- Constituents who are deeply committed to the University and their role in it, both personally, in their own lives and histories, and professionally, as the home in which they pursue and develop their careers.

Auburn’s institutional capacity currently cannot meet the demands upon it. In briefest terms, the work of the next several years is to restore “the commons” and increase Auburn’s institutional capacity. The following eight tasks -- subject to continuing modification, elaboration, and development during the course of this year -- are designed to meet the challenge.

This report is one of hope. The agenda I present is what I see Auburn now beginning to address. “The commons” and institutional capacity already have begun to grow. As the tasks become known and widely accepted, the real work can begin.

### **Auburn University’s agenda**

#### ***1. Assess the quality of “customer service” and ensure that it matches need.***

Four components figure within this overall task:

1. Identifying the customers.
2. Determining customers’ needs.
3. Assessing how well those needs are being met.
4. Planning to address those needs.

In the course of my interviews with over 160 people, reference to “customers” and their “satisfaction” was rare.

Customers, of course, include the students, both undergraduate and graduate, and not only at Auburn, but also at AUM. They also include those working with the University in

agriculture and extension services, those holding contracts with the University, and those making grants to it. Yet another group of customers consists of the internal units (schools and colleges, departments, and activities, etc.) that contribute to the University's overhead. The definition can be pressed further, into Peter Drucker's rule for identifying stakeholders: "Anyone who can say no."

After preparation of a complete customer list, questions quickly emerge about what these customers want and need, what they "get" from Auburn, and how the University can serve them better. "Service" only has meaning in such context and such knowledge.

Assessing student satisfaction may be the easiest of the tasks. Among the areas to be addressed are:

- a. Academic advising.
- b. Class size and personal attention.
- c. Research facilities.
- d. Dining.
- e. Sports and athletics.
- f. Extracurricular activities.
- g. Student Government Association.
- h. Health services.
- i. Library services.
- j. Personal counseling.
- k. Career counseling.
- l. Registration and records.
- m. Financial aid.
- n. Residence halls.
- o. Technology and access to it.
- p. Overall quality of social life.
- q. Greeks.
- r. Orientation.
- s. Retention and graduation.
- t. Admission

Consistent with lack of references to "customers," there is no committee of the board devoted to student affairs and staffed by the vice president for student affairs. What other committees might serve here as well?

## **2. *Plan for necessary renovations of facilities and additions to them.***

Auburn has experienced great improvements in its plant over the course of the last decade. After a decade of new construction in the 1980s (almost \$200 million worth),

Auburn turned to renovation in the 1990s. Whereas, 10 years ago, Auburn spent some \$700,000 a year on deferred maintenance, it today invests \$7 million (close to its goal of \$10 million), has an established plant reserve fund, and has halved its allocation of overall tuition revenues to debt service. Building after building shows the results of renovation (\$160 million since 1990), increased maintenance, greater energy conservation, and greater cleanliness. Evidence of landscaping also has begun to appear. Today, it is possible to take new pride in the University's look. Moreover, work is well advanced on the University's first master campus plan since early in the last century and on a thorough assessment of overall needs in deferred maintenance.

An active board property and facilities committee has been well engaged in all this work. Among students of governance, it is a commonplace that the board's support is essential if its university is to have proper facilities. Without the board's commitment, funding tends to go elsewhere.

Yet great work at Auburn remains to be done:

1. The campus varies significantly from one building to another. Hargis Hall is a model of the "tone" one could expect to find throughout the University, as are parts of the Lowder Business School, the new basketball quarters of the Coliseum, and the Alumni and Development Building (note that, unlike Samford Hall, with its curious, dark, enclosed, stark, and empty central heart, the Alumni and Development Building has a gracious, warm, open, well lighted, and welcoming central atrium). On the other hand, it's hard to imagine another university in the country with facilities as embarrassing as Biggin Hall or Langdon Hall, or as depressing as the lecture halls in the old math and physics building. Some laboratories look like what were antiques in the 1960s. Too often, elsewhere on campus, the effect is of long, sterile hallways and barren classrooms. In wandering through these halls with the University out of session, one never would guess at the warmth of Auburn's students, professors, and staff.
2. Few areas of the campus provide vistas that tie it together and create a sense of unity of the kind so evident at a Virginia Tech. At Auburn, pieces too often appear discrete, complete unto themselves, as if no one lived or worked next door, much less belonged to the same University.
3. Much of the renovation already accomplished has been cosmetic, leaving the old infrastructure in place, to be dealt with later. On buildings yet to be renovated, perhaps half the cost will be infrastructure.
4. Beyond the demands for renovation and ongoing maintenance are the needs for new and more appropriate facilities. With residence halls accommodating only 3,200 students, and sororities housed only in those residence halls, many freshmen (3,700, total) must live off campus. Bonding, community, and retention all suffer; Auburn cannot be the Auburn it long has aspired to be. In

terms of simple instruction, the instructors who teach English in the core share office space (two or three instructors in each office) and telephones (one telephone to every six instructors). Instructional laboratories are cramped, outdated, and insufficient. For research to thrive, it, too, needs the right facilities, as every growing research university in the country now can attest. The list goes on, and includes full development of the athletic facilities that allow that department to continue its rise to top-level prominence and competitiveness.

5. A full and shared walking tour of the campus for all members of the board and senior administration only will increase joint resolve to address these issues.

Overall, then, the goals include:

1. Completion of the master campus plan (the University's first in almost a century), and assessment of the costs of completing it (\$150 million?).
2. Final determination of overall deferred maintenance and renovation needs -- now estimated at \$200-to-\$400 million -- and identification of priorities and sequences for addressing them.
3. A rebuilt and refocused University facilities staff.
4. Wide University-consciousness of the work to be done.
5. A plan that indicates how to implement the overall facilities agenda.

**3. *Fund the University in the manner required to advance its excellence.***

Auburn is starved for resources. By all objective measures, it is understaffed, underpaid, and undermaintained. For some years now, Auburn has, with exceptions, been burning out faculty, staff, and facilities. Catching up only can occur with difficulty; necessary advance will require new approaches. During a decade of multiple cuts and reallocations, inaugurated with severe cutbacks in State appropriations, Auburn has struggled as it has tried to implement its mission.

Some examples may help to describe the situation.

1. Deans, asked what they need in their budgets if they were to offer truly competitive programs within their colleges and schools, estimated increases of 50% to 100% and more.

2. Faculty salaries can run \$10,000 below averages of regional peers. Some schools' medians stand at 80% of the region's.
3. In financial aid awarded to undergraduates, Auburn ranks 17 out of 18 regional peers, or \$2.65 million -- versus a UNC at \$12 million, a Florida State at \$13.7 million and a University of Florida at \$16.1 million. In percentage of full-time first-time freshmen receiving aid from institutional grants, Auburn comes in 14 out of 18, or 19% -- as opposed to UNC's 53%, for instance, or the University of West Alabama at 41%.
4. Appropriate development of University-wide technology alone could lift tuition 50%.
5. Estimates of deferred maintenance range between \$200 and \$400 million, and new construction easily could reach \$150 million.
6. As a percentage of overall revenue, State appropriations fell from 44.1% in 1991-92 to 36.1% in 1999-00.
7. On the State funding formula, Auburn has slipped over the last decade from 80% of the formula to 53%, thereby now receiving about half the appropriations the formula intended.
8. As a percentage of total revenues, tuition and fees risen from 15.1% to 26.6% over the decade.
9. An endowment of some \$250 million is inadequate to make a significant impact in meeting the University's many needs.

Auburn's current situation has not arisen without significant efforts to bolster its fiscal health. Auburn has put up a good fight. Among the measures taken have been:

1. Reallocation of 5% of budgets in 1992 to balance operational shortfall and historically underbudgeted areas.
2. Formation of the budget advisory committee in 1992.
3. Movement of tuition closer to the regional peer average.
4. Restriction of long-term debt and a moratorium on long-term borrowing.
5. Implementation for fiscal 1995-96 of a one-time retirement incentive to address a 7% reduction in State appropriations, thereby reducing salary expenses by \$16 million.
6. Creation of a reserve fund against future prorations.

7. Development and approval of the 21st Century Commission Report, and implementation of the recommendations of the board's Role Committee, which allowed for improved compensation, the Peaks of Excellence, and better plant maintenance.
8. A successful capital campaign. It exceeded its \$175 million goal by \$26 million.
9. Preparation within the last year of an initial campus-wide "needs assessment" (it comes to \$475 million).

In many of these efforts, as with the plant, responsibility for initiating such success as has come can be traced to members of Auburn's board of trustees. The University's offices of finance also have displayed exceptional energy, dedication, and expertise. Recent awarding of a Aa(3) bond rating bears witness to such management.

The work required now to correct Auburn's funding and allow it to advance includes:

1. Final determination of overall costs required for Auburn to implement its mission and move toward its vision. Expenses include academic, extracurricular, and administrative programs; research; outreach and extension; athletics; plant and facilities; technology; compensation; appropriate levels of staffing; and financial aid. Such costs can be determined through comparisons with regional and national peers and through further work on the campus-wide needs assessment. AUM must be included.
2. Examination of current sources of income and the ways they can -- or cannot -- be increased to reach the needed goals. Included in the review must be:
  - i. State appropriations per student, currently almost 30% below the average of regional peers, with State appropriations per student about half that of aspirational peers, and, overall, half those specified by Alabama's own funding formula.
  - ii. Tuition, now running a good 10% below the regional median and well below aspirational peers like Virginia Tech. Clemson recently increased its tuition 40%. One expert noted that additional funding at Auburn equal to doubled tuitions could be spent well.
  - iii. Recommended numbers of students, undergraduate and graduate, resident and nonresident, and by college and school.
  - iv. Annual fundraising, bringing in perhaps half its potential of about \$100 million.
  - v. Contracts and grants.

- vi. Endowment.
  - vii. A capital campaign.
3. Review of current programs and operations, with an eye to successful reallocation and to greater efficiency and effectiveness, including:
- i. Restructuring based more on program review than on across-the-board cuts, which starve all equally. The work of Robert C. Dickeson, *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services: Reallocating Resources to Achieve Strategic Balance*, Jossey-Bass, 1999) may prove of value.
  - ii. Consideration of new models of budgeting that might a) respond better to shifting program enrollments and needs, b) assist those units that, to advance, require investment, yet cannot do so because of a “cost recovery” model, c) address units’ ability, by not filling vacant positions, to pocket the difference and, over the years, build up reserves, and d) best allocate “soft” moneys. The procedures developed in the early 1990s no longer may serve Auburn best.
  - iii. Review of expectations for consistency in financial administration. Should, for instance, separate colleges and schools be allowed to set their own fees, as, for instance, in technology, where students can pay varying sums in each college in which they take courses? Do colleges and schools need accounting methods distinct from each other’s?
  - iv. Review of rules that set the financial “contributions” each unit of the University makes to central operations.
  - v. Assessment of the benefits of one fiscal year for the entire University (the University’s runs with the State’s, October 1 through September 30; athletics’ runs July 1 through June 30), and, so that the University and the State can work supportively and harmoniously together, redefinition of the State’s. (How, for instance, can tuition be set months in advance of State appropriations?)
  - vi. Staffing of central financial operations in such a way as to allow current leadership to research, analyze, model, and project. Currently, and as is the case throughout the University, the strategic takes back seat to the day-to-day.

#### **4. *Focus and develop the University's advancement functions***

Much good work has taken place in advancement. Consistent annual contributions have more than doubled (an increase of \$20 million), donor records after the \$201 million campaign are good, participation in the Alumni Association is fourth in the nation, University Relations has begun to focus on developing and broadcasting an Auburn message (in addition to the messages of schools and colleges), and the president's office has begun excellent e-mail communication with constituents.

But major challenges lie ahead. Advancement well exemplifies the current crisis of Auburn's "commons."

1. Auburn's advancement functions are split up among different units, with different leadership and different priorities: University Relations, Office of Governmental Affairs, alumni affairs, Alumni Association, Alumni Advisory Council, development office, Foundation, athletics, and relevant components at AUM.
2. The various groups tending Auburn's advancement have no operating agreement defining what belongs to each and how each works with the other to achieve the greater good. Staff turnover and cuts and shifts in staff responsibilities confuse matters more. Where does one go to start a campaign? Who is responsible? Where are the procedures?
3. In communications, in fundraising, and in events and activities, the various groups seeing to Auburn's advancement compete with each other.
4. For any university, doubling of annual gift revenue during the 1990s was not hard.
5. The annual fund, the normal centerpiece for advancement and the barometer of its health in institutions nationwide, works at Auburn on the basis of four letters and some phonathons, collects gifts largely less than \$1,000, and competes with Auburn's colleges and schools, the Alumni Association, and athletics. It brings in less than \$2 million a year.
6. Alumni giving, for an institution with excellent alumni support, runs at 12%, about two-thirds the national average for public universities.
7. The development office is as seriously understaffed as any on campus. It cannot do its own work, assist the colleges and schools in their responsibilities, or see to Auburn's future.

8. Endowment growth of 53% over the last six years falls 30 percentage points below the average of peers', and contrasts with more than a few university endowments that rose 100% and 200% and more.
9. "Board" giving, as a percentage of University-wide giving, is on target for regional institutions, but includes the gifts of 55 members of the board of trustees and the boards of the Alumni Association and the Foundation.
10. For that matter, as a serious, professional venture, Auburn's development office is remarkably recent -- late 1980s.
11. The "constituent model" of fundraising -- with its focus on individual colleges and schools and programs -- has advanced to the point of hindering not only overall University-wide development efforts, but also the work of the parts.
12. The alumni affairs office has been reduced to a handful of employees, uncertain of their work, their role, or their future.
13. University publications vary widely in quality and visual standards, and they have no "family" look. No central measures of control guide them. Some years ago, in the face of strong opposition, an attempt at greater consistency was abandoned. There is not even a database listing all of the University's publications. University Relations' control of the web site is only two years old. Policy until recently has required focusing on the work of colleges and schools, not on Auburn as a whole. Communication with the administration has not always been steady, strong, or strategic. No policy guides news releases from around the campus; multiple and sometimes uncoordinated reports confuse and irritate the media. No cultivated network of allies in the media helps get the desired word out.
14. Where does the office of governmental affairs figure with respect to Auburn's message?
15. During the last academic year, the University assumed a remarkable leadership role throughout Alabama with respect to proration, yet, on internal issues, often remained silent in the face of attack. Constituents heard little in the way of support, understanding, meaning, or pride. Anger held the field uncontested.
16. With some variations, the media have provided remarkably unfavorable coverage.
17. There is no one individual (other than the president) charged with -- and responsible for -- the coordination and development of all of Auburn's advancement functions.

18. The board of trustees has only begun to recognize that it may have a major role to play in development. As of yet, there is no advancement committee, and there are few policies. For that matter, there is little interest in the fundraising: "The Foundation does that."

The tasks to be accomplished in the next several years are five:

1. Creation of a unified, coordinated, and appropriately funded and staffed University advancement function.
2. Preparation and approval of an "operating agreement" that spells out what each independent group with fundraising responsibilities may and may not do and how they are to work together for University-wide goals.
3. Generation and communication of a consistent, strategic University "message" and "look" and the means to get the word out.
4. Creation of an advancement committee on the board of trustees and an appropriate level of involvement in the field.
5. Launch of a capital campaign.

***5. Identify and begin implementation of a shared academic vision.***

In the face of its many challenges over the last decade, Auburn's academic programs have, overall, become far stronger. Not only did Auburn establish a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa last spring, it also launched its Peaks of Excellence some years back. The Peaks -- steadily supported and radiating excitement and success -- have become model Auburn programs, in research, outreach, instruction, public relations, and revenue-generating potential.

There also are important opportunities.

1. The 2002 SACS self-study (in preparation for the 2003 reaccreditation visit) provides a focal point for addressing academic mission and vision.
2. AUM and Auburn recently have begun joint projects that can lead to important institutional synergy. Operating for some time almost as an autonomous other institution of higher education within what some call "the Auburn System," Auburn University at Montgomery brings Auburn the advantage of a different student body, different programs, different traditions, and ties to a different community.

3. Auburn's Statewide leadership in proration last spring is there to be seized with respect to the State's overall role in higher education. The need is great. Alabama's educational landscape is not friendly, with:
  - i. One of the nation's lowest tax rates.
  - ii. A century-old constitution that guarantees erratic funding, including crippling shortfalls.
  - iii. Excess capacity in higher education, including 37 community colleges (and 40 or 50 legislators in the employ of these community colleges), 14 four-year institutions, and overlapping programs (for instance, seven engineering programs in Alabama, as opposed to one in Georgia).
  - iv. No capital-budget planning.
4. Auburn is well situated to play a central role in creating a "research trapezoid" to rival North Carolina's "research triangle" or Virginia Tech's "New River Valley." Containing the University of Alabama (including Huntsville and Birmingham), together with Montgomery's institutions and those of Atlanta and Athens, the trapezoid could provide rapid, sustaining growth in a manageable, though still extensive, area.

These opportunities are important; so, too are the challenges, many of which now are being addressed:

1. Auburn has no shared academic history which all can and do recite. Different constituents tell different stories, and they cite different and often conflicting evidence. Potential for a single and proud history exists: President Philpott advanced the liberal arts component of the classic land grant university and moved Auburn in significant ways to the comprehensive status it now enjoys. President Martin provided much of the University's current infrastructure, bringing \$200 million of facilities to a growing and improving University. President Muse helped align costs of plant and program with dwindling State appropriations. As battles over "what happened" diminish and when praise for Auburn's many accomplishments increases, attention can focus on the future. Strong institutions have shared histories, shared stories, shared heroes, and shared dreams.
2. At this moment, Auburn's mission statement -- which appears in different versions in different publications -- can be vague, silent, misunderstood, or no longer relevant. Numerous and major issues of mission exist, some long-standing, some recent. Already, in Dr. Walker's comprehensive planning group, important work has begun to start resolving complex issues of:

- i. "Elitism" versus "access."
  - ii. The definitions of desired student "outcomes" and their measures.
  - iii. "Liberal arts" versus "land grant."
  - iv. Undergraduate versus graduate programs.
  - v. Academics versus athletics.
  - vi. Research and outreach versus instruction.
  - vii. Optimal enrollments, overall, and within colleges, schools, and departments.
  - viii. Appropriate section size and feel.
  - ix. The right relationship to Auburn University at Montgomery and other institutions of higher education, in Alabama and throughout region.
  - x. The University's role as a spark plug for regional economic development.
  - xi. Auburn's self-definition, as primarily an Alabama, regional, national, or international University.
3. In the absence of a stable, current, appropriate, and sharply defined statement of mission, accurate measures of student outcomes cannot be taken. Therefore, analysis of such outcomes cannot impact program development, proof of which is a major expectation of SACS' new and more demanding criteria.
  4. After the Alabama Council on Higher Education mandated new standards for program productivity (standards the Legislature then enacted as law), Auburn set aside its strong program-review process.
  5. Current budgeting procedures, created a decade ago and far superior to what once existed, struggle today with shifting enrollments.
  6. Although plans are in motion for full integration of instructional technology into the classroom, much work remains. Currently, no unit is charged with such integration. Technology fees vary from college to college. Overall technology costs per student could reach half of current tuition.
  7. As has been noted, the University is understaffed and its faculty members and other professionals too often underpaid. As the current generation of faculty begins to retire, Auburn cannot compete in replacing them. Failure now to "grow the future" can cripple Auburn for decades to come. Without correction,

a snowball effect of departures among Auburn's most promising faculty is all too possible.

8. With a student-faculty ratio of about 18-to-one, professors necessarily are stretched to their limits and beyond. Among the Ivies, the ratio runs perhaps between 6-to-one and 9-to-one. Although the Ivies may be an extreme comparison, Auburn, like the Ivies, boasts caring and individualized attention from the faculty.
9. Standards for faculty-student interaction vary considerably. Students told me that, with a couple of exceptions, "the larger and more technical" the college, the less personal attention the professors give. Is this desirable? Necessary?
10. Not all faculty are appropriate to Auburn. In their interviews with me, students expressed to me an overall satisfaction with their professors, but also questioned the number of whom they say have slipped through the cracks. Although there is a system for annual performance reviews of faculty, led by department heads, implementation has been inconsistent.

The tasks to be accomplished in the next several years include:

1. Writing a history of Auburn University: The sesquicentennial of the charter comes in 2006.
2. Reinstating procedures for program review.
3. Implementing the plan for integration of information technology into the classroom, University-wide. The Biggio Teaching and Learning Center will prove a great boon in this regard.
4. Pressing forward with Dr. Walker's comprehensive planning process and producing a sharp statement of mission and a clear academic vision.
5. Revisiting and revising as necessary the procedures for academic budgeting.
6. Planning for significant increases in faculty and other professional compensation, as well as for appropriate levels of staffing.
7. Verifying that procedures for annual performance reviews are followed.
8. Openly expressing gratitude for strong faculty and staff. They have continued to offer their best through a difficult and sometimes painful decade.
9. Maintaining a leadership role in addressing issues of State support for higher education.

10. Pressing forward with plans for building cooperative ventures with other Alabama and regional universities.
11. Completing the SACS self-study and re-accreditation.
12. Writing a financial plan encompassing the above.

**6. *Create an administration capable of working with the board and constituents to catch the University up and prepare for its advance.***

Throughout the Auburn community, great respect has been expressed for the work of the interim president, who is seen as drawing people together, finding solutions, and serving the University's best interests. The president also has a team of senior administrators -- including a lively, loyal, and collegial group of deans -- who work just as hard and are a model of quality and synergy for any university. The long working relationships among the president and vice presidents are particularly noteworthy.

This administration already has begun the task of creating a central authority capable of catching Auburn up, serving its "customers," and moving into a shared future. In the language of this report, it has started to rebuild "the commons."

The obstacles to this work also are clear.

1. Although across-the-board cuts in reallocations aimed at 5%-to-10% for academic programs, they hit some administrative operations -- including financial affairs and development -- at 20% and more. Auburn's offices often are staffed at half the levels of peers. Such cuts have occurred during a decade of vastly increased complexity, greater competition, and new challenges: The work of administration today is far more extensive and demanding than anyone 20 or 30 years back ever could have imagined. Top administrators themselves -- at the expense of their real and essential jobs in reflection, analysis, planning, and strategy -- too often must see to their offices' day-to-day business and put out brush fires: The staff necessary for routine tasks simply does not exist. Questions asked of administrators about the work their offices might perform can meet with depressed and/or angry responses. When good people are kept from doing their best and from doing their best at what they do best, weak morale is only to be expected.
2. A unified, functional administration is not yet in place. Over the last decade or more, the administration has grown in titles and by accretion. The decision some years ago to have vice presidents report to the executive vice president and provost also complicated structures.

3. The impact of senior management currently is blunted. There is no single management team handling the top level issues coming before the administration. Bringing multiple individuals up to speed in multiple groupings takes time and reduces effectiveness. Conversations can take place many times over. How are decisions made?
4. In many administrative units, there has been considerable turnover and/or movement among positions. There are more than a few "interims," often at high levels. A stable context has yet to emerge.
5. Performance reviews for administrators historically have been haphazard, and it is not clear that policies and procedures for doing so even exist. Understandably, but with unfortunate consequences, the University Senate has a committee for evaluation of administrators.
6. Questions arise with respect to the effectiveness today of the University's governance structures, overall. Do they support and further good process and resolution of difficult issues? Do they focus on University issues of strategic importance?
7. Significant decisions lie in the future about Auburn's intended use of information technology in administration. Currently, the University has seven major systems on campus, and the administration's is at the point of requiring upgrade or replacement; a decision has yet to be made. Central IT services, to be housed someday in one location, still largely are scattered, with the main office in the basement of an old building (some fear its collapse) and without backup emergency power supply. There has been no chief information officer.
8. Too often, the University lacks clear and accepted ways of doing business. Policies can be vague, hidden in archives, oral or "traditional," not respected, ignored, or absent. I asked a number of people about Auburn's "policy" with respect to the athletic department's budgetary self-sufficiency. No one could answer when the policy began, who instituted it, or where it might be recorded. One University academic leader long proclaimed that clear, written policy only impeded future change and adaptation.
9. Lack of accepted ways of doing business often turns what should be a normal administrative task into a time-consuming and painful burden. In the absence of clear process, any attempt at doing business can be seen as an imposition, an intrusion, or a threat. Conscientious administrators, in an attempt to build consensus, only can speak to every affected group: They cannot follow a simple procedure, reach closure, and move on to other tasks. Work multiplies many times over, good people are ground down, standards of service fall, and constituents, to resolve troublesome issues, demand greater involvement and more discussion. Eventually, in frustration, administrators (and others), aware of\_

the need for a decision, lose their patience and take the action that sound process easily and long before could have provided. Auburn as a whole suffers.

10. Overall, the administration is not held in obvious esteem.
  - i. There is a strong discomfort among many (not all) constituents with anything smacking of “control.”
  - ii. Some hold a vision of management appropriate to universities of another era -- “seeing to the little details.”
  - iii. When some constituents speak of bringing groups together to resolve differences and work them out, one by one, they normally fail even to mention the administration as a player: “Let us bring together the board of trustees, the Alumni Association board, and the Foundation board.” “If we could have the board of trustees and the University Senate sit together on a regular basis, we could work out the University’s issues.”
  - iv. Of course, in arguing for such ongoing plenary sessions, these constituents also assume that a university’s business matters are relatively few in number and can be so resolved.
  
11. Uncertain process (and a culture that bristles at definition), understaffed offices, growing work loads, and pressures for necessary closure on multiple issues all have nurtured a strong entrepreneurial spirit. Consider some consequences:
  - i. Fiefdoms abound. Departments, schools, and colleges have their own ways of doing business, their own look and level of maintenance, their own purchasing policies and fees. There long even have been two departments of mathematics (finally soon to end) and two facilities staffs.
  - ii. Groups can behave as if they were their own universities. An article in *The Auburn Plainsman* (“Absentees Plague Senate,” October 11, 2001), even notes, unwittingly, “The open forestry and engineering seats will be filled once the senate receives recommendations from the colleges’ presidents for a replacement.”
  - iii. End runs -- normally not even conceived of as such -- constitute a part of normal business procedure. A group of deans meets with trustees; a group of faculty visits the governor; the governor receives the faculty; Leaders of all kinds within the University community express their personal opinions to the media and in public forums, and they meet with constituents to hear their concerns; students take their issues directly to the board; concerned constituents register a protest with the University’s

accrediting agency. Consistent reliance on appropriate process has yet to become part of University culture.

- iv. Individuals and groups can form ad hoc coalitions to share information and develop approaches to individual and collective issues.
- v. All of these groups and individuals, standing and ad hoc, unintentionally can end up as competitors to the administration.

12. In seeking to “build the commons back up,” the administration cannot rely on a healthy context of interpersonal relations and cooperation among units.

- i. Few groups and individuals at Auburn express a strong sense of being valued, praised, or caught up in the institution’s broader growth and development. Under such circumstances, morale typically is weak, as are productivity, creativity, and willingness to take risks.
- ii. Like constituents at many other institutions, Auburn’s often do not know each other, may not trust each other, and tend to see the University through personal and constituent lenses. A shared conversation does not exist.
- iii. “Lack of trust” -- often mentioned as one of the University’s foremost problems -- has led to its frequent use as a club: “If you do X, the distrust will go away, and we can start fresh all over.” Or, “We can do nothing until trust has been restored.” Such statements tend to block further analysis, prevent exploration of solutions, shut conversation down, and preserve the status quo.
- iv. Tempers flare and result in further slams and put-downs, rather than in quiet and thoughtful response. Indeed, outbreaks have become customary enough, that one person may attack another in a rage one day, and then smilingly continue the conversation the next, as if nothing had happened. An outsider might conclude that that which Auburn shares -- “the commons” -- is vitriol.
- v. Voices of moderation, who hold multiple and complex perspectives on this complicated University, and from whose ranks probably will come Auburn’s future leaders, have been silenced. In related fashion, other constituents, tired of the anger and the noise, have withdrawn. Important seeds of Auburn’s future have difficulty sprouting; the administration as yet lacks all of the allies it needs.

13. Auburn’s focus long has been on its constituent parts, which go their separate and isolated ways. Trying with some difficulty -- and not always in good cheer -- to manage their own increasingly complex affairs, and sometimes seeking

assistance from central administration, they too often find it understaffed, overwhelmed, and unable to serve them or advance the University. Not surprisingly, there is, at the same time, widespread concern with what is perceived as the administration's failure to identify and resolve major issues, consistently implement policy, defend and nurture constituents, think to the future, and, overall, provide "leadership." Dr. Walker's work already is effecting change. Yet the "crisis of the commons" is real.

14. Overall, Auburn lacks the institutional capacity to bring the University back up to speed and help it move forward. Its muscles are weak, its policies and procedures spotty and inconsistently followed or enforced, and tradition and turf in the saddle.
15. Auburn's last strategic plan, developed carefully in the early 1990s and approved four years ago, already shows signs of past relevance: Much of it, admirably, already has been implemented or is in the process of planned implementation. In any institution, absence of a fresh, relevant, and shared vision invites a narrow and back-ward focus. To the extent that harmony and energy exist within healthy organizations, they do so in the context of a shared, preferred future.

The tasks required to build Auburn's institutional capacity and its sense of "the commons" include creation and/or preparation of:

1. A restructured central administration, including a unified management team and a plan for right-staffing the offices.
2. A University-wide administrative team with a shared agenda.
3. Performance reviews for administrators and staff, and policies for conducting them.
4. Carefully reviewed, elaborated, and centrally located policies and procedures; a more normal management culture.
5. Decisions on the direction of administrative information technology.
6. Communication of the role and achievements of the administration.
7. Continuation of the administration's currently well-modeled civility, patience, and clarity.
8. Structures that foster enhanced conversation and understanding among the University's many component parts.

7. ***Build a board of trustees and an entire governance structure appropriate to the needs of Auburn University in the 21st century***

This section on governance, the lengthiest of the report, reflects both the complexity of the subject and the ability to interview most trustees.

A series of five explanatory sections leads into an analysis of obstacles to superior board performance at Auburn and then to a list of tasks the board can perform.

1. Work on governance already is underway. In commissioning this report, the board signaled its openness to outside assessment and its intention to become more effective. Few if any boards operate at their potential; the desire to advance is both healthy and honest, and it normally produces the significant improvement most boards seek. The impact on Auburn's "commons" will be beneficial and powerful. Already, growing confidence in the board's chief executive officer has strengthened both board and University.
2. At different institutions, and at different points in their histories, boards play varying roles and work with differing levels of strength. Generally, over the last 10 or 15 years, university -- and corporate -- boards have become more active and engaged. For instance, fifteen years ago, any corporate chief executive officer who failed to take the initiative and present the board with a strategic plan would have been fired for irresponsible behavior; today, that executive would be dismissed for seizing that initiative and developing a plan without first engaging the board.
3. Beyond American trends toward more active boards, multiple factors have worked to make this last decade at Auburn one of growing board authority. This increase in engagement at Auburn understandably has brought about upset and anger in a University long accustomed to something else. Much the same could be said about many universities over the last 10 years. Consider some of the factors at Auburn that have contributed to this growth in activity:
  - i. The close, at Auburn, in the late 1980s, of a period of strong and traditional presidential authority.
  - ii. A split of board opinion in the selection of the next chief executive officer.
  - iii. Severe financial stress, beginning in the early 1990s. To be managed were cuts in State funding, heavy debt service, an aging and growing physical plant, badly lagging compensation, rapidly advancing competition, and the threat of State cuts to come. Fiscal pressures remained throughout the decade.

- iv. In the final years of the decade, the emergence of “unity” on a board long pulled apart in State politics.
  - v. A chief executive officer, who, by all accounts, became increasingly distant and increasingly tended to leave working relations with the board to the vice-presidents, and administrative relations to the provost and executive vice president.
  - vi. Newness on the board, with half its members coming on in 1999 and after. New boards have special energy.
  - vii. The start of a presidential search in early 2001, followed by the State’s announcement of proration for the academic year 2001-02.
4. Over the last decade, the University’s major strategic thrusts have been the board’s. Whatever criticisms can be leveled at this board and its trustees, this board nevertheless can and should point with pride to significant, high-level initiatives that have advanced the entire University: One might well wish that more boards stepped forward as has Auburn’s. Consider this board’s achievements over the last decade:
- i. Successful reallocation of resources.
  - ii. Reduction in percentage of tuition revenues spent on debt service.
  - iii. Increased allocations to plant maintenance (from \$700,000 per year to \$7 million) and establishment of a plant reserve fund.
  - iv. Increased tuition.
  - v. Creation and funding of the “Peaks of Excellence.”
  - vi. Increased faculty compensation.
  - vii. Establishment of a reserve against future proration.
  - viii. Use of a multi-constituent Role Committee to address fiscal issues.
5. The board -- and also, hopefully, the community -- can take pride in the individuals serving on this board.
- i. The time Auburn’s trustees devote to the work of the board is unusual. Frequent averages of one or two days a week would be extreme for board chairs at most institutions. Auburn’s trustees spend much of their board-time visiting on campus and/or traveling about the State. The “visitation program” instituted last spring has increased their time

commitments considerably and also has lifted the board's base of knowledge about the University's special victories and challenges.

- ii. One expects members of any board to cheer their institution on, but conversation with Auburn's trustees reveals unusual enthusiasm.
- iii. Unusual on the board of a public institution is the number of alumni, and of alumni long active in the life of the University. That has been one of the secrets of the success of Virginia Tech and its board.
- iv. In terms of skills present, Auburn's board is impressive, with strength in philanthropy, corporate leadership, banking, law, politics and government, marketing and public relations, education, media, construction, real estate and development, and agriculture. Most boards in the country would be envious.
- v. The presence of one or more individuals without earlier ties to Auburn provides important outside perspective. Most institutions seek such diversity of opinion on their boards, take pride in any they can find, and point to it as a sign of broad community interest in them. In the world of corporate boards over the last decade or two, "outside directors" have been especially sought after as a check on "inside-think" and as a stimulant to fresh and diverse patterns of thought. Concerns with "inside-think" in higher education tend to focus on alumni trustees, who, with the best of intentions, can be caught up in a vision of their universities as they once were, when they were students. Also, tensions easily can emerge in comprehensive universities that have -- especially in the last few decades -- rocketed forth in enrollment, new programs, different kinds of "customer," higher quality, and more complex and changing constituencies.
- vi. Growing strength and effectiveness on this board already are ensured, with shortened terms, more members, and new procedures for nominating trustees.

Yet the Auburn board of trustees, like most university boards, has yet to operate at its full potential. In umbrella concepts I have used at presentations at many universities around the country in recent years, too many boards today tend to:

1. Deal in trivia and ignore major institutional challenges and opportunities.
2. Have "antagonist" members, increasingly in positions of power.
3. Lack meaningful knowledge about their institution and engagement in it.
4. Use committees poorly.

5. Waste valuable meeting time listening to “canned” written reports and becoming irritable -- or withdrawn -- in the process.
6. Experience pressure from alumni and employees to become actively involved in administrative affairs.
7. Rely on trustees’ solo performances instead of teamwork.
8. Show divisions between activist newcomers and the old-timers.
9. Fail to assess their performance and that of their chief executive officer -- and lack comprehensive policies for doing so.
10. Think they’re doing a good job.

Consider, specifically, 10 obstacles to the superior performance of Auburn University’s board of trustees.

1. One half of the board (seven) has come on in 1999 and after, making this a very new board, by any standard. Historical perspective on the board and its work is uneven; the vision once held in the early 1990s no longer rings true (especially to new members); and, a sense of shared tasks only has begun to emerge. As of yet, there is no shared vision -- rolled out in a plan -- to serve as a guide.
2. Existing committees do not cover the range of the board’s responsibilities.
  - i. There is no committee on advancement, charged with monitoring, coordinating, and developing this essential University role: The board -- and the board alone -- finally is responsible for it.
  - ii. There is no student affairs committee to assess the impact of board and University policy decisions on students and to further best “customer service” for students.
  - iii. Nor is there a committee on trustees, charged with setting annual goals; preparing general lists of board and trustee responsibilities; assessing the board’s and trustees’ individual performance; profiling the board’s skills and the emerging strategic needs for membership; making recommendations for appropriate individuals to serve; and -- through orientation of new members, retreats, assigned readings, and focused discussion -- managing the board’s professional development.
3. Committees perform well below their potential. No board can fulfill its many responsibilities without full reliance on the right assortment of well-functioning committees.

- i. There are widely varying levels of committee engagement. Perhaps three are highly active.
- ii. Committees now cannot acquire the power and focus possible when a well-chosen, small, and steadily participating group of individuals conducts intense investigation and analysis of complex problems over a period of time. Meetings occur in a modified committee of the whole, the morning of board meetings, and all those present -- members or not -- are welcome to participate. The work of committees is hostage to the vagaries of whoever is present and whatever concerns them.
- iii. Board members often serve on multiple committees, and some also try to attend most if not all committee meetings. They can serve none of them well.
- iv. Committee membership is made up almost exclusively of trustees. Not only does this spread trustees thin, it denies committees -- in focused and intentional fashion -- an appropriate range of University constituent perspectives. The work of the board necessarily is more narrow as a result. The board's recent initiative to bring faculty onto some committees is an important first step. Of course, whether those committee members are trustees or individuals from others of the institution's many constituencies, the board's is the responsibility to appoint them, just as, now, at Auburn, the administration appoints members of University committees.
- v. Board committees lack the opportunity fully to explore significant issues of concern to themselves. Normally, they "receive" recommendations from the University and act upon them. They do not customarily help to identify the issues and assist in developing the recommendations to be brought to the board.
- vi. There are no board-mandated charges to committees, charges linked to annual board goals and on which committees are assessed each year. While committees understandably wish to generate and focus their own energy, that laudable desire must be incorporated into the needs of the entire board.
- vii. Committees are kept on an unnaturally short leash. The work of each committee occurs not only in the committee, but also in its repetition to the board at the meeting of the board, and committees are expected to report out at each meeting. Moreover, recommendations brought to the committee and rejected by the committee still come to the board. In each instance, what's the point of the committee? Also, worries about so-called "micromanagement" may prevent the kind of normal and

productive relationship that optimally develops between a committee (especially its chair) and the vice president serving as liaison to it.

4. In spite of numerous praiseworthy, strategic, and high-level decisions over the last decade, this board, like many boards, has yet fully to understand its role as a board. Of course, experts on governance know that no clear line can be drawn between “policy” and “operations,” that a board and administration normally work together and at a variety of levels across the broad gray area in between, that different parts of a board may -- in appropriate ways -- become more or less engaged with “operations” over time, that few decisions belong exclusively to the board or the administration, and that administrators and others on campus also set policy. An example of helpful, engaged activity at one point in a university’s life might be the chair of a buildings and grounds committee, active professionally as a general contractor, dropping by the university’s construction site each morning to speak to the site manager and help -- with the administration -- to smooth out inevitable difficulties. With these caveats, and also noting that, in resolving issues of funding, Auburn’s board has on numerous occasions worked at the highest level, consider these challenges:
  - i. With the best of intentions, this board can at times behave as a super-administrative body and engage in discussions -- such as seeing to the details of campus safety and security -- that have no normal business in the discussions of a board. When the board plays that role, it does so not only because it cares, but also because the campus -- along the lines described in this report’s section on administration -- has acquired the habit of going to the board for decisions that appropriately belong to the administration: “A resolution was passed on the floor of the student senate that went directly to the Board of Trustees about campus safety” (*The Auburn Plainsman*, October 11, 2001, “SGA Vice President Defends Student Representation”). Some on campus see the board as top management, sometimes as middle or lower management. If the board often is charged with behaving like management (“micromanaging”), some on campus insist on it. In a desire to please and to put out fires, the board assents, so diminishing the time available to it for strategic thinking and analysis. If the board refuses to comply, units and individuals on campus may, in entrepreneurial fashion, turn elsewhere and censure the board as they move on. In this fashion, “appeals” might proceed to various combinations of the media, the governor, and the regional accrediting body. Campus reservations about “the administration” and a belief in the centrality of the University’s component parts add to this general pattern of behavior.
  - ii. If the board sometimes plays the role of management, it also and in related fashion can play the role of legislature. Individual trustees too often act as if they were legislators who are interested in the concerns of

“constituents.” Of course, Auburn hardly stands alone among public universities in this regard.

- a) Some trustees meet and speak with constituents, try to solve their issues (even as individual trustees), prove open to lobbying, and bring constituent worries to the board. (It’s worth noting that guidelines for the important policy of board “visitation” nowhere are written down.)
- b) Trustees also can deliver speeches, hold interviews, and express their personal opinions, to constituents and the press. In so doing, they also define themselves -- and are dealt with -- as if they were elected public officials.
- c) Such “legislator-like behavior” particularly has been the case in recent months, as trustees have sought to rebuild ties to campus -- and as many constituents have worked to capture the attention of a board eager for it. No trustee has authority as an individual or an opinion as an individual. Only the board takes action and speaks, and only the board chair and president speak for it.
- d) Of course, the long association of trustees with the University, often in significant prior positions in the Alumni Association, means that trustees can experience understandable difficulty shifting into required new roles, roles in which professors, administrators, and even students may no longer appropriately be treated as “old friends.”
- e) Board policy even goes so far as to “encourage everyone with suggestions for policies governing Auburn University to write to individual board members.”
- f) The behavior of the board as legislature also is furthered by the fact that trustees come out of the State’s individual “districts” (as set in 1961), by the presence of student “representatives,” and by the drive of other constituencies for equal “representation.”

Board discussion thus can end up tightly focused on “what constituents want” -- to the exclusion of what the University needs. In slightly different terms, reacting to constituent concerns may make a board more “responsive” and so more pleasing to constituents; it also can thwart the board’s responsibilities as board. As legislatures, Boards fail. The American system of higher education, distinct on earth, holds boards accountable to their institution’s best interests, mission, and future welfare. Because boards are not accountable to “constituents,” they can focus on their institutions’ long-term,

strategic interests. Boards that exist solely to please rarely do their job. Boards stand outside of their universities and look at them with knowledgeable, but impersonal perspective.

Desired changes in this regard probably will be harder for some constituents to accept than they will for a board that has, in this decade, taken numerous valuable and strategic initiatives.

- iii. A number of trustees over the years have shown Auburn exceptional generosity. Yet, such generosity has yet to be considered an obligation of membership, nor does the board solicit its own members for contributions each year. Where do trustees stand with planned giving?
  - iv. The board has not set annual goals for itself or evaluated its performance against both those goals and general expectations for boards. Moreover, there is no policy governing board assessment. Unfortunately, Auburn's board probably is typical of others around the country in these regards.
  - v. Campus reservations about "the administration" and a belief in the University's component parts .
5. Numerous other factors, in this and earlier decades, have made highly problematic the development of a fully functional, cohesive board of trustees with a sense of its own corporate role and responsibilities. These factors go beyond the political component of public university boards in general and beyond the widespread misunderstandings around the country about the role of a board.
- i. An historical context -- over the decades -- of constituent questioning of and even contempt for the board.
  - ii. A history of internal board conflict.
  - iii. Newness as a governing board, having, until the last decade, played the passive role customary throughout the country, emphasized here in the 1980s by a strong, old-style president.
  - iv. The necessity in this last decade for seizing fiscal initiative and handling the resulting anger.
  - v. Many new members late in the decade.
  - vi. Lack of clear succession planning for board leadership.
  - vii. Competition with other "boards" on campus. There are the Alumni Association and Foundation boards, all three of which one observer

called “our different boards,” and all three of which curiously are included in the University’s formal list of “board” financial contributions each year. There also apparently are the board’s own committees: One trustee contrasted them to “the big board.” Whose is Auburn’s “real” board these days? Given the appropriately handsome appointments of the room used by the Alumni Association’s board, most outside visitors probably would award it the prize.

- viii. Alabama law and the recent ruling of the Lee County Court. Good decisions on sensitive and difficult issues normally require long and frank discussion, a willingness to take risks before colleagues, shifts in opinion, and attempted, failed, and finally emerging consensus. As boards acquire practice in such discussion, they acquire greater confidence and do better work. On some subjects -- such as attorney-client privilege and presidential appointment and standing -- most states grant boards confidentiality. Self-assessment that produces no formal board action often may occur in closed session as well. States that impose low limits on the numbers of trustees constituting “the board” find that discussion occurs in yet smaller numbers and at comparably lower levels of quality. Alabama, by requiring basically all board and committee discussion -- including the highly sensitive -- to occur in public, nicely tips the scales in favor of its competitor states and their institutions of higher learning. Sound open meeting and open record law balance the public’s right to know with the institution’s right to compete, and, in the instance of a search, the candidates’ right to privacy. Absent such balance, the odds increase that decisions on important and sensitive matters will be reactive, subject to constituent pressure, political, and hasty. Moreover, normal “practice” in working as a group is hindered. AGB’s Center for Public Higher Education Trusteeship and Governance has begun a study of the impact on American universities of such laws. An important current article covering nationwide practice in presidential searches was prepared by the legal counsel to the University of New Mexico (Nick Estes, “State University Presidential Searches: Law and Practice,” *The Journal of College and University Law* (Winter 2000), pp. 485-509). The value of Estes’ article extends well beyond presidential search. In an important section on the subject of confidentiality, Richard T. Ingram, president of AGB, asks, “What should trustees know about open-meeting laws? Everything, because all trustees diligently must follow the requirements of these statutes in letter and spirit. At the same time, however, some of these laws are counterproductive to conscientious trusteeship; rather than encouraging good institutional governance and management, some state laws inadvertently discourage it” (*Effective Trusteeship: A Guide for Board Members of Public Colleges and Universities*, p. 27).

- ix. Strong constituent interest -- not unique to Auburn -- in keeping the board “responsive” and “accountable” to constituent interests.
6. The structure and procedures of board meetings place a low ceiling on the board’s ability to serve as board.
- i. Meetings are organized around reports, not on strategic action and on subjects the board itself has declared to be of interest. Annual goals and objectives, linked to a strategic plan, should drive not only committees, but also each agenda of the board’s meetings. Other than the president, no individual or group need regularly report.
  - ii. Meetings are run as if “town meetings,” with anyone wishing to speak raising a hand and rising. Not even legislatures permit that. Meetings of the board are for the board.
  - iii. The board’s meeting place is set up for spectator sport, not board meeting: Members sit around an enormous, empty square of tables. Normal conversation among trustees cannot occur, speechifying is invited (and furthered through absent or inadequate amplification of their comments), the board cannot focus on the board and its work, and the focal point remains the audience, for whose benefit these meetings do not occur. Indeed, from the podium that individuals -- including both president and trustees -- use to address the board, members of the board cannot readily be distinguished from the audience behind each side of the table: They melt into the audience and so disappear. The board’s physical identity is hard to seize. Given these circumstances, it is no surprise that trustees have on occasion succumbed to the kinds of invective found elsewhere in the Auburn community.
7. The president is the board’s chief executive officer, its agent, and its normal spokesperson to the outside world. For the board to do its work, the president must do his (or hers). Progress occurs against set goals and must be officially measured against those goals. Those goals, in turn, relate to the annual goals of the board and the institution’s strategic plan. Presidential assessment at Auburn, as it may have occurred, appears to have been of the informal and cursory variety. Currently, this board has no policies for presidential assessment, ongoing, annual, and periodic. Nor are there policies for adjusting presidential compensation in conjunction with performance reviews and the compensation offered presidents at peer institutions. As has been noted, there no board self-assessment or policy for it; therefore, there can be no linkage of presidential and board assessment. The board’s most important task is selection, support, and advancement of the work of its president.

8. The president is the board's chief educator. Almost never does one encounter a board that improves in performance by itself. Some presidents consider their greatest achievement the building of an effective, cohesive board. Auburn's board not only is new (in both function and membership), it has served without guidance. Strong presidents often spend one-third to one-half of their time developing their boards. As is normally to be expected, a year of working together has developed a trusting and productive relationship between Auburn's board and its chief executive officer.
9. Finally, the board is limited in what it can do by the overall governance structures of the University.
  - i. Although constitutions of the on-campus governance bodies (Student Government Association, University Faculty, University Senate, Administrative and Professional Assembly, and Staff Council, Auburn and AUM) do make clear that they are authorized by the board of trustees, they do not specify ways in which they might work with the board of trustees. Indeed, their sole specified role is as "advisory to the president." Should they, then, have no relationship to the board of trustees? Do their discussions about board issues constitute, as some have argued, "faculty micromanagement"? Should trustees serve on Senate, University and other constituent-body standing committees? If any university today wishes to advance, it must -- in the face of severe political, fiscal, and competitive pressures and under board and administrative guidance -- have clear structures and procedures for engaging constituent perspective. In the absence of such structures and procedures, conflict is sure to occur. No longer is it 1960, with a board quietly and distantly raising money, a state providing necessary and steady fiscal support, a university running itself in its component parts, and a fixed and predictable clientele selecting itself for entrance. Auburn's "entrepreneurial" traditions intensify the tensions of current needs versus outdated structures.
  - ii. Second, there are questions of whether the work of these bodies is appropriate to their constituents' and the University's needs.
    - a) If the officers of the Faculty are the officers of the Senate, how do the two organizations differ? Does the addition in the Senate of a small group of non-faculty "representatives" do the needs of the faculty justice? Those of the University as a whole? Where does the business of the faculty take place? The other constituent bodies? The campus?'
    - b) Some have argued that the real work of the faculty has taken a back seat to the Senate's focus on the work of the board.

- c) Some Senate committees are vital and essential; most of the 23 are inactive, administratively focused, and divorced from any current sense of University strategy. The same can be said of the 36 University standing committees. Is the work of a traffic appeals committee -- one of the active committees -- worth the sacrifice of a professor's professional advance? What impact does this have on membership? On governance?
  - d) How is the work of the committees determined and coordinated, among themselves (Senate, University, Administrative and Professional Council, and Staff Council) and with the board's (and the Alumni Association's, the new Alumni Advisory Council's, and the Foundation's)?
- iii. Perhaps not surprisingly, the bylaws of the groups working outside campus level -- the Alumni Association and its board, the Foundation and its board, the Alumni Advisory Council, and AUM's Alumni Association and board -- fail to make clear how *they* can work with the board of trustees and each other. As with the on-campus groups, friction and conflict are ensured. In this instance, of course, the Alumni Association and Foundation, while they exist for the University's benefit, legally are independent of it. In view of the University's need for dramatically restructured work in all areas of advancement, including pursuit of a capital campaign and improved communications, these issues are serious.
- iv. The overall point is, that, in the absence of effective, coordinated, and focused University-wide governance structures, every group in one way or another necessarily "micromanages": The work of each has an impact on the others and on the whole. A history of "entrepreneurial" behavior adds to the difficulties. The task is to set up structures that work and then to respect them.
- v. It is important to note that Auburn University hardly is alone in facing challenges in institution-wide governance. An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Courtney Leatherman, "'Shared Governance' Under Siege, Is It Time to Revive it or Get Rid of It?" January 30, 1998), notes, "But lack of interest among faculty members is just one of the problems plaguing 'shared governance' on campuses these days. The concept of professors' playing a role in running their institutions is a cherished idea, but it's under siege, threatened by overreaching trustees, ineffectual presidents, and professors themselves." One expert on governance structures wrote, back in 1971, "University governance is by and large a crazy quilt of hierarchies, committees, and overlapping jurisdictions, and almost anyone who is closely connected with it privately recognizes that it is archaic, inefficient, inhibitive to necessary change, and not even very

comfortable any more.” The answer, of course, is to build in such a way as to allow concerted, coordinated, university-wide focus on strategic issues. Concerned with these issues, AGB issued, in 2000, its guidelines for unified institutional governance.

While standing up vigorously for “the commons” in the last decade, this board, if it is to address Auburn’s current and emerging needs, now must develop ongoing and comprehensive structures and procedures for best conduct of its own business. To build its “institutional capacity,” the board can:

1. Hold a board workshop on governance.
2. Establish appropriate public relations with regard to the board’s own numerous strengths and successes.
3. Call for the reworking of University-wide governance documents.

***8. As a whole institution, prepare and adopt a strategic plan that advances a shared vision and implements Auburn’s mission.***

Those interviewed spoke to me with regularity about Auburn’s need for greater unity and harmony, and, in so doing, referred to what I have called “the loss of the commons.” Many also spoke to the need for a new vision to bring the University together. Of course, the two go hand in hand.

Listen to some fairly typical comments:

- “Everything we do is sporadic. We’re a chicken with its head cut off, here, there, bouncing about. We have no clear direction.”
- “Where are we going? In the 1960s and 1970s, we could be all things to all people. We lack that luxury now. Our priorities change from year to year. We have no plan now. We’re wandering around like the children of Israel in the desert. We need leadership to say where we’re going. People love Auburn too much. They want it for what they want. They hold it, and they clutch it. If they don’t like a vision they’re presented, they dismiss it. Each person knows what Auburn must be; God tells each one what to do. No one has corrected or led them. They’re all on their own.”

Already, this is changing. The task now is to prepare a strategic plan for the years to come, a plan that captures the University’s desire for unity, vision, and forward movement. To that end, the board can:

- Urge on the good work of Dr. Walker's comprehensive planning group.
- Appoint a task force on "agenda" and ask it to use multiple methods to bring back recommendations in the spring of 2002.

## **Conclusion**

If Auburn's "commons" long have been weak, the advances of the last several months and on numerous fronts bear witness to this University's justifiable hopes for the future. The overall message is clear: Against significant odds, Auburn has done far better than anyone might have imagined. It also has much further to go, and an emerging will to get there.

Auburn University  
Auburn, AL

### **Summary Agenda and Tasks**

January 7, 2002

William A. Weary, Ph.D.  
Fieldstone Consulting, Inc.  
Washington, D.C.

1. ***Assess the quality of “customer service” and ensure that it matches need.***
  1. Identify the customers.
  2. Determine customers’ needs.
  3. Assess how well they’re served.
  4. Plan to meet their needs.
  
2. ***Plan for necessary renovations of facilities and additions to them.***
  1. Complete the master campus plan (the University’s first in almost a century) and assess the costs of implementing it.
  2. Bring to conclusion the determination of overall deferred maintenance and renovation needs (and costs) and identify priorities and sequences for addressing them.
  3. Complete rebuilding and focusing the University’s facilities staff.
  4. Lift University-wide consciousness of the work to be done.
  5. Write a plan that indicates how to implement the overall facilities agenda.

**3. *Fund the University in the manner required to advance its excellence.***

1. Determine finally the overall costs required for Auburn to implement its mission and move toward its vision.
2. Examine current sources of income and the ways they can -- or cannot -- be increased to reach the needed goals.
3. Review current programs and operations with an eye to successful reallocation.

**4. *Focus and develop the University's advancement functions***

1. Plan for the creation of a unified, coordinated, and appropriately funded and staffed University advancement function.
2. Prepare and approve an "operating agreement" that spells out what each independent group with fundraising responsibilities may and may not do and how they are to work together for University-wide goals.
3. Generate and communicate a consistent, strategic University message and look and the means to get the word out.
4. Create an advancement committee on the board of trustees and an appropriate level of involvement in the field.
5. Launch a capital campaign.

**5. *Identify and begin implementation of a shared academic vision.***

1. Write a history of Auburn University: The sesquicentennial of the charter comes in 2006.
2. Reinstigate procedures for program review.
3. Implement annual performance reviews of professors consistently, around the University.

4. Implement the plan for integration of information technology into the classroom, University-wide.
5. Bring to conclusion preparation of a statement of academic vision.
6. Revisit academic budgeting and revise as necessary.
7. Create a plan for significant increases in faculty and other professionals' compensation, as well as a plan for appropriate levels of staffing.
8. Express gratitude for a strong faculty and staff. They have continued to offer their best through a difficult and painful decade.
9. Maintain a leadership role in addressing issues of State support of higher education.
10. Press forward with cooperative ventures with other Alabama and regional universities.
11. Complete the SACS self-study and re-accreditation.
12. Write a financial plan encompassing the above.

**6. *Create an administration capable of working with the board and constituents to catch the University up and prepare for its advance.***

1. Restructure the central administration, including creation of a unified management team and a plan for right-staffing the offices.
2. Form a University-wide administrative team with a shared agenda.
3. Set up performance reviews for administrators and staff and policies for conducting them.
4. Collect and rewrite policies and procedures.
5. Resolve appropriate direction for administrative information technology.
6. Communicate the role and achievements of the administration.
7. Continue the administration's currently well modeled civility, patience, and clarity.

8. Structures that foster enhanced conversation and understanding among the University's many component parts.
  
7. ***Build a board of trustees and an entire governance structure appropriate to the needs of Auburn University in the 21st century***
  1. Hold a board workshop on governance.
  2. Establish appropriate public relations with regard to the board's own numerous strengths and successes.
  3. Rework University-wide governance documents.
  
8. ***As a whole institution, prepare and adopt a strategic plan that advances a shared vision and implements Auburn's mission.***
  1. Press forward with the comprehensive planning process.
  2. Have the board appoint a task force on "agenda."
  3. Conduct a series of series of multifunctional task forces this spring.

Auburn University  
Auburn, AL

**Summary Agenda**

January 7, 2002

William A. Weary, Ph.D.  
Fieldstone Consulting, Inc.  
Washington, D.C.

1. Assess the quality of “customer service” and ensure that it matches need.
2. Plan for necessary renovations of facilities and additions to them.
3. Fund the University in the manner required to advance its excellence.
4. Focus and develop the University’s advancement functions
5. Identify and begin implementation of a shared academic vision.
6. Create an administration capable of working with the board and constituents to catch the University up and prepare for its advance.
7. Build a board of trustees and an entire governance structure appropriate to the needs of Auburn University in the 21st century
8. As a whole institution, prepare and adopt a strategic plan that advances a shared vision and implements Auburn’s mission