



Collaborative Strategies | inc.



Washington University in St. Louis

Stakeholder Research Findings  
Spring 2019



## About the Project

Washington University in St. Louis has benefited from a long line of visionary chancellors who have carefully prepared the school to thrive in an ever-changing world. As chancellor Andrew D. Martin prepared to assume leadership of the university, his office commissioned Collaborative Strategies, Inc., a St. Louis-based management consultancy, to conduct an intensive research project among university stakeholders. **The purpose of this research was to gain first-hand insights into the hopes, dreams and concerns regarding the university's future. These findings will be a critical input into a comprehensive new university strategic planning process, which will kick off in the fall of 2019.**

Collaborative Strategies' research ran from February to June 2019. The effort reached a significant cross-section of the university community:

- **34 one-on-one interviews** with university leaders from all schools and colleges and teams as well as trustees and community partners
- **18 focus group interviews** with alumni, faculty, staff, undergraduate and graduate students, parents and community representatives
- **821 survey responses** from alumni, faculty, staff, students and donors

In all of these forums, CSI explored questions such as:

- *What are your hopes for Washington University's future?*
- *What are the priorities you'd like to see addressed in the university's next strategic plan?*
- *Are there any university initiatives that should be retired or discontinued?*
- *How would you describe WashU's "culture" or "climate" at the moment?*
- *What hopes do you have regarding Chancellor Martin's leadership style?*

The breadth of the research provides an excellent starting point for WashU's strategic planning and signifies the meaningful influence stakeholders will have on the future direction of the institution.

## Summary Observations: State of the University

Unsurprisingly, across an institution as diverse and large as Washington University, there are few sentiments universally shared by all. Perspectives are a function of experience, and individuals have significantly different experiences depending on their role at WashU. There is, however, a strong sense of optimism about Chancellor Martin's new leadership. He has consistently made positive impressions on those with whom he's visited.

In addition to the hope for the future, there is a restlessness among many stakeholders. There is great pride in the university, but there are frustrations with WashU's reputation, rankings, and its operations. (All of these topics will be elaborated upon throughout this report.) This restlessness is especially present among new members of faculty and staff who have experienced what they perceive to be higher functioning institutions elsewhere.

Stakeholders are eager to see a bold new vision for the university, expressed in a new strategic plan. They want to see **a unifying theme and shared priorities among** the various units of the university. Naturally, stakeholders want to see WashU rise in global rankings and increase its prestige, but they want to see the institution accomplish this in a way that is distinctively WashU. They are **passionate about WashU claiming its own niche**. Striving to be “the Ivy of the Midwest” is not inspiring and lacks creativity. Students feel the university is hesitant to do things until peer institutions make similar moves. In aggregate, this feedback can start to shape the tone and general direction of the next strategic plan. Stakeholders welcome Chancellor Martin's vision and leadership on *how* to achieve these lofty goals.

## The Big Ideas

In any research effort, it is instructive to uncover not only the ideas that arise with the greatest frequency but also the bold (sometimes controversial) ideas expressed by smaller subsets of stakeholders. At WashU, there were several such ideas.

Those keenly interested in WashU establishing its own distinctive positioning often **recommended that the university boldly adopt a “BHAG” project with the potential to meaningfully transform the world**. The process of selecting the particular project would consider the deep passions of students, faculty and staff, as well as the university's top strengths. The pursuit of the BHAG would have the potential to catalyze the university community, align priorities, raise the institution's stature, reshape the brand, and improve the human condition. Three potential focuses for such a BHAG project:

- **Creating a bold, comprehensive community development effort to transform St. Louis.** As a region, St. Louis suffers from deep, protracted, inter-related challenges: fragmentation, economic stagnation, racism, intolerance, poverty, healthcare disparities, and educational inequities. St. Louis becoming a “failed city” is a “mortal risk” to the University – the long-term fates are intertwined. St. Louis' problems are already affecting the university's ability to recruit talent at all levels (faculty, staff and students). Perhaps more than any single institution in St. Louis, WashU has the diverse expertise to play a leadership role in assembling the necessary resources and plan to transform the region. Such a project could harness strengths from many schools and programs: Law, Business, Social Work, Medicine, Public Health and more. In fact, some criticize past community development efforts as piecemeal, fragmented, and uncoordinated. A successful effort could serve as a model for lifting the prospects of other depressed communities around the world.

- **Eliminating healthcare disparities.** This topic brings together the strengths of multiple schools within WashU (the Medical School and the Brown School). The Medical School could improve the diversity and inclusiveness of genomic research (and ensure personalized medicine does not disproportionately benefit the wealthy). Major new studies could explore childhood nutrition and brain development. In addition to its own resources, the university could secure collaborations with BJC as well as some of St. Louis' biggest corporations – Centene, ExpressScripts, Ascension Health and more. In the process, WashU (and St. Louis) could cement itself as a world leader in progressive healthcare.
- **Addressing climate change.** This is a problem about which the University community cares deeply. One element of this topic, reducing the use of fossil fuels, was among the most frequently mentioned initiatives by students in the survey.

The other bold call to action that emerged from a subset of interviewees is internally focused. This subset tended to include new faculty and staff (with rich experiences at other universities) and Medical School faculty and senior staff (who perceive their campus enforces notably higher productivity standards). These interviewees are alarmed at what they perceive as the pervading culture among faculty on the Danforth Campus. **They hope the new administration has the courage to tackle faculty productivity and accountability. They are frustrated by perceived deficiencies in research productivity, scholarship expectations and teaching quality.** A frequently cited statistic was the sub-100 ranking of WashU research funding if the Medical School is excluded. Those frustrated with the Danforth faculty feel department chairs don't hold their faculty accountable. There is too much "complacency" and acceptance of "mediocrity". "There is not a culture of excellence." Furthermore, some believe the faculty is dominated by individuals who have spent the bulk of their careers at WashU, and the university doesn't hire enough faculty with experience elsewhere. Indeed, they argue a little more turnover would be a "good thing". Interviewees recognize that rooting out this issue will be controversial and fraught with risk. However, they believe it stands as the primary obstacle to elevating the Danforth Campus – and the university as a whole – to elite status.

One strategy (again, offered by a few interviewees) that might advance the reforms described above would be **replacing the traditional "department-centric" organizational model with a more collaborative and innovative structure.** (They did not offer a specific alternative.) Proponents observe that WashU has become too siloed. Fragmentation has led to duplication of efforts and inefficiencies. The university is exposed to zero-sum and beggar-thy-neighbor ways of thinking. Moreover, these interviewees argue, the current structure is not conducive to the rapidly evolving interdisciplinary education today's students seek. If the university is truly to be a leader in higher education, perhaps this is an avenue that merits exploration. Proponents would say WashU has been too conservative in its strategy, being a "fast follower" rather than a "pioneer".

## Areas of Great Alignment

Even among the wide diversity of stakeholders polled in this research, there were many recurring themes. More popular ideas tended to represent incremental improvement opportunities, in contrast to the bigger bets of the prior section.

One of the most common hopes expressed by faculty, staff, alumni, and students was **investing “less in buildings and more in people”**. There were several variations on this theme. Many are interested in investing in recruiting new faculty and staff, others in student life and welfare, still others in affordability/financial assistance. There were many questions on the wisdom or necessity of the current construction project at the east end of the Danforth Campus.

**Improving the Arts & Sciences programs (both teaching quality and research)** was another common goal. Interviewees said WashU fails to rank in the top 10 of any of the 12 core Arts & Sciences disciplines as measured by US News & World Report. Disappointment was especially common among Medical School leadership looking for stronger basic science partners on the Danforth Campus. In fact, teaching in sciences was frequently mentioned as one of the weakest areas of the university. In recent years, the university has made investments in student life, but investments in the academic experience have not kept pace. Interviewees want to see more, and more outstanding faculty added to the team. The tone may be set with the naming of the new dean in the next academic year.

Feedback on Danforth Campus research was very similar (and related) to the Arts & Sciences feedback. **Many interviewees want to see a more *focused* research investment strategy.** They’d like to see WashU “throw a lot of money at a few initiatives” instead of spreading funding evenly across schools and departments. A top-down selection of research priorities may result in some faculty feeling left out, but the strategy could be key to climbing the rankings. “We can’t be excellent at everything.” Interviewees want to see WashU cultivate additional truly outstanding programs beyond the Brown School and Medical School. Suggested focus areas included:

- Bio-informatics
- Bio-medical engineering (and more broadly the Division of Biology and Biomedical Sciences)
- Computational Sciences
- Quantitative Social Sciences
- The economics of healthcare
- Areas that complement the Medical School’s focus on personalized medicine (for example medical ethics, technology-enabled medicine, etc.)

*Focus* isn’t the only missing ingredient in WashU’s research strategy. **Many interviewees want to see improvements and investments in the Graduate School<sup>1</sup> and junior faculty orientation.** They don’t feel the university is attractive to the most promising graduate students. The university lacks the star researchers under whom PhD candidates want to study. Graduate and medical students reported disappointment with working conditions and the lack of

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<sup>1</sup> To clarify, these comments pertained to PhD programs, not the professional programs.

training/professional development. Furthermore, a few interviewees recommended elevating the reporting relationship of the Graduate School Dean – moving it to the chancellor or at least the provost (versus the dean of the Arts & Sciences faculty). With new faculty, WashU seems to struggle with orientation and grant-writing assistance. Some are looking for more or better help from OSRS and offered Duke or Northwestern as institutions with great research assistance resources.

Turning from academic topics to student-centric topics, many interviewees hope that Wash U **continues to increase its commitment to affordability and diversity in the student body**. Students, especially, are passionate about these goals. Part of this objective seems to be moving closer to a truly need-blind admissions policy and offering more advantageous financial aid packages (e.g. recruiting more students who are Pell grant eligible, more assistance with ancillary fees such as labs, extracurriculars, etc.). Another element of the objective is offering more assistance and a more welcoming environment for students of lower socio-economic status (SES). Interest in admitting and supporting low-SES students was not limited to the Danforth Campus. Representatives from the Medical School shared similar sentiments. In the process of better supporting students of lower SES, **middle class students** don't want to be overlooked. Some feel they lack natural networks on campus because the student body bifurcates into the "rich" and "poor". They don't think increased emphasis on Pell grants will help them.

Students, parents and many administrative leaders would also like to see **better mental health services for students**. There is a sense that the WashU pays "lip service" to mental health, but resources don't follow, and that peer schools do a better job of supporting students. Parents suspect students need help with resiliency and coping with failure. Critics point to counselor-to-student ratios, appointment wait times and costs. Not only is more accessible care the right thing to do, but also one bad event has the potential to seriously damage the University.

Finally, while a majority of stakeholders may not be ready to commit to the revitalization of St. Louis *on the scale described earlier*, most did voice support for at least incremental increases in the university's community development efforts. Specific initiatives spanned 5 broad categories:

- **Economic Development:** further investing Cortex, supporting the new Arch to Park initiative
- **Health:** addressing disparities and social determinants, providing services in north city/county, providing services outstate (where in some areas health outcomes are worse than north St. Louis)
- **Public Policy:** rethinking regional integration
- **Community Relations:** promoting racial equity, breaking down the "Delmar Divide"
- **Education:** increasing partnerships with KIPP, other charters and SLPS

## A Healthy Culture & Operating Environment?

The most prominent topic on which opinions are not aligned is the health of WashU’s culture. Opinions vary widely, and naturally are a product of each stakeholder’s experience. Perhaps the best illustration of these divergent opinions is the following word cloud, which represents the answers to the survey question: “What one word best describes the Washington University culture.” The cloud includes several pairs of antonyms.



Unsurprisingly, many interviewees identified **major differences between the cultures on the Danforth and Medical School campuses**. A few interviewees suggested this rift has grown worse since the days of Bill Danforth’s chancellorship. The general characterization is that the Medical Campus runs more “like a business”, with greater demands on its people, higher levels of accountability, and greater efficiency. Medical School interviewees were often frustrated by a perceived lack of compromise and consideration from Danforth Campus colleagues, despite the fact that the Medical School is a dominant economic and reputational driver for the university as a whole... and the fact that it employs 75% of all staff.

Differences in the campuses are one example of “silos” that stakeholders perceive within the university. Some see the same isolation among units or other organizational boundaries (e.g. faculty and staff). When collaboration thrives - across campuses, schools/colleges or other units - it seems to be the product of individual relationships, not formal institutional mechanisms.

**Critics of the university culture (on both campuses) would like to see significant improvements made to operational efficiency.** “We’re a \$1.6 billion enterprise that still runs like a ‘mom-and-

pop’ shop.” New people observe many processes that are done because “that’s the way we’ve always done them”. They would like to see more merit-based performance evaluations and greater accountability, and a greater sense of urgency from team members.

Some further suggest **greater centralization would improve operational efficiency**. The university’s historical preference for decentralization might be less relevant now that so many new deans are in place. Moreover, the provost has built trust among current school/college leaders, perhaps increasing the potential acceptance of shared services.<sup>2</sup>

## The Next Tier of Topics

The preceding pages capture the topics and themes that occurred with the greatest frequency in Collaborative Strategies’ research. There were a number of other topics that came up less frequently. Feedback on this next tier of topics may prove helpful in strategic planning and/or other university planning initiatives.

- Collaborative Strategies asked nearly all interviewees whether there were any programs or initiatives the university could *stop* doing (or significantly curtail). Most interviewees had nothing to offer, but a handful suggested the **university spend much less on international programs**. These interviewees didn’t see a return on investment in the international programs – especially the **McDonnell International Scholars Academy**. They also feel the university lacks a cohesive international strategy.
- The university has many “Centers” that get started within and between units. Some perceive there are **loose standards for starting and maintaining these Centers**. They argue accountability is lacking and a comprehensive review would help refocus resources on the most effective and deserving Centers.
- Medical School representatives want to see the **Alumni & Development (A&D) department expand their fundraising efforts beyond alumni** to efforts like “Grateful Patient” fundraising. There are also opportunities to better coordinate fundraising efforts with BJH Foundation. They feel A&D is too narrowly focused on the Danforth Campus.
- Staff, graduate students and medical students would like **more (and more affordable) childcare/day care options** on campus.
- The **Public Health program was described as “in limbo”** by a few interviewees. Enrollment is perceived to be weak and the Medical School disinterested in the program.

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<sup>2</sup> After the completion of this research the university announced the provost would be taking a year-long sabbatical and return in a different capacity.





- A few leaders suggested doing **more collaborations with other universities** (one example offered was the Gateway Higher Education Cybersecurity Consortium). Such efforts extend the University's reach and capabilities.
- Student (mostly in the survey) expressed support for a \$15 minimum wage.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> After the completion of this research, the university announced its commitment to achieve a \$15 minimum wage for many roles by FY21.