Comments from Senate Chair, Patricia Hart, for the September 26th meeting of the Board of Trustees

What will our Purdue family look like in 2050? Who will our students be? What will our faculty look like? How will we fill our classrooms and staff them? What about the faculty/student ratio or the ratio of tenured and tenure-track faculty to adjuncts? You and I will have moved on, but today’s young star professors will be in the prime of their careers. Generations of parents, grad and undergrad students, as well as all of the beneficiaries of Purdue research around the world are depending on what we do now.

With a shrinking pool of potential students to choose from, who will be Boilermakers? In recent years, we have gotten mixed messages. The Chronicle of Higher Education points out that across the country, we’ve seen a relentless push by college leaders for more of everything. Applicant pools could always be bigger, tuition revenue greater, student bodies more diverse, test scores higher. So what does Purdue want more of?

Can we really rely on international students—particularly Chinese—to make our bottom line add up? Other countries are already serving those students, and Chinese universities are improving by leaps and bounds. This year, graduate applications from China have leveled off and will soon decline. Undergraduate trends will not be far behind. If we want to attract foreign students tomorrow, we simply must improve their experience today. They will be prosperous alumni who will remember Purdue passionately if we serve them well now. But is our current model of 25% international undergrads sustainable?

On the other hand, if we want to serve more American students—particularly, more Hoosiers—are we doing the right things? We won’t have to wait till 2050 to perceive the demographic shift in our country or in our state. Any way you slice it, the Purdue student body is already out of kilter with state population in racial, ethnic, and socio-economic terms. We do not have the luxury of ignoring this. If we are not doing every good thing to attract both underrepresented minorities and everyone else who is working hard to enter the middle class, we will become irrelevant. There is a widespread misperception that increasing diversity means giving expensive, unfair advantage to a few to the detriment of the majority. We can combat this by initiatives that improve opportunities for all students.

Does our long-term plan factor in possible fluctuations in support from the Indiana legislature? How?

In the simplest terms, I want to ask you, what are your plans and what are your goals?
Here are mine:

- First and foremost, do everything to enhance and nothing to tarnish the excellence and value of Purdue degrees
- Reduce the number of students who drop or flunk out
- Help weaker students succeed
- Cast a wider net for Hoosier students
- Grow the number of underrepresented minorities
- Improve the experiences of international students;
- Make greater use of the physical facilities in the summer;
- Last, but not least, get students graduating on time without taking away the full range of exciting, life-changing college experiences that they want and expect.

Are these things tops on your list? If so, I believe you will be happy to learn of a plan forthcoming from the committee assembled to examine the calendar. It will be presented soon to the President for his input. It has enormous potential to address some or all of these goals. I can’t tell you details, but it could be unique in the country. Some extremely caring and thoughtful people have spent a lot of time on it.

Purdue is a massive enterprise that cannot turn on a dime. Some people might think that we faculty are just resistant to change, set in our ways, or even lazy—whatever the cost to our students—but this is simply not true. No group of highly-trained employees want to make massive changes unless they understand them and think they will be improvements. Faculty at this great university are no exception.

Let’s trust and respect each other. Let’s be clear about what we want. Let’s talk numbers.

I am confident that if we do these things, we can work together to make clear goals and commit to achieving them.