Update Regarding the Purdue/Kaplan Deal

As I mentioned in my last update, the University Senate passed a resolution with overwhelming majority in opposition to the proposed Purdue/Kaplan deal last May. I also sent a letter explaining our opposition to the Indiana Commission for Higher Education and the Higher Learning Commission. Since these commissions are still reviewing Purdue’s proposal, and we have not received a response to our letters yet, I called for a meeting of the Senate Leadership (composed by all of the standing committee chairs, as well as by the present and past senate chairs and the vice-chair). At this meeting, we reviewed Vice-Provost Frank Dooley’s Frequently Asked Questions document regarding the Purdue/Kaplan deal, which was meant to respond to the large number of questions and comments gathered from faculty and sent to President Daniels. We found this document useful, but there are still many questions that can only be answered by engaging in direct conversations with faculty. So, I believe it would be useful to take a moment now to clarify and re-state some of our concerns and next steps.

First of all, it is extremely important that we make clear that we are not against the notion of making higher education more accessible to non-traditional students. Equally important, our opposition to the proposed Purdue/Kaplan deal should _not_ be interpreted as being blindly opposed to on-line education either. We need to agree to agree that these are _not_ the main issues. In fact, Purdue currently offers a variety of successful on-line programs, developed and led by well-established scholars. Based on the dozens of questions and comments gathered by faculty, and that were sent to President Daniels, our concerns could be grouped into three broad categories:

1. **Shared-governance**: This is the third time the University Senate feels that the carpet was pulled from under us by the current administration and that the principle of shared governance was not upheld regarding major university decisions. The first time was in 2014, when Purdue Calumet and Purdue North Central were merged into Purdue Northwest; the second time was in 2016, when the Board of Trustees passed a resolution to re-structure (meaning eliminate and suspend) some programs at the Purdue Fort Wayne campus. And, now the most shocking for faculty was the proposed Purdue/Kaplan deal. I had already described our concerns regarding shared governance in the letter we sent to the respective commissions, so no need to re-state them here.
2. The enigmatic nature of the new entity being proposed and its potential risk to the Purdue Brand: One of the reasons that the Purdue/Kaplan deal is causing so much anxiety amongst faculty—who are scholars dedicated to finding potential answers to critical questions—is the enigmatic nature of the proposed new entity. So far, it is easier to describe it by what it is not. While this educational entity will offer many courses and programs already available at Purdue and its regional campuses, it will not be operated by Purdue; it will not be governed by Purdue policies; and, in fact, it will have its own set of rules (like not being bound by Indiana’s public records law). So, it is not really a public university; and it is definitely not Purdue On-Line since faculty were not involved in the development and coordination of programs and curriculum. Nevertheless, since this new entity is obviously financially associated with Purdue, many are still concerned about potential risks to Purdue’s long standing reputation as a top national and international university.

3. Issues regarding program/curriculum coordination and risks to students:
A major concern for faculty is whether the very students that this proposed deal is seeking to support will be set up for failure when they seek to transfer course credits through the proposed educational entity, or when they seek to pursue other advanced degrees at any of the Purdue campuses after completing an on-line degree. Since there has been no consultation and coordination of programs, curricula and requirements between Purdue and the proposed entity, there is the potential that non-traditional students seeking to advance their goals might encounter an assortment of stumbling blocks in the pursuit of their career goals.

Therefore, politically speaking, we will continue to oppose the Purdue/Kaplan deal, and hope that the commissions for higher education conduct a detailed review. At the very least, the letters we sent were meant to create a “moment of pause” for everyone to more deeply reflect on the implications of jumping into this fast-moving train we are temporarily calling “New U.”

Pragmatically speaking, however, if the Purdue/Kaplan proposal is approved by the commissions, the University Senate has a moral and professional obligation to do right by students and faculty. Therefore, we will take steps to work with the administration to ensure that their rights are fully protected. I am currently gathering concrete suggestions from members of the Senate and other interested faculty in order to devise a plan of action. For example, some of the Senate’s actions might involve assigning various tasks to committees, such as monitoring the academic performance of New U transfer students and/or students who completed a degree
through that entity. Another task could be asking faculty to carefully review similar programs to those offered by New U in order to contrast requirements and standards. We will be better able to determine a plan of action when the University Senate and its committees resume their regular meetings next month, and of course after we learn the respective commissions’ final decision.

I would like to close by re-stating that the faculty is eager to work productively with the university administration and that we should take steps to improve our collaboration. The Senate Advisory Committee meets monthly with President Daniels, and I also scheduled monthly meetings with Provost Akridge. President Daniels and I talked about scheduling monthly meetings as well. We of course recognize that the President and Board of Trustees have the authority to make major decisions regarding the financial well-being of Purdue. We are only re-affirming that through shared governance an institution of higher learning like Purdue can tap into the readily and freely available talent of its faculty to ensure the best possible direction for our university.