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### Après le Déluge at State U: A Comprehensive Public University Responds to the Great Recession

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# recession

## Après le Déluge at State U

### A Comprehensive Public University Responds to the Great Recession

By Richard A. Skinner and Emily R. Miller

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We propose to tell a story. It is about one institution we think is representative of an important type and a large proportion of American universities, the comprehensive public university, and its responses to the lingering Great Recession.

As a group, comprehensives handle almost 40 per cent of the total student enrollment in the US. The 400-plus member institutions of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) account for almost half of all four-year public enrollments.

Virtually all American colleges and universities—public and private—have been hurt by what we now know to be the worst economic crisis since the Depression. Over the past several years, we have listened to the stories of representatives from every group. Along with community colleges, comprehensive public universities are the most battered among them.

The time therefore seems right to begin to take stock of the present state of affairs—which, as grim as it is, may be “as good as it gets”—and to describe one institution’s attempts to adapt to it.

We think our story is illustrative; we hope it is instructive.

### Somewhere in the Middle

They defy easy categorization. Even nomenclature is problematic. We dub them “comprehensive publics.” But save for state government support, these institutions vary in countless ways.

- They exist in downtowns, in small towns, and in suburbs and exurbs along interstate highways.
- They enroll a few thousand to nearly 40,000 students.
- Their missions are variously defined in terms of
  - a designated role within a state’s system of higher education,
  - geography (with the expectation that most students reside within three hours of campus), and
  - the specialization of the institution’s degree offerings and curriculum within an otherwise comprehensive set of majors and degrees.

Despite their differences, though, these institutions have this in common: Their current financial situations are difficult, if not dire.

With slight research portfolios in comparison to research-intensive institutions and small to middling endowments, comprehensive public universities cannot look to federal or donated funding to relieve the almost-annual budget cuts imposed by states since 2008 as part of a long-term trend toward a reduced state financing of US higher education.

To date, their recourse has been to raise tuition and fees to offset some of the losses in funding. But the fiscal relief purchased by these increases often constrains access for citizens seeking a college degree.

Caught among options that appear to offer little in the way of real relief, the choices and plans of these institutions’ leaders will have an important impact on American higher education now and for years to come. Here we describe one institution as a case study that illustrates the complexity and vulnerability of these essential building blocks of the state systems of higher education as they adapt to a changing environment.

### TOBACCO, TEACHERS, AND THE LONG SHADOW OF THE TAR HEELS

Coming from the north, you exit Interstate-95 at Rocky Mount to begin the last leg of the journey to Greenville, North Carolina, home of East Carolina University (ECU). You drive on secondary roads that bisect large fields of corn where once, more “bright” tobacco was grown and sold than in any other county in the world.

Pitt County, home of ECU, while not losing population, is encircled by ten of the state’s twelve rural counties, which are.

North Carolina’s poverty rate of 17.5 percent is the highest since 1981. Median household income in North Carolina fell by more than \$3,500 between 2000 and 2008 and continued to decline through 2010. Its high unemployment rate is likely to persist for some time.

Just prior to the onset of the Great Recession, rural North Carolina had to endure a series of disasters, including two hurricanes that did \$1.3 billion of damage to the state and the worst drought in the recorded history of the state, which all but destroyed three growing seasons.

Cumulatively, these events produced sharply declining state revenues. They fluctuated from an increase of more than \$40 million in 2000 to successive declines of nearly \$2 billion, just over \$1 billion, and more than \$500 million between 2009 and 2011.

The Great Recession also brought home the reality that the economy that had supported North Carolina for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was no more. As the North Carolina Commission on Workforce Development concluded, “The recession accelerated the state’s shift to this knowledge-based economy because firms had to adjust to this new reality in a much shorter timeframe.”

Compounding the state’s troubles is the immigration into North Carolina by young Hispanics with low levels of education. Meanwhile, within-state migration from rural to metropolitan regions—slowed during the recession—is likely to increase over time and bring to the cities yet more workers who lack both education and skills.

ECU—with more than 27,000 students enrolled—is tightly bound to the region in which it is located. The institution that began in 1907 as East Carolina Teachers College now includes 12 academic schools and colleges, plus a graduate school, Division I athletics, and a distance-education arm that enrolls more than 5,000 students hailing from 38 states and several foreign countries.

ECU has experienced the familiar stresses of balancing the teaching and research of its faculty, as well as the competition between academic programs over resources. However, faculty workloads reflect an effort to acknowledge faculty preferences in teaching and research without de-valuing either.

ECU’s 5,500 employees make it the second-largest employer in the immediate vicinity and one of the largest in

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eastern North Carolina. Save for a few remaining poultry-processing plants, health-care facilities account for most of the other large employers in the region. And health care, including its own medical and dental schools, is perhaps the most prominent area of education, outreach, and research for the university.

The institution has historically depended heavily on state support to keep tuition low for students, to pay the costs of enrolling more students each year, and to build facilities. State support has been particularly critical to start and sustain expensive programs that might create the graduates needed in the region. That support began to decline just as the university's enrollment crested and when some of those new programs were launched.

Finally, any portrait of a public university in North Carolina must take into account that it is one of sixteen campuses of the University of North Carolina (UNC). Except for Chapel Hill and North Carolina State, the other fourteen campuses must find their identities in a specialized mission or by serving a distinct region of the state. ECU does the latter.

The UNC system is noteworthy because North Carolina is bound constitutionally to provide low-cost postsecondary education to its citizens. As Section 9 states,

The General Assembly shall provide that the benefits of The University of North Carolina and other public institutions of higher education, as far as practicable, be extended to the people of the State free of expense.

For much of its history, North Carolina generously funded public higher education, so that the price of attending college was among the lowest in the US. Among the sixteen UNC campuses, ECU had the fifth-highest tuition in 2006-07, at \$2,335. But in comparison with fifteen national peers, ECU had the fourteenth-lowest tuition.

Low prices and the increasing selectivity of Chapel Hill and North Carolina State made ECU an attractive choice for North Carolina college-goers—especially for many residents of eastern North Carolina. The percent of the university's enrollment made up by residents of the state's eastern region was 36.8 percent of total enrollment and over half of on-campus in-state enrollment. Like many other comprehensive public universities around the country, the institution's enrollment growth was continuous: It increased from just over 10,000 students in 1970 to nearly 28,000 in 2010 and by more than 48 percent between 2000 and 2010 alone.

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**North Carolina is bound constitutionally to provide low-cost postsecondary education to its citizens.**

### Le Débûge

And then events of 2008 unfolded. Writing to the campus in May 2009, Chancellor Steve Ballard acknowledged that "just a few months ago, we prepared scenarios for a 7 percent cut for the coming year, and we considered that the worse case." He went on:

Today, a 7 percent base budget reduction would be welcome. ... Therefore, I have asked the vice chancellors and the deans to:

- Immediately implement a 7 percent base budget reduction;
- Prepare for an additional 2 percent reduction to be implemented this summer, or as soon as we receive further guidance from the General Administration [of the UNC system];
- Prepare plans for a total spending reduction of 14 percent for fiscal year 2009-10, or a base budget cut of \$39.9 million.

Between 2008 and 2012, ECU lost in excess of \$150 million in state appropriations. During the same period and including the 2012-13 fiscal year, tuition rose by 51 percent.

Beginning in 2009, tuition increases and battered state and regional economies began to affect enrollment at ECU. Cresting at nearly 28,000 in fall 2010, total enrollment dipped slightly and then remained flat. Enrollment by students from eastern North Carolina declined in both real and relative terms, from 9,000 students in 2006-07 to slightly more than 8,600 in 2011-12. Now they comprise less than half of on-campus in-state enrollments for the first time in ECU's history.

Black student enrollment at ECU declined slightly in fall 2011, while Hispanic enrollment dropped by 10 per cent. More ominous still were 11 percent and 35 percent decreases in first-time freshmen enrollments by blacks and Hispanics, respectively.

The percent of students attending part time rather than full time nearly doubled from fall 2010 to fall 2011, suggesting that students could not afford the cost of full-time enrollment and were having to work more to earn enough to pay the higher tuition.

As the cuts kept coming, the university's leadership decided to adapt to what was becoming a permanently changed environment, one that—whatever the constitution stated—had the state providing less and students paying more.

## AS GOOD AS IT GETS?

In launching what has become an on-going process, ECU's leadership embarked on reshaping the university to fit with the times—but to conserve what ECU had become in recent years, not to fundamentally alter the institution.

Two committees set the academic priorities. First, the Educational Planning and Policies Committee (EPPC) of the faculty senate, and then, a chancellor-appointed Program Prioritization Committee (PPC)—comprised of faculty, administrators, and staff who represented the institution at large—examined how existing resources could be used to advance strategic institutional priorities.

The environment for this work was captured in guiding notes by the EPPC:

It is readily acknowledged that many units may be highly resistant to change due to a number of very legitimate concerns. However, such concerns must be weighed against the fact that the retention of faculty positions and ultimate survival of the University in time of financial limitations must take priority. (April 15, 2011)

Before the announcement of the PPC in February 2011, the chancellor charged the EPPC to develop two preliminary reports. The first was to define potential tangible and quantifiable methods for prioritizing academic areas. The committee designed a rubric (the Program Data Template) to assess programs on three dimensions: centrality, productivity, and quality. This initial rubric, which provided a starting point for the PPC's academic prioritization work, is available at <http://www.ecu.edu/ppc/eppcreport.cfm>. The second report was to describe one potential structural reorganization scenario to generate administrative cost savings and increase administrative efficiencies.

In May 2011, using the work done by the EPPC as a starting point, the PPC began a two-phase process to recommend investments in and reallocations to academic programs for the next five years. Using the academic priority-setting plans from Washington State University and Indiana State University as models (counsel from officials at those institutions also assisted the PPC), Phase I focused on prioritizing academic programs. In Phase II, the committee examined the structural arrangement of academic programs, including academic administrative configurations.

During Phase I the PPC refined the program data template by considering feedback from department chairs and school directors, as well as the university community. By August 15, the committee had collected quantitative data and qualitative narratives from ten colleges and schools and 70 departments.

During the fall, colleges' self-studies were drafted based on departmental data and priority scoring by the PCC. Resolved not to repeat across-the-board cuts, the PPC assessed the financial viability and regional relevance of each certificate, degree, program, and academic unit. Committee members were apparently in close agreement that ECU

The university seems determined to maintain as much access as possible for students whose own and whose families' incomes are, more often than not, declining.

should remain bound to the region—which, the committee chair noted, invokes “a feeling of accountability you can’t escape.” Research linked to the region was also considered to have the potential to attract regional investments and federally funded grants.

On January 16, 2012 the PPC recommended 11 units for reduction and 68 programs (degrees, minors, and certificates) for reduction or elimination. Eight units and 32 programs were recommended for investment. Along with the assessment to develop priority areas was the recommendation to maintain 32 units and 161 programs. The chair of the PPC tentatively projected that 30 faculty positions would eventually be reallocated between units and result in an estimated \$3 million for reinvestment. Phase II was launched with the dissemination of a white paper discussing 57 possible structural adjustments that affected departments, divisions, and colleges. Starting in February 2012, the PPC hosted 12 college-level forums to discuss the white paper and issued an electronic survey. The faculty senate also held a special session to present units’ responses to the white paper.

By March 30, the PPC had developed three scenarios based on some permutation of the proposed structural adjustments, each assessed in terms of campus-wide academic administrative savings. The PPC hosted a series of scenario-specific forums with the university community to obtain reactions and testimonies, during which college-level restructuring was frequently challenged by forum attendees.

The committee made a set of structural recommendations to improve academic administrative efficiencies campus-wide, reduce academic costs in alignment with Phase I recommendations, and to protect the academic core. PPC’s chair estimated the amount of these administrative savings as likely to be \$1.2 million.

These recommendations reflected the guiding principles of the PCC, an appreciation that in 2003 ECU had conducted university-wide restructuring of academic units, and an understanding that “our University’s current organizational structure is the result of decades of decisions; some well-considered and some ad hoc” (PPC, Phase II Recommendations, April 30, 2012).

## WHERE MATTERS STAND

Only time will tell if and how this effort at institutional change enables ECU to adjust to what appear to be per-

manent features of the higher education landscape. As this article was being completed, officials of the university were contending with a variety of uncertainties (e.g., enrollment and the state's planning assumptions for the next fiscal years). Still, one of the administrative staff charged with managing ECU's budget related that "the PPC's recommendations are what we are using."

Pressed to estimate what this process had produced in terms of change and money, officials at ECU were understandably cautious, since results were only beginning to be apparent and the process will be on-going. For example, ECU's provost currently applies the work of the PPC in negotiating with deans and department chairs over faculty positions and all other resource requests.

If at this early stage of implementation an outside observer has to look hard to see the results of what insiders consider very hard decisions, then an assessment may simply be premature. But the chair of the PPC estimated that

in terms of reallocation of faculty positions (between units), there appear to be five thus far. ... If we assume \$100,000 per position (including benefits), that's about \$500,000 thus far. That reallocation will continue. We consider these to be a type of savings.

On the administrative side, two departments were merged and a deanship was eliminated (albeit with stipends to be paid to persons assuming some of the former dean's duties); these efforts realized \$170,000 in savings.

The amount of savings thus far achieved may seem relatively modest in comparison to the university's budget of \$283 million until one recalls that these are on top of cuts already made over the past four years that were only partially offset by tuition increases. As many at ECU related, so much has already been lost already that little remains to be whittled away.

The institution is reallocating funds from areas identified for reduction to those targeted for investment. And even in the midst of budget cuts, ECU sought and won legislative support for special funding of a second statewide dental school program that aims to produce graduates who will be prepared to, and ultimately may, practice in rural areas of the state.

Chancellor Ballard insists that one quarter of revenues produced by tuition increases be allocated to need-based student financial aid. While the tuition increase approved for 2012-13 is the highest in the university's history, ECU's tuition remains among the lowest among its national peers. The university seems determined to maintain as much access as possible for students whose own and whose families' incomes are, more often than not, declining.

Still, the university's leaders are aware that the process they used to gain a greater measure of control over ECU's future has had its costs, especially in what administrators view as a loss of trust on the campus and among a variety of stakeholders.

The speed and severity with which states' economies and budgets deteriorated beginning in 2008 required nearly

## TIMELINE

February 2011

- Chancellor Ballard requests preliminary reports from the Faculty Senate Educational Policies and Planning Committee (EPPC)

April 2011

- Chancellor Ballard appoints the Program Prioritization Committee (PPC)

April 8, 2011

- EPPC submits the preliminary academic prioritization rubric (Program Data Template) to the chancellor

April 15, 2011

- EPPC submits its preliminary academic administration consolidation scenario to the chancellor

April 19, 2011

- The Faculty Senate reviews the EPPC reports

April 26, 2011

- Faculty Open Forum to discuss the EPPC reports

May – June 2011

- PPC establishes the academic prioritization phases

June 10, 2011

- PPC refines and distributes the Program Data Template

July – August 2011

- PPC obtains feedback on a refined Program Data Template
  - Meetings with deans, department chairs, school directors
  - Shared with the university community on a website

July 15, 2011

- The Program Data Template is issued to department chairs and school directors

August 15, 2011

- Departments and schools submit completed the Program Data Template to PPC

August – September 2011

- Teams of PPC members score departments, schools, and programs

September 20, 2011

- College self-studies are drafted by the PPC and submitted to the colleges for comment

November 1, 2011

- College self-studies take their final form

January 16, 2012

- Phase I recommendations are submitted to the chancellor

February 15, 2012

- PPC issues a white paper on structural adjustments

February 17 – March 1, 2012

- PPC hosts college-level forums to gain feedback on the white paper

February 24 – March 9, 2012

- PPC conducts an online survey to gain feedback on the white paper

March 20, 2012

- The Faculty Senate holds special session to present unit-level responses to the white paper

March 30, 2012

- PPC develops and prepares a report on three scenarios for possible structural changes

April 9-12, 2012

- PPC hosts series of scenario-specific forums

April 30, 2012

- Phase II recommendations are submitted to the chancellor

immediate reactions by colleges and universities. Initial responses were often insufficient as estimates of the magnitude of declining revenues often turned out to be optimistic and larger cuts were required in the final months of fiscal years.

There was simply too little time for universities to do more than react.

Now, enough time has passed for a consensus to have formed that there will be no return to earlier, better times. Like the faculty and staff of ECU, many other institutions have begun to prepare for a “new normal.” The process has taught some lessons that are worth sharing with institutions that are undertaking this kind of work, but it has also raised awareness of some of the deeper challenges they will face.

The priority-setting process itself was (and for comparable institutions attempting anything similar will be) unglamorous but very important. Certain decisions were critical, including the following:

- the context was characterized as urgent,
- the PPC chair was credible to faculty and staff,
- the PPC ensured transparency and inclusive participation,
- the PCC used data in a variety of formats, and
- the committee took a comprehensive look at the institution.

These allowed the PPC to move forward in an expedited manner and avoid having the process get sidetracked or slowed to a pace that would necessitate arbitrary decisions. And this work was not done for a bookshelf: It is actually being used.

Faculty governance remains important. But traditional governance structures, particularly faculty senates and their equivalents, are ill situated to address the university-wide academic and administrative questions that currently confront institutions. When pressures for change are inexorable and are affecting the institution as a whole, debate and deliberation requires an institutional perspective, with voices from a variety of vantage points.

The lesson we draw is that presidents and boards should begin now to engage their community of stakeholders in serious conversations about their institutions’ futures. Colleges and universities that ignore the forces now at work on higher education are likely to be imperiled by inaction.

## CHALLENGES

There are deeper issues raised by this examination of one university’s attempts to deal with a changing landscape while conserving its essential identity. Foremost, the questions that need to be asked by and of universities are increasingly existential, so the processes used to address them ought to start with fundamental ones.

*Why and how will we be viable in five or 10 years?*

**A consensus [has] formed that there will be no return to earlier, better times.**

**Traditional governance structures...  
are ill situated to address the  
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administrative questions that  
currently confront institutions.**

Tweaking on the margins will not be enough to grapple with the kinds of pressures that are mounting.

ECU’s leaders framed the debate in terms of institutional survival. But it may be that even as exacting a process as the one used at that institution (or at Indiana State and Washington State) may not be sufficiently fundamental, or timely, or transformative enough. It may be that comprehensive universities must consider an even more fundamental question:

*Is the traditional institution that provides most post-secondary education in this country viable in a rapidly changing environment that seems to call into question much of what it does and is?*

East Carolina attempted to conserve as much as it could of its identity before the Great Recession. But the process the university employed to cope with reductions in state support and the criteria by which programs and units were assessed may not do justice to the existential threat that appears to be looming over American higher education. Perhaps ECU cannot retain the traditions, semblance, processes, and trappings of the conventional state university but instead must transform itself into something radically different.

## Culture

Colleges and universities are often characterized as conservative with respect to change in general and particularly resistant to exhortations to change. Our study of ECU convinces us that comprehensive public universities can determine – at least in part – their futures. But that conviction presumes that those institutions are prepared to make what are most likely zero-sum choices about what they want to be.

An interesting contrast is apparent in the comments by the Board of Visitors of the University of Virginia in remarks that followed the removal of President Teresa Sullivan in June 2012:

The Board believes this environment calls for a much faster pace of change in administrative structure, in governance, in financial resource development and in resource prioritization and allocation. We do not believe we can even maintain our current standard under a model of incremental, marginal change. The world is simply moving too fast.

ECU, working as part of a statewide system under a single Board of Governors, completed a process of institution-wide priority setting and resource reallocation in 14 months. Leadership and resolve, it appears, can stimulate what in academia is considered prompt action. But how well the action suits the circumstances of the moment or whether it is timely enough are – absent the verdict of history—in the eye of the beholder.

Our conviction that substantive change is possible is tempered by the recognition that choosing one future over another does not bestow any measure of certainty that the selected future will be successful. While we applaud the commitment with which ECU has tied its fate to that of the region it is charged to serve, that region faces formidable odds in trying to reverse decades of decline. We are not convinced that the university – or any other single entity – can stop that decline.

### Governance Structures

Ours is a very fragmented educational system, with various loci of control and institutional types and loosely coupled linkages among colleges and universities, K-12 education, and the workforce and professions.

Even North Carolina, with a single system of public baccalaureate and graduate institutions, wrestles to align that system with a community college system under yet another governing board, primary and secondary schools, independent/private colleges and universities, and a workforce in which there are few large employers and which is undergoing change every bit as fundamental and powerful as that affecting higher education.

Each of the discrete elements in that constellation can work very hard to carry out its mission and remain viable, and yet the system as a whole may not be coordinated. For example, community colleges may decide that improving student mobility via transfer is their primary mission, and that decision may assist four-year institutions seeking to improve graduation rates by shifting the costs of the first two years to the colleges and focusing on seeing students through to graduation. This is, in fact, part of ECU's strategy for improving graduation rates.

But North Carolina has a large number of under-educated, low-skilled citizens for whom preparation for employment cannot wait. The eastern region of the state is no longer a place where unskilled workers can find jobs in agriculture, so who or what will help this sizable component of the population?

### Leadership

Leadership from the governor and the legislature is sorely needed to make choices among competing claims on state resources and to ensure that the components that make up the system of education, are aligned and coordinated. But state politics, in North Carolina and elsewhere, have become every bit as polarized as those at the national level. Meanwhile, higher education is viewed by some governors and legislators as a private benefit (for which the beneficiary

should pay more of the cost), not a public good. So we are not optimistic that such leadership will be forthcoming.

The situation in which ECU finds itself and the challenges that confront North Carolina have their nuances and idiosyncrasies that make the institution and the state distinctive. But they are not so unique as to make their experiences irrelevant to other public universities and to other states. One of the Tarheel State's adopted sons – James Taylor – sang of “signs that might be omens,” and our analysis suggests he was on to something. 

*Portions of this article appeared in a series entitled Pathways to the Academic Presidency and published the online Inside Higher Education between September 2011 and May 2012. We are grateful for the comments and suggestions of Doug Lederman, but responsibility for this content and its flaws is ours alone.*

*Members of Chancellor Steve Ballard's executive leadership group – Provost Marilyn Sheerer, Vice Chancellor for Finance & Administration Rick Niswander, Interim Vice Chancellor for Research & Graduate Studies Ron Mitchelson, and Chief of Staff Philip Rogers—and their staffs were most forthcoming in responding to requests for information and answering a persistent stream of questions.*

*Larry James, associate executive vice president at Washington State University, provided us with the history of the priority-setting process there.*

*Finally, we are grateful to the anonymous reviewers who examined an earlier draft of this article and pointed out ways to make it stronger.*

### RESOURCES

For program prioritization reports and recommendations see:

- East Carolina University Program Prioritization Committee <http://www.ecu.edu/ppc/>
- Indiana State University Program Prioritization [http://www.indstate.edu/academicaffairs/program\\_prioritization.htm](http://www.indstate.edu/academicaffairs/program_prioritization.htm)
- Washington State University Academic Affairs Program Prioritization <http://academic-prioritization.wsu.edu/>

For one president's approach to fashioning something new, see the comments of Michael Crow of Arizona State University at:

- <http://www.collegeproductivity.org/blogs/asu-president-michael-crow-describes-'new-american-university'>
- <http://www.futureofstateuniversities.com/speakers/mike-simmons-2/>