

Buffalo State College

Institutional and Programmatic Distinctiveness Concept Paper

Introduction

“Institutional distinctiveness” defines a characteristic that differentiates Buffalo State College from most other universities. This distinctiveness (also known as “horizontal distinctiveness”) would not mean Buffalo State would be one of a kind or the absolute best of all colleges, but rather that we would be recognized in higher education as among the best of colleges pursuing similar goals. Our distinctiveness would make us nationally known in academic circles and recognized by our peers for a specialized excellence in higher education.

Institutional distinctiveness sets a focus around which our innovations and accomplishments can be centered. -We pursue distinctiveness as a way of focusing intellectual energy and using limited resources effectively.

“Programmatic distinctiveness,” on the other hand, represents disciplinary or cross-disciplinary areas of excellence that have achieved, or are poised to achieve, distinction at the local, regional, national, or international level. Identifying this distinctiveness (also known as “vertical distinctiveness”) would mean validating our areas of program strength, in both academic and support areas.

Our efforts to be distinctive must be in harmony with Buffalo State’s sense of mission—that is, with our knowledge of who we are, what we do well, and whom we serve. Seeking distinction can energize us and provide a sense of community as we share a common vision. Our students can identify with the institution’s goals, become engaged in its patterns of shared thoughts, and participate in meaningful actions that will have a lasting impact on their lives.

History and Process

Buffalo State has been in the process of defining academic and institutional distinctiveness as part of the strategic planning that began two years ago. At least four college groups have contributed to articulating a focus that would inspire and unify the campus community and a process for identifying programs of distinction.

The original task force defined the elements of institutional (horizontal) and programmatic (vertical) distinctiveness. The second task force defined rubrics for evaluating distinctiveness, which were later modified and broadened to be used as templates by academic and support units to establish how their programs are distinctive. A subsequent work group articulated the broad idea of creating an image of Buffalo State as an “engaged campus,” one connected to student-centered learning, with a rich learning environment and a dynamic relationship with the community fostered through service learning and applied research.

The final task force incorporated the work of previous committees with feedback from a fall 2003 college stakeholders meeting and refined the concept of engagement further. This group proposed that Buffalo State be known for its way of “Integrating Inquiry and Action.”

Integrating Inquiry and Action: Our Definitions

Integration is the core concept of this approach—integration would be the key to Buffalo State’s distinctiveness. Various institutions and departments excel in developing inquiry, others in promoting action; we aim to excel in the integration of these two. Knowing for the sake of knowing is not enough, and neither is action that is not rooted in inquiry. The integrative relationship between inquiry and action is cyclical and ongoing. Engaging in inquiry leads to ideas and questions about action, and similarly, engaging in action inevitably raises new questions and concerns that require further inquiry.

Inquiry fosters the development of intellectual curiosity, the capacity to engage others, and a desire to learn continuously. The educator’s role is to provide a sound theoretical base to inquiry, and to model how inquiry applies in an academic discipline as well as how to make productive connections between theory and practice. The student’s role is to be an active learner through processing information, questioning, and creatively solving problems.

Action results when learners are able to put their knowledge and skills to use. Action derived from inquiry creates a greater level of engagement in learning and, potentially, greater meaning to learning. The educator’s role is to help students develop plans for engaging in action. The student’s role is to be open to the many ways that he or she can apply knowledge and skills to create a better world, whether within the academic setting or the broader community.

Why Does “Integrating Inquiry and Action” Suit Buffalo State?

There are many reasons why focusing on the process of integrating inquiry and action seems well suited to Buffalo State. Through all sessions with committees and stakeholders, these characteristics about our college came repeatedly to the forefront:

- We are teacher-scholars in the classroom, closely and directly challenging students; we are not a research university, but a place where full-time faculty rather than teaching assistants focus on student-centered learning.
- We mentor students, encouraging them to develop as leaders and to make transitions to the professional world; many of our major programs are closely related to applications in the working world; our research is applied. Our “hands on” teaching has given us a reputation in the community for creating graduates ready to step competently into professional positions.
- In addition to their discipline-related research, our faculty conduct research in the scholarship of teaching and learning (our established connection to the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning), in the processes of creative thought (our International Center for Studies in Creativity and creative studies program), and in the foundations of educational development (our extensive NCATE-approved teacher preparation and educational foundations programs). We can use this research to improve and enrich our teaching. We encourage our faculty to make active connections between their research and teaching.

- Our small classes promote situations where students can actively solve problems (e.g., the art conservation program, the Great Lakes Center, the forensic chemistry and communication programs), and we provide opportunities for laboratory, field, and studio experiences (e.g., in our visual and performing arts departments).
- The new major grant we received in service learning—“Civic Engagement”—is bringing Buffalo State students to Buffalo’s West Side as tutors and workers.
- Our culture of undergraduate research (with our recently increased support for the Undergraduate Research Office) will enable students to be actively involved in research and creative activities in and out of the classroom.
- Our urban location means that students engage in a variety of off-campus experiences as student teachers, interns, service learners, and volunteers; in addition, professionals from the community readily come to campus to share their expertise with our students.

While in many ways, integrating inquiry and action already characterizes much of who we are and what we do, we nonetheless aspire to the following characteristics (and perhaps many others that may yet develop) as a way of becoming nationally recognized and known for our excellence in integrating inquiry and action:

- Our best practices in connecting theory and practice.
- Our general liberal education program, which manifests in the connection of ideas within a discipline and across disciplines, and connects intellectual foundations requirements with major disciplines.
- Our expertise in the scholarship of teaching and learning.
- Our development of a curriculum that is problem based and inquiry based.
- Our creation of classroom situations that facilitate and encourage students to become problem solvers and agents of change, as well as intellectuals.
- Our requirement that all students participate in a culminating course or experience in which they apply the lessons of their discipline.
- The fact that our students and their teachers, indeed most members of the Buffalo State community, are engaged in professional or service activities in Western New York and beyond.

Conclusion

Competition for students, financial support, and public favor is the new reality in American higher education. Institutions are recognizing that they cannot compete successfully without being perceived as worthy of the public’s confidence and investment. An institution’s ability to earn and sustain comparative advantages requires that it be perceived as possessing distinguishing attributes and characteristics that are valued and respected in the academic community.

Ultimately at Buffalo State, we will all benefit from the process of developing, achieving, and sustaining enhanced academic and institutional identity, distinctiveness, and vitality.