



# Commitment to Excellence

*A Planning Agenda for Mississippi State University  
through the year 2001*

Final Report of the  
Priorities and Planning Committee, Phase I

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Presented to Donald W. Zacharias, President  
Mississippi State University  
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# COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

Mississippi State University's land-grant heritage, anchored in agriculture and the mechanical arts with emphasis on "practical" or professional education, and with a broad foundation in general studies, has guided its development as a dynamic and strong partner committed to the development of Mississippi's citizens. This heritage has evolved into a major commitment to science and technology and to various emerging professions, such as business administration, education, and public administration, while simultaneously providing exposure for undergraduate students to a broad range of ideas that enable them to function as productive citizens in a rapidly changing world.

MSU's land-grant roots also have led to an emphasis on research to solve technical and social problems faced by the state and on outreach mechanisms to share the results of research beyond the classroom. This research mission enhances opportunities to provide students with an educational experience that expands their knowledge in a worthwhile way and prepares them to contribute to basic and meaningful solutions to scientific, technical, and societal problems.

## Charting MSU'S Future

Financial support from the state has declined in real terms, thereby forcing increased reliance on tuition, fees, and other public and private funding sources. Simultaneously, demands on the institution from both internal and external constituencies have grown. Students demand quality instruction that meets specific career needs and that prepares them for life-long learning, faculty seek equipment and support services which enable them to interact effectively with peers around the world, and the institution places new demands on faculty time. Board of Trustees and legislative pressures for efficiency, cost containment, and accountability grow daily. In such a climate, the likelihood of a multitude of external forces defining MSU's future continues to increase.

As a community of scholars, MSU must take responsibility for ensuring that academic quality and integrity are maintained. This will require priorities for programs, a difficult task at best, since *"No program now in place is without merit; none is without external support; none is now funded too generously. But some priorities are more urgent than others because needs are more desperate or because programs are more central."*

MSU's reputation remains a prestigious one; however, the University now stands at a critical juncture. MSU can no longer attempt to be all things to all

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<sup>1</sup>Academic Priorities, 1988-1993, University of Minnesota, 1988.

people. Rather, it must narrow its focus and do fewer things so that what remains can be done as effectively as in the past and so that opportunities will continue to exist to meet tomorrow's challenges.

## **Basic Premises**

The Planning and Priorities Committee, appointed to recommend a future course of action for MSU, used the following premises to guide its deliberations:

- Mississippi State University affirms its commitment to the land-grant mission and to the economic and educational development of the state's citizens.
- MSU's resource base is currently inadequate to sustain the quality of all existing programs, and this is not likely to change in the foreseeable future. The University must responsibly define the areas in which its contributions can be most significant, enjoy public support, and provide the faculty, students, and staff with a sense of pride and accomplishment that energizes their efforts.
- Undergraduate education will remain a primary component of MSU's mission.
- Graduate education and research are inextricably related and central to MSU's mission.
- Certain disciplines and academic programs are central to all universities and provide a foundation for the overall strength of more specialized University programs. Many professional programs, for example, are anchored to arts and science programs and many agricultural programs are supported by the biological and chemical sciences.
- Coping with life, the workplace, and the evolving global arena dictates that MSU place increased emphasis on dealing with issues of cultural diversity.
- Emerging technologies and economic realities create the need for expanded international involvement both in the classroom and in study abroad experiences for our students; these environmental conditions also create opportunities for outreach and research in traditional areas of strength.
- Innovations in learning technology and the growing scarcity of resources in higher education in Mississippi mandate a broader educational outreach, without regard to the now obsolete constraints of geography.

## UNIVERSITY FOCUS AREAS

Mississippi State University's land-grant heritage has shaped four broad focus areas in which the University is uniquely suited to fulfill the needs of Mississippi's citizens for tomorrow's world. These areas comprise MSU's core strengths and project a contemporary vision of the land-grant mission. They acknowledge the primacy of learning in the university's tri-part mission of learning, research and service, and recognize that a broad-based, liberal education for all students is a necessary foundation for study leading to productive careers. These focus areas, individually and collectively, have the potential to concentrate Mississippi State's energies and resources on an improved quality of life in all dimensions for the people of Mississippi. These areas of emphasis also create new pressures for stronger interdisciplinary cooperation and interaction. The recommended areas of emphasis are:

- ◆ **Human Resources Development.** Mississippi State will provide a liberal and broad-based education to prepare students for positions of responsibility and leadership in their communities and to equip them for life in an increasingly internationalized and culturally diverse society. It will continue to emphasize the preparation of students for careers in the professions and broader world of work and to emphasize extension, research, public service and life-long learning programs which aid the citizens of the state in their places of work, in their homes and schools, and in their communities.
- ◆ **Science and Technology.** Mississippi State will emphasize and build on its particular strengths in science and technology, including fields such as engineering; biotechnology; computing and information technology; animal and plant sciences; food technology; and manufacturing technology.
- ◆ **Economic and Community Advancement.** Mississippi State will contribute to the economic and community advancement of the state through its contributions in areas of expertise such as agricultural and forest products; business, both domestic and international; community and government management; manufacturing; social and policy analysis; and technical assistance.
- ◆ **Environmental Quality.** Mississippi State will help ensure the environmental quality of life in the state through innovative research and instruction in areas such as air and water quality; food quality; management of forests, land and other natural resources; and waste management.

Clarifying the University's focus areas will help guide future allocations and reallocations of University resources to support and enhance critical strengths. The recruitment of new faculty and staff or the reallocation of existing positions,

for example, should reflect and support the focus areas adopted by the University. The focus areas also will provide direction for academic units as recommendations in this document are implemented.

## **ACTION PRIORITIES**

The Priorities and Planning Committee's recommendations to chart Mississippi State University's future course can be grouped into ten Action Priorities. Combined with the four University focus areas, they define a consistent and efficient framework to help guide the institution as it strives to enhance learning, research, and service to all Mississippians in a time of limited and decreasing state financial support.

**UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES:** The University will place an emphasis on efficiently delivered, innovative undergraduate education with special attention to the content of the core curriculum, which provides a liberal and broad-based education for all students in the University; strengthen and better define the common core of undergraduate education; and place an emphasis on advanced undergraduate courses in the University focus areas.

**GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH:** The University will concentrate graduate education and research in basic areas of strength consistent with the focus areas and maintain and strengthen its Doctoral I status and Carnegie Research I classification.

**FACULTY AND STAFF:** The University will recruit and retain the best possible faculty and staff and provide appropriate, consistent and competitive compensation and rewards in order to encourage excellence and productivity.

**ACADEMIC SUPPORT:** The University will increase the funding priority for academic support areas, especially the library, commensurate with the needs of a quality undergraduate and graduate instructional and research program.

**INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY:** The University will increase the utilization of modern cost-effective instructional technologies to achieve a leadership position which reinforces its educational mission and quality.

**CULTURALLY DIVERSE ENVIRONMENT:** The University will implement an institutional strategy which fully supports the development and appreciation of the rich capabilities of diverse populations, especially the African-American population so critical to Mississippi's future economic and social development.

**INTERDISCIPLINARY VENTURES:** The University will foster and emphasize interdisciplinary ventures which augment all mission components.

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:** The University will vigorously pursue its special responsibilities in supporting the economic development of Mississippi, especially in areas in which the institution has particular expertise.

**GLOBALIZATION:** The University will build on existing strengths and experiences in international teaching, research and service; special emphasis will be placed on promoting international opportunities and expanding curricula to include familiarization with global issues and understanding of different cultures.

**PRIORITIES AND PLANNING PROCESS:** The University will design an ongoing mechanism to evaluate and establish priorities which are specific, rational, and consistent with existing strengths critical to MSU's academic quality.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1 Priorities and Planning Process

- 1.1 Establish an appropriate committee structure to ensure that the priorities and planning effort evolves into an effective ongoing process.

*A mechanism by which each college or school emphasizes MSU's major focus areas should be established. The recommendations contained in this report are intended to help provide direction for the University and for colleges and schools as they focus their efforts more effectively.*

- 1.2 Formulate a process to identify a limited number of present and potential Programs of Distinction.

*Universities that aspire to achieve or maintain high quality are built on a foundation of exemplary Programs of Distinction. These programs embody four critical characteristics: centrality to mission, a focused agenda, cost effectiveness in the deployment of resources, and high standards of teaching, research, and service. Supporting and investing in promising Programs of Distinction generates continuous gains in quality for all University programs. Programs already exist at Mississippi State which qualify as Programs of Distinction, and others will emerge in the near future as departments capitalize on interdisciplinary and synergistic opportunities.*

*A process should be developed immediately to establish a one-year time frame for submission and review of proposals seeking program enhancement. Proposals should indicate consistency with one or more of the Focus Areas and Action Priorities, the specific requirements for resource utilization, the expected outcome, and the methodology to be used for evaluating the outcomes. Once identified, a Program of Distinction should receive sustained financial and other support.*

- 1.3 Guidelines for reallocating existing resources to reflect the university's Focus Areas and Action Priorities should be formulated and implemented, reducing the funding of lower priority programs to make funds available for reallocation to higher priority programs and/or to meet mandated budgetary reductions.

*MSU administrators are already being forced to cut budgets, but without the guidance of visible long-term strategies. Contracting budgets compel a more strategic approach than is currently used. Each college, for example, could be required to give up two or three percent of its budget each year for five years and to formulate a five-year plan which details what actions would be taken to cope with the reduction; or, all open positions during each year could be automatically placed into a general position pool with reallocations made from that pool consistent with the university's priorities. The college plans should also specify how any reallocations to the college would be redistributed within the college. Concurrently, a model faculty plan should be developed to ensure a rational distribution of resources among the various colleges.*