

**Wabash-Provost Scholar Report – January 2011
Results of Fall 2010 Focus Group Sessions
(With Recommendations)**

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A. Background

This report summarizes North Carolina A&T State University Wabash-Provost Scholar activity during the Fall 2010 semester. The Wabash-Provost Scholars is a group of undergraduate students trained to conduct peer-led Focus Groups and other institutional assessment activities aimed at improving the academic environment at the university. The Wabash-Provost Scholar Program was initially developed in Fall 2008 to provide institutional context for results from North Carolina A&T State University's Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNSLAE) results.¹ Since then the Wabash-Provost Scholars have engaged in a variety of institutional assessment activities, summarized on the Academy for Teaching and Learning (ATL) web site: <http://www.ncat.edu/~atl>.

The focus of Wabash-Provost Scholar activities during the Fall 2010 semester grew out of inquiries made by the Chancellor and Provost during a July, 2010 lunch with several Wabash-Provost Scholars. The topic for discussion was the intellectual climate at North Carolina A&T State University and factors impacting the intellectual climate. The Wabash-Provost Scholars, in conjunction with the Wabash-Provost Scholar Program co-directors, used this information to develop a set of eight Focus Group questions that were administered to undergraduate students during the Fall 2010 semester.

1. How would you describe the "intellectual climate" on campus?
2. What suggestions do you have for improving the intellectual climate at A&T?
3. Chancellor Martin would like to improve the diversity (race and ethnicity) of A&T's student population. What do you think about this goal?
4. An SGA survey indicated that 30% of students have "been thrown off track due to misinformation from their academic advisor." What are your experiences with advising at A&T?
5. The university is considering raising admission standards for entering freshman (SAT scores and high school GPAs, for example). What impact do you think this will have on the university?
6. A&T has challenges with students completing and submitting their FAFSAs by March 1st. What issues do students have meeting this deadline? How can these issues be resolved?
7. What if the university adopted a "dress code"? What should that dress code look like?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share with Provost Adams and Chancellor Martin about your experiences at A&T?

B. Focus Group Summary – Fall 2010

The Wabash-Provost Scholars partnered with the NC A&T Student Government Association, the NC A&T Department of Housing and Residence Life, and individual faculty members to recruit focus group participants during the Fall 2010 semester. Various incentives, including Aggie Bucks, C.A.S.E. hours, and course extra credit, were offered to focus group participants to attract

¹ The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education is a four-year longitudinal study focused on investigating the "teaching practices, programs, and institutional structures" that promote or retard student growth in a variety of liberal education outcomes. For more information about the Wabash National Study, see <http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-overview/>.

a broad range of participants. C.A.S.E. hours and course extra credit were the strongest incentives for focus group participation.

A total of 152 undergraduate students participated in the Fall 2010 Focus Group sessions, including students from six schools/colleges as well as undeclared majors (10%). Summary distributions of participants by gender and class are indicated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Focus Group Participants
(by gender and class)**

Gender	Females	80
	Males	72
Class:	Freshman	49
	Sophomores	42
	Juniors	30
	Seniors	27
	New Transfers	4

C. Focus Group Results

Overall Findings

On average, students reported that the intellectual climate at North Carolina A&T State was low and needed improvement. Three issues surfaced repeatedly during the Focus Group sessions:

1. Low intellectual foundation of the student population.
2. Low levels of professionalism among the student population.
3. Variability in academic quality across the university (e.g. by major and department, and Honors vs. non-Honors courses).

Question-by-Question Summary

1. Describing the “Intellectual Climate” on Campus

Student Professionalism and Campus Conversations. The intellectual foundation of the student population is a combination of student preparation prior to college and engagement while at the university. It encompasses students’ communication styles, their drive to succeed and achieve, and their overall mindset about college and learning. Campus conversations among students have a significant impact on the perceptions of students about the intellectual climate of the university. A common theme, exemplified by one focus group participant: “Student conversations are loud and ignorant; no one talks about anything besides entertainment. You hear more about entertainment than business and internships.” Another participant mentioned that students need to know when to “turn fun on and off,” indicating that there is a time and place for certain conversations and behaviors. Students’ (in)ability to communicate effectively with professors was also noted, with one participant indicating that this was an illustration of “a lack of intellect on the student’s part because they do not know how to talk to their professors.”

Instructor Professionalism and Engagement in the Classroom. Student participants also commented on the professionalism of teachers in the classroom and its impact on the intellectual climate. A student participant said: “The approach ... professors are taking has become very detrimental to the intellectual climate on this campus,” with another participant noting that “Professors come (to A&T) to simply earn a paycheck instead of being movers and shakers of this university.” Many of the groups agreed that professors appear to be “putting in time” rather than truly engaging students in the learning process; they primarily teach from PowerPoint slides and do not exhibit a sense of real obligation to the students. A student stated: “too many teachers teach from the textbook and don’t know what they are talking about.” Also mentioned was the lack of “uniformity” among instructors who are teaching different sections of the same course. Students noted that “there is a difference in academic quality within the same courses,” meaning that each teacher is teaching with his/her own methods and teaching what they believe students should know instead of establishing consistent outcomes across sections. Students also complained that if they are not constantly in their professors’ faces about campus life or activities, then the professors do not let them know about things that are happening on campus.

Variation in the Intellectual Climate. Many participants thought that the intellectual climate was higher in some areas of the campus than in others. A distinction made by participants was that of the intellectual climate of students in Honors classes versus that of students in non-Honors classes. One participant said, “Intellect depends on the individual, and as far as climate is concerned, Honors classes have better intellectual climates than general student body classes.” An Honors student participant commented that “in their Honors courses, open discussion is encouraged and intellectual conversation is more accepted than in their classes with the general student body.”

2. Suggestions for Improving the “Intellectual Climate” on Campus

Students in the Focus Groups had a variety of suggestions for improving the intellectual climate on campus:

Increase Faculty Engagement with Students. For many students in the focus groups, the improvement of the intellectual climate starts with the professors. “I want my professor to be my backbone and help me.” Students want the professor to go above and beyond their basic job description and make sure that their students reach their potential. “Getting the teachers/administration more involved” is important. This is because many students feel that their professors just come to work, do what they have to do, and then go home. By investing more time in students, professors show that they truly have a passion to teach and that they genuinely want students to succeed. Having passionate teachers could motivate students to work harder, thereby improving the intellectual climate.

Increase the Academic Expectations of Freshman Students. Implementing certain requirements targeting freshman students would encourage students to be more academically engaged and build a foundation for increasing the campus intellectual climate over time. Some of the suggestions the students gave were to offer more mandatory workshops/activities for freshman students, in particular in areas that make them more well-rounded and think outside the box. For example, one student stated that “a freshman leadership orientation led by the

Chancellor discussing *the do's and don'ts* of the university would show what others expect of them." Other suggestions included a mandatory study hall for freshman students and an address to the freshman class during orientation instructing them on how classes are really going to be and what is expected of them academically – with a follow-up meeting reminding them of their academic responsibilities sometime prior to midterm exams. Ultimately, the purpose of the address to the freshman would be to reiterate information about services and organizations geared towards promoting academic success. Follow-up meetings could see how these freshman students are doing in the beginning of their college career. The overall theme of these recommendations seemed to be that if you start with students in their first year, you build a foundation that will have an impact on the future intellectual climate of the campus.

Increase Academic Programs (and their Promotion) on Campus. The vast majority of participants said that if there were more intellectual programs/events on campus, then there would be a significant improvement in the intellectual climate of the campus. "We could have more forums about current events. It would also be good to talk about these events in class." Some participants were specific and mentioned that they want more "motivational speakers" and more "inspirational speakers" to come talk to the students. This would influence the student body in wanting to do better and strive for excellence. "The university should hold forums and post flyers around campus that encourage open discussion of current events." Not only are events important, but also getting people to attend. One student commented, "Things should be promoted better. There are always party flyers; there should be flyers for intellectual events." This theme was echoed by other focus group participants as well. To get more students to these events, students suggested the use of "catchy titles that will make students want to come". Also, students emphasized the "use other modes of communication such as email, Facebook, and Twitter as opposed to just flyers."

3. Expanding the Diversity of A&T's Student Population

Students expressed a variety of views regarding the impact of expanding the diversity of the student population at NC A&T:

Diversity Gives the University a Competitive Edge. According to the majority of students participating in the focus groups, diversity is important because it gives the university a competitive edge. "More diversity equals more opportunity." Not only will this enhance competition among students, but also being more diverse can potentially improve "global conversations" among students.

Diversity Will Help Prepare Students for Corporate America and the Real World. Students felt that a more diverse student body would better prepare them for the real world. One student expressed this view by saying, "Corporate America is not all black." Another student agreed by stating, "You need to get used to being around other cultures so that you don't offend somebody down the line in corporate America." More specifically, students expressed that a more diverse campus better mirrors the real world. One student stated: "It broadens your cultural perspective. I think it is unrealistic just working with one culture." Another student echoed this view saying, "In the workforce you have to work with people of different races and backgrounds, so you need to be prepared." Another student remarked, "The workforce is diverse, and college should be too".

The Goal of Diversity should not Diminish A&T's History as an HBCU. “I agree that there should more diversity in this campus as long as we don't lose sight that this is a HBCU. I do not want to come back and not be able to tell that I went to an HBCU.” This statement from one of the participants illustrates the widely accepted opinion of the majority of students when asked this question on diversity. They believe that – even while acknowledging the advantages of having a diverse campus – diversifying A&T should take into account the legacy of NC A&T as an historically black university. The majority of students felt that “as long as African-Americans are still the majority I don't mind.” In addition, students feel an emphasis on African-American history should still take place on campus, so as not to overlook the historical role of this university with respect to diversity issues. As one student stated, “It is great to be competitive but you don't want to lose the history.”

Diversity Would Change the Face of an HBCU. Unlike the students that feel diversity is beneficial to A&T, there was a significant minority who felt strongly that diversifying campus should not be a goal of this university. These students were deeply passionate that it would negatively change the face of A&T as an HBCU. One student proclaimed, “Diversifying the university defeats the purpose of being labeled as an HBCU.” In addition, these very vocal students felt that it would undermine their purpose in coming to A&T. They indicated that their main reason for coming to A&T was to fulfill their desire to attend an HBCU. Specifically, as one student said, “I came here because there are more students that are like me. There are way more white schools than black. HBCU's give us a great opportunity and an option to choose as opposed to going to a majority white school.” Further, greater diversification could negatively impact the pride some students obtain from being in an environment where the majority of students are African-American. As two students strongly stated, “Being at an HBCU, I am enriched and cultivated by black people. Why change the historically black college/university?” and “HBCU's should be devoted to getting great black minds here; you just have to get them.”

4. Experiences with Advising at A&T

Some students found their advisors to be genuinely interested in their personal success, advising them positively and effectively toward graduation in four years. These advisors and advisees came prepared to scheduled meetings and developed one-on-one relationships with each other. However, the overwhelming majority of students in our focus group sessions had less positive experiences with their advisors.

Availability and Support of Advisors. A majority of students across disciplines found advisors fall short of their expectations. Some are unavailable during posted office hours, do not understand how to obtain PINs for students, are not fully aware of the student's needs, or worse, do not seem to care. As a result, many students are offered poor or inadequate advice, especially with respect to course registration. A large number of students reported that they were incorrectly advised, which set them back as much as a year in some cases. When it came to availability, almost every student with a negative response agreed that “advisors are never available, even during required office hours” and that “advisors do not respond to emails and calls.” Some students suggested that advisors should make students “aware of tutoring opportunities.” However, many students indicated that their advisors fall short in these types of support, often encouraging course drops and withdrawals at the first sign of struggle.

Roles of Advisors and Advisees. Focus group participants noted that advisors expect students to do some level of research into what classes they need to graduate on time and ask proper questions to better understand anything they could not find on their own. Upper-level students generally agreed that a large amount of the responsibility falls on the students in regard to their own advisement. Advisees expect advisors to inform them about major changes to classes, what they should take to graduate on time, career advice, and general encouragement and motivation related to their academic and professional careers. The majority of students also believe that it is the advisors' responsibility to know about major changes in their curriculum guide, and to be "educated on the courses in their advisees' curriculum." Lack of knowledge regarding cluster themes in UNST was frequently mentioned. One student had a very dramatic experience with his/her advisor: "After two years I found that I had been taking courses for the wrong major!"

5. Raising Admission Standards for Entering Freshman

Positive Impact. The majority of students thought raising admission standards for entering freshman students was a good idea. There are a number of advantages, including enhancing the intellectual climate. One student stated, "I do believe that by raising the standards we would be able to recruit higher quality students." This would ensure that students are here to learn and as a result the campus will have fewer distractions for incoming freshman students. Moreover, an enhanced intellectual climate would improve the school's reputation. Increasing graduation rates due to more qualified students would also raise the perception of the university by eliminating the stigma that A&T is a "second chance school." Student participants felt that in order to demand higher academics from the students during their time at A&T, we have to demand it prior to admitting them into the university. In sum, A&T would be viewed as a more prestigious university, which would attract more highly-qualified students and improve each student's level of competitiveness after graduation.

Negative Effects. A minority (approx. 20-25%) of students believed that raising admission standards would shut out students who deserve a chance at an education. The new higher standards would penalize students who were not privileged to attend a quality high school. The students that were against raising standards felt it may "leave students by the wayside."

6. Challenges with Meeting FAFSA Deadlines

Student Procrastination. A major issue emphasized by students regarding the FAFSA form is that there is a lack of "individual student" motivation. Students are not taking the time to fill out the paperwork or get the documents they need to complete their FAFSA. The university often does its part in informing the students of upcoming deadlines but some students do not heed the advice. As one student pointed out, the school sends out enough bulletins and emails talking about filling out the FAFSA forms and important deadlines. This student even mentioned FAFSA day, a campus-wide initiative to improve timely completion of the FAFSA. However, students are not taking the initiative to read the bulletins or check their emails. Although personal problems can be a factor in turning in the FAFSA on time, this is not the case for most students. Many students fail to see the importance of doing the FAFSA, so they may not complete it right away.

Confusion by the Students. Another key issue turned up in the focus group sessions is that students do not know how to fill out the FAFSA. One female student repeatedly stated that she

believes she did the FAFSA wrong because she ended up getting less money than when her parents did it for her the previous year. Another student expressed his confusion about how to complete the FAFSA and believed that uncertainty is the reason why most students do not complete and submit their financial aid forms promptly. One student noted, "My sister does my FAFSA for me. I don't know how to do it, because it's tedious and repetitive. People don't do it because it's difficult." In most cases students have other individuals help them because they don't know how to do it themselves. A student mentioned that in high school their principal helped them with their FAFSA. Another student mentioned that "before you get to college someone else does it for you."

Parental Issues. Parents were cited as another key cause for missing FAFSA deadlines. In particular, parents often do not provide their children with the information necessary to complete the FAFSA, including not having current tax information ready. Some students expressed that they don't know their parents' tax information and their parents are reluctant to share it with them. Another student stated that "they don't have a problem with getting their FAFSA done, but for the most part it all depends on their parents." A common excuse was that most parents do not get their tax forms until February or March, so the majority of students are unable to proceed in completing the forms (despite the fact that the FAFSA allows applicants to use estimated tax information). Some students complained that their own jobs are not providing them with their forms until February or March as well.

A large number of students indicated that they do not live with their parents and are not supported by them financially. For example, one female student mentioned that "one of my parents is deceased and my mother is a deadbeat, she says she is going to do her taxes but she doesn't." In a similar case, a female student mentioned that "she lives with her aunt and she was still required to get her parents' tax information, which in turn made her turn it in late." Students are often living with grandparents and other family members and do not have contact with their parents because they are not involved in their lives and are not helping them with their schooling. Family relationships appear to be another hurdle for many students.

Financial Aid Office Issues. A third reason that students claim for not completing their FAFSA on time is lack of assistance from the Financial Aid Office. Several students expressed that Financial Aid Office employees are not well informed about filling out the FAFSA and the requirements for completing it under different statuses. One student relayed his negative experience with the Financial Aid Office, stating that he turned his FAFSA form in a couple of days after they started taking FAFSA forms. However, because he filed with "independent" status he was given the "run around" with respect to the solution to his problem. Another student had a similar experience, expressing that "Financial Aid is horrible because they make you go back and forth only to give you the wrong information." Another student noted that "the Financial Aid Office doesn't always do its job and they are always late with getting things done." Overall, focus group participants "think they (Financial Aid Office employees) are slow and they do not help much."

7. Adoption of a Dress Code

This question produced a variety of responses. A dominant theme was that a proposed dress code would limit individuality as well as restrict the personal growth of college students. Learning how to dress appropriately is part of the educational process. Students raised

additional questions as to how the proposed dress code would be enforced. Ultimately, students do not want to be told *what to wear*, but would respond more positively if told *what not to wear*, especially if the suggestions were specific in nature. For example, a large majority of the students in the focus groups agree that underwear should not be visible.

Dress Codes Limit Individuality. In each focus group a small contingent of students felt a dress code would limit their ability to express their individuality. Furthermore, they expressed that it is imperative for a student to develop the ability to discern what's acceptable in a professional environment while they are in college. The majority of students indicated some aversion to having a dress code enforced but were open to the concept of having a general standard of dress. A reoccurring theme that emerged from students was that they are adults and paying customers. One student expressed these sentiments this way: "We are young adults. You shouldn't dictate what we wear."

Lack of Knowledge Regarding Appropriate Dress. Many students stressed the fact that students do not know the difference between casual and business professional modes of dress. One student said, "Everyone doesn't know what they should or should not wear." Another student stated, "Everyone doesn't know that certain things are inappropriate." Most students were against the idea of a formal dress code but said A&T students should at least know what business professional attire looks like. Some students suggested that there should be a "fashion show" that visually highlights the difference - during freshman orientation. Another suggestion was that the university should have a "what not to wear" forum once a month, or at least every season. One student suggested, "We should have a business casual and business professional day. This will help students be able to differentiate business professional from business casual." Another student said that students need to know about special events such as Business Professional Week. A Business Professional Week would be a time that would allow students the opportunity to visualize examples of how professionalism can be incorporated into everyday life.

8. Additional Concerns

Taking advantage of the opportunity to voice their additional concerns, students came up with a list of significant needs for improvement in the following areas:

Financial Aid. A common theme arose indicating that staff members in the Financial Aid Office need to be more proactive and timely regarding changes in students' financial standings. For example, students feel that Financial Aid staff members are slow in responding to issues, which results in delayed solutions to problems. One student exclaimed, "Financial Aid is too slow, and it takes too long for them to get problems fixed." Some students indicated that the issues surrounding the Financial Aid Office are recurring and never get fixed: "A better system is needed for financial aid. I've been here for four years and every year I've had issues."

Parking. Students feel that current parking services are not suitable for the growing student population, citing limited parking spaces, restrictive parking regulations, and expensive parking permits. Limited parking spaces are a particular concern: "Off campus people coming to find a parking spot on campus for class is similar to hunting." and "You're buying a sticker but still have to fight for parking." Some students complained that the limited parking spots available for students are related to the quantity of reserved (faculty/administrator) parking spots that are never fully occupied.

Housing and Residence Life. Students find that there are various problems with the housing process. Upperclassmen feel as though they should hold seniority when it comes to the lottery system for choosing student housing. Moreover, the participants believe that the residence halls need to be maintained better with respect to sanitation and pest control. For example, one student shared his discovery of water bugs in Morrow Hall. Another participant described the issues he/she had with the maintenance staff: “Maintenance should be more attentive. They fixed a leak with my air conditioning and vacuumed the water, but the carpet has mold. Two weeks later the air conditioning was leaking again.” Other issues that arose focused on relationships between residents and resident advisors and the fines that residents incur due to minor infractions.

Food on Campus. The majority of students in our focus group sessions believe that the quality of food on campus is poor and that the selection should be expanded. More specifically, there should be healthier options. On this topic a student expressed, “The only healthy thing is the sandwich and salad line.” In addition, students expressed their disappointment with the Cafeteria’s hours of operation. They feel that to accommodate students’ schedules the hours should be improved. One student stated, “Cafe hours are a problem because if a student has a late class or back to back classes in the evening, then they will go to bed hungry, especially if the cafe is the only source of food.” Finally, students generally believe that the meal plan should be more flexible in order to meet the needs of individual students. For example, they suggested the idea of being allowed to use unused breakfast meals for dinners so that if you missed breakfast, you won’t go hungry.

D. Wabash-Provost Scholar Recommendations

Intellectual Climate. In order to improve the intellectual climate on campus there should be greater emphasis placed on the recruitment and retention of high-achieving African-American students. On-campus programs that highlight academic topics, as well as current events, should also be increased so that students gain a well-rounded education that extends beyond the classroom. Additionally, there should be more responsibility placed on the professors to ensure that students receive a quality education with classes that foster higher learning and encourage open discussion. In addition, freshman students should be charged with higher expectations of academic success upon entering the university.

Campus Diversity. Although recruiting a more diverse student population is looked upon favorably by many students, most NC A&T students continue to believe that it would take away from the HBCU tradition of the institution as well as the rich history that A&T provides. Overall, it is believed that African-American students should still be the majority so as to not change the face or legacy of the school. Moreover, classes and other events should continue to inform students of the rich history that A&T has to offer. This would allow for students to have pride in their beloved institution and value the many societal contributions of African-Americans.

Advising. The relationship between academic advisors and their students is subpar. More information needs to be made available to students as to the appropriate roles/responsibilities of advisees/advisors. Advisors should engage more fully with their advisees in order to help guide them through their matriculation at A&T and entrance into their chosen professions. Emphasis should be placed on addressing the needs of each student as well as being aware of

their academic standing in preparation towards graduation. Advising sessions should focus on academic and career counseling and establishing a good relationship where students feel comfortable coming to talk to their advisors when they have problems regarding academics. Overall, advisors need to be trained better in their role as advisors, as well as the procedures for obtaining a student's PIN for registration.

Raising Admission Standards. Admission standards should be raised in hopes of improving the intellectual climate. An essay portion could be added to the university application that would highlight strengths a student may have that are not indicated through GPAs and standardized test scores.

FAFSA Deadlines. In order to have more students completing their FAFSA paperwork by the deadlines, more responsibility needs to be placed on the parents, the Financial Aid Office, and students. Parents and students must be educated on the importance of completing FAFSA forms in a timely manner. Furthermore, the Financial Aid office needs to be more proactive in addressing the needs of the student body so that the paperwork is processed in a timely manner.

Dress Code. Students should be allowed to choose what to wear so as to not suppress their individuality. This can be balanced, however, by implementing and enforcing some acceptable minimum dress standards. Students need to be educated on how to dress appropriately in an academic and professional setting. More programs can be implemented during the school year as a way to provide examples to students as to what is appropriate to wear during and outside of job interviews and on-campus recruiting. Clothes should be tasteful and acceptable in a casual business environment.

Parking. More parking spots need to be made available to students that drive in order to compensate for the expensive parking fee as well as the struggle to find a spot in a non-reserved location. Consider reducing faculty/administrator reserved parking spots, as commuter and resident students on campus have difficulty finding (convenient) places to park due in part to the large number of reserved parking spots not being used. In addition, we believe that the price of a parking permit should be reduced, in light of the difficulty finding spots to park.

Housing. The selection process for housing should be modified so that returning students who desire to stay on campus have higher priority than new students. Also, more attention should be focused on the general up-keep of the residence halls to ensure the safety of the residents.