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# QUALITY OF LIFE

## Introduction

As NJIT experiences significant growth and change, attention paid to the university's quality of life is critical. The relevant issues must be addressed through careful planning, effective communication and coordinated implementation of change. The quality of life affects every aspect of university endeavor, from student academic performance, to faculty performance and staff productivity. If students and staff feel their needs and concerns are listened and responded to, they are more likely to adapt to changes willingly and remain strongly committed to the institution. Special efforts are needed in an organization such as NJIT, with so dynamic a mission, to foster an atmosphere in which continued development can flourish.

## External Influences

Many of NJIT's students face a special set of challenges because of their social and economic profile, the rigor of the curriculum, and the university's location. Working or studying at an urban institution is always challenging. It can be both frightening and exciting at the same time. Services and programs should be designed to minimize apprehensions and take advantage of the area's assets.

NJIT serves a largely middle and lower middle income population. These are the very students most likely to be negatively affected by the current fiscal crisis. At the same time that higher education in New Jersey is facing unprecedented financial difficulties with State appropriations significantly reduced, there is a serious decline in the level of federal funding for higher education and financial aid. In such circumstances, a caring environment can make a critical difference.

A strong career orientation is also characteristic of NJIT students. For most, the primary goal is to obtain a well-paying job with their professional degree. The vast majority of the students work to help finance their education and many even support their families. Although the in-residence population is increasing, NJIT must continue to develop a sense of community among a predominantly commuter population, many of whom are on campus for limited amounts of time.

## Student Life

Since 1981, continued development of programs and upgrading of physical plant have greatly improved the quality of student life on campus. These include a major cafeteria renovation, and renovation and expansion of the gymnasium. The expansion of on-campus residential capacity has had an especially positive impact. Cypress Hall, NJIT's third residence facility, was opened in 1990, doubling the previous capacity to nearly 1,000 students and resulting in a true sense of campus community. With the purposeful location of two of the residence halls in close proximity to one another, an outdoor gathering place was created.

The extensive construction and renovation program, of which the residence hall was a critical piece, did create problems, however. Frustration was expressed regarding the inconveniences and distractions experienced during construction. Lack of space for studying and relaxing was a particular concern. This was addressed in considerable measure with the addition of study space in the lower level of Cypress Hall.

The expansion of the physical education and athletic facilities and programs was designed to serve a more diverse student body. The needs

of women and of the evening and residential populations were special concerns. Varsity teams were added for women, resulting in a full intercollegiate program throughout the year. A new gymnasium addition for physical education, recreation and intramural activities affords all members of the NJIT community the opportunity to take part in physical fitness programs.

A number of programs under the direction of the Dean of Student Services have also been initiated or expanded to improve the quality of student life:

- Activities have been introduced specifically to serve the expanded residential population. To ensure personal contact and support for all residential students throughout the academic year, one resident assistant is provided for every thirty students.
- A reorganization of the Hazell Center has made staff more responsive to the needs of students who attend evening, as well as day, classes. And professional staff hours have been extended.
- Programs and activities have been increased to reflect the growing diversity of the student body. Administratively, direct responsibility for international students was shifted from the Associate Dean of Students to a new Office of International Students and Faculty staffed by two professionals. One very successful initiative has been World Week. Introduced in 1989 by the Division of Student Services, this series of events gives NJIT's diverse populations the opportunity to share their cultural heritages. Rutgers-Newark joined NJIT in 1991 as co-sponsor of this celebration of student diversity.
- The Counseling Center, staffed by two Ph.D. psychologists and two master's level counselors, provides a growing

array of services to students: workshops on such topics as study skills and procrastination, support groups, a student staffed drop-in center, and individual therapy sessions. In the past five years, the number of contact hours per counselor has increased significantly, and new student outreach programs have been developed. The demands on the staff are considerable, however, with the potential for a decline in the time available for "walk-in" hours. This is an important service for students with immediate needs. An increase in off-campus referrals is possible.

To further accommodate student needs, the registration and financial aid processes have been greatly improved in recent years. An on-line registration system was added in 1987. Beginning with the Spring 1991 registration, students have been able to access on-line such information as course enrollments, faculty teaching courses, grades and "holds" on grades. Another innovation in Fall 1991 was the incorporation of all Rutgers-Newark courses into the NJIT schedule and the ability of NJIT students to register for these courses without leaving campus. Self-registration at terminals located throughout campus was added in Spring 1992. The Office of Financial Aid has added several new staff members in order to be responsive to students in a more timely manner. However, the steady increase in the demand for financial aid at times taxes even the expanded resources.

### **Campus Environment**

The rapid changes occurring on campus, combined with the challenges of the immediate environment, have led to a number of recent improvements for the entire university community. Newark does present a challenge with respect to safety, compounded at NJIT by the increase in off-campus parking sites and the twenty-four hour population created by the

additional residence halls. In response, significant additional resources have been devoted to public safety and security. Since 1987, the staff has grown from 28 to 61, with the number of police and security officers more than doubled. In addition, six new police vehicles were purchased. On-campus escorts are provided during the evening hours, and a security detail is stationed at the Lock Street subway stop during the most active morning and evening hours. Additional lighting and emergency telephones have also been placed around campus.

Particular emphasis has been placed on the training of Public Safety personnel. This includes programs provided to all new security officers and consultants engaged to offer sensitivity training to the entire department. The Public Safety Director and staff periodically meet with student organizations to discuss concerns. Efforts are also made to communicate through the campus newspapers.

Parking poses another serious challenge for an urban university. The problem has been exacerbated at NJIT by recent construction that has replaced much of the on-campus surface parking. A number of sites, most within a block or two of the university, have been acquired in recent years. This process, which has resulted in a net increase in the number of parking spaces, will continue as more grass and trees are added to improve the aesthetic quality of the campus. The demand for parking continues to increase, however. In Spring 1992, construction will begin on an on-campus parking deck with a capacity of 1,300 automobiles. Bonds valued at \$14.5 million have been issued, a firm assigned and a schedule finalized. In the meantime, a revised parking policy which eliminates most designated (and not always well used) parking spaces and other interim measures are being instituted.

Child care is another need to which the university seeks to be responsive. A building adjacent to the campus has been purchased, and plans for a facility are being developed. The standing university Committee on Child Care has conducted a survey to more accurately define need and is in the process of interviewing child

care providers to secure assistance in operating the center.

A fourth area requiring administrative attention during a period of rapid change has been communication. In 1985, an outside firm was engaged by NJIT to make recommendations designed to enhance the university's marketplace potential. One area they found in need of improvement was internal communication. Since then, a weekly university newsletter has been established. Widely circulated, *NJIT this week* presents stories of interest to the entire university community, announces workshops, seminars and other campus events of general interest, and reports on new and changed university policies. Computer-based electronic mail (E-mail) is another form of frequently used internal communication. In addition, the president and vice presidents schedule periodic universitywide forums on such issues as the budget, which also include general question and answer sessions. Senior administrative officers also make themselves readily available for numerous campus events. Other forms of communication include monthly meetings of the Administrative Council and Committee on Academic Affairs, both chaired by the provost.

## Continuing Concerns

To gain a better understanding of campuswide perceptions of the quality of life at NJIT, a survey was conducted in Fall 1990 as part of the self-study process. The survey instrument was developed in conjunction with the Office of Institutional Research and made widely available throughout campus. Special efforts were made to secure input from all campus constituencies. More than one hundred responses were received. The findings indicate that students and staff generally have positive feelings about working and going to school at NJIT. Several areas of continuing concern were identified, however:

- Security — There is general agreement about the steady improvement in services

provided by the Public Safety Department. Students and staff report, however, that they would like to feel safer as they walk on campus after normal business and class hours. Suggestions include reinstating the student patrol force with the provision of escort service in off-peak hours as their primary responsibility; exploration of a more widespread system of limiting access to campus buildings, as for example, the card access system in place in the York Center for Environmental Engineering and Science and other buildings; and personal safety workshops for all constituents in addition to those presently provided during student orientation. Students also express frustration regarding the attitude of some members of the Public Safety staff. The Public Safety personnel training programs should pay particular attention to their interaction with students.

- **Communications** — There is a continuing perception among some staff and students that senior administrators do not keep the university community fully informed and that input is sought after decisions have been made. Because perceptions are reality for many, continuing efforts should be made to dispel these impressions. The responsibility lies with the entire NJIT community. It is up to each member to communicate by listening, reading, participating in formal and informal meetings, serving on committees and encouraging discussion. Representatives from the Student Senate, the Graduate Student Association, Faculty Council, the bargaining units, university committees, and senior administration should be held accountable for communicating information to their constituencies in a timely manner. Compilation and regular dissemination of university policies should be standard operating procedure.

- **Sense of Commitment to Students** — It is critical to the well-being of the university that students believe that instruction and services are provided in a supportive and caring environment. Orientation programs for new staff should emphasize the importance of service to students, and this theme should be regularly reinforced. As appropriate, employee evaluations might include an assessment of how well students are served.

- **Sense of Equality** — Diversity at NJIT is not just reflected in the student body; it is characteristic of the staff as well. Bias, wherever it exists, must be acknowledged before it can be mitigated. The wide promulgation of the university's anti-discrimination policy is an important annual reinforcement of this position. Recent sessions on sexual harassment in the workplace were also widely acknowledged as improving understanding about a critical issue. Additional workshops for faculty, staff and students on cultural diversity, gender and prejudice could foster appropriate attitudes and behavior. Particular attention should be focused on women studying in the engineering and scientific disciplines.

- **Parking** — The plans to build a decked parking facility are a very positive step, but frustration about the current situation continues. Members of the university community must recognize that the new structure will be costly and accept the likelihood of increased user fees. Retail space in the garage building might offset some of the expense. Concomitantly, efforts should be made to increase the use of the excellent public transportation facilities available to NJIT. Arrangements might be made with New Jersey Transit to sell bus and train passes

on campus. Additional ways to increase the sense of security in the subway stop should also be explored.

- **Campus Appearance** — Recent fiscal cutbacks have led to a reduction in maintenance staff. While it is presumed that this is temporary, immediate actions can be taken, for example, to improve accessibility. Uniform signage at key locations would be an important step. In addition, physical plant supervisors indicate that volume of staff is not necessarily as critical as training of staff. While there are many dedicated physical plant workers on campus, motivational programs for the staff that emphasize the importance of maintenance work to the well-being of the university might further enhance campus appearance. The completion of the current phase of campus construction, including the parking deck, will provide significant

opportunities to address landscaping, signage and related areas.

In anticipation of that time and in response to many of the continuing concerns, a Task Force on Campus Life was formed in Summer 1991. The charge to the group is to recommend ways to make life on campus more community-oriented. University units represented on the Task Force are Residence Life, Athletics, Security, the Hazell Center, Physical Plant, the Student Senate, and the Graduate Student Association. The group is exploring ways to further improve campus life in such areas as events and activities, appearance, athletics and spirit, off-hour services to residents, food services and security. Immediate no-cost (or low cost) strategies are being explored, as well as long-range approaches.