NSU Not in Crisis

The recent editorial “NSU In Crisis, On Deadline” presented a scenario of a university experiencing desperate and poor academic and financial conditions. Nothing could be further from the truth. NSU is “not” a “campus in crisis.” It appears that the editorial writer took license from a statement from the director of the State Council of Higher Education (SCHEV), Peter Blake, to justify using inappropriate and alarmist language such as “NSU In Crisis.” Mr. Blake’s statement referred to the tight timetable for NSU to address delayed audits for FY 2011 and FY 2012. Specifically, he told the editorial writer, “It is an institution in crisis in the sense that the deadlines they’re facing are tough.” Mr. Blake “did not” say that NSU’s financial and academic conditions are “in crisis,” as reported in the July 18 editorial.

The many inaccurate statements in the editorial warrant clarification, correction and context. Firstly, the editorial presented “no firm evidence” that NSU’s finances are in disarray or that its national accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) is “in jeopardy.” And the reason that the editorial did not provide such evidence is because there is none! With respect to academics, all of NSU’s academic programs eligible for national accreditation are nationally accredited. And, NSU maintains full and unconditional accreditation by SACS. The issue of our Associate Degree in Nursing students achieving low pass rates on the NCLEX is being carefully addressed by NSU Provost, Dr. Sandra DeLoatch. The editorial writer concludes that the shortcomings of “one” academic program shows that all academic programs at NSU are poor. Again, nothing could be further from the truth.

The editorial noted a 34 percent student graduation (degree completion) rate over six years for NSU. The accurate figure that he was provided with is 36 percent. And, I am confident that we will make steady progress to exceed a 40 percent degree completion rate. NSU “is not” comfortable with these numbers, and we are working diligently to increase student graduation rates. The challenges faced by NSU are typical of most Historically Black Colleges and Universities’ (HBCUs) relative to student retention and degree completion. And this matter, indeed is a “two-way street” where responsibilities are shared both by the university and the student. Financial aid constraints and reductions are contributing factors to our enrollment challenges.

On average, NSU students come from households earning $40,000 a year or less. And, NSU’s “student profile” brings with it special needs including financial aid, academic support and advisement, among others. Over 90 percent of NSU’s students are “highly dependent” on financial aid to enroll and to make progress toward achieving college degrees. While some universities are disinvesting themselves in serving students with this profile, NSU’s faculty and staff members welcome such students to our campus.

NSU is very much aware of the challenges we face with respect to strategically increasing student retention and degree completion given our student profile. We are exercising our due diligence to achieve this goal in the coming years. Consequently, a host of new programs and initiatives have been launched or soon will be initiated to directly increase student retention and graduation rates.

These programs and initiatives include the opening this fall of a new, comprehensive student success center, offering academic support, peer mentoring and advisement services. NSU this fall will initiate a “15-to-finish” program to financially incentivize full-time students taking a minimum of 15 credits, and as many as 18 credits for the tuition price of 12 credits of course work. We anticipate that this new incentive program, aimed at helping students take full-
time credit course loads, will increase degree completion over the next several years. NSU, this year will launch a new program funded by a grant from the Hampton Roads Community Foundation to help freshmen students who marginally meet NSU’s admission standards to receive dedicated academic support and advisement. The “Spartan Hope Academy” is a pilot program that NSU hopes to sustain in future years. NSU has successfully competed for and been awarded national grants from the NCAA and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to promote student academic success for student athletes and nursing student majors.

Additionally, NSU has increased First Year Experience course offerings, will open a new Student Testing Center this fall, and has strengthened its Summer Bridge orientation program for entering freshmen. The administration also is reevaluating the need to increase student admission standards. Last, but not least, the University last year initiated a major, institution-wide program known as the Spartan Crusade for Academic Success to directly address student retention and degree completion by providing a host of new services, programs and initiatives that promote student academic success.

The July 18 editorial also distorts the nature of communication between the President and the Board of Visitors members. The editorial notes that the president has “not kept Board members informed about what’s happening on campus.” Again, this statement is inaccurate. Members of the NSU Board of Visitors receive regular and continuous updates and communications from the President and other senior administrators on a weekly and often a daily basis. The administration will continue to work to strengthen communication with Board members both individually and collectively. It should be noted that communication styles and preferences sometimes change as the composition of the Board changes. In my first two years as NSU President, I have served “four” different rectors with their own unique leadership styles and communications preferences. Also, the majority of the NSU Board members have served “two years or less” and represent a relative new leadership base for our Board of Visitors.

Lastly, the July 18 editorial characterized NSU’s academic quality as weak and that the university has “failed to improve academic performance and distinguish Norfolk State in a highly competitive market.” The NSU faculty, administration and I take exception to this conclusion. The facts prove otherwise relative to NSU’s sound academic condition. Again, all NSU academic programs eligible for national accreditation are nationally accredited. And for two consecutive years, the quality of the faculty has been demonstrated by an NSU professor winning the State’s top faculty award. The SCHEV Outstanding Faculty Award was awarded to NSU professor Rasha Morsi in 2012 and to NSU professor Frances Williams in 2013. This year (2013) NSU was the only university in the South Hampton Roads region in which a professor claimed the State’s most prestigious faculty award. NSU also has been recognized nationally in recent years as among the top “masters-degree level” universities in the U.S. Additionally, NSU has been recognized repeatedly and nationally as a “military friendly” university. We operate a state-of-the-art research and development cleanroom devoted to applied research in nanotechnology and micro-electronics, one of only three universities operating such facilities in the state. And, NSU is fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Case closed! NSU’s academic condition is undeniably sound and “not in crisis.”

Since 1935, NSU has met the challenge of offering a quality, affordable education to its students. Some of these students face real and severe socio-economic challenges, but these students wish to secure their futures by earning a college degree. If they are willing to do their part to achieve this goal, NSU stands ready to help them realize their aspirations as college
graduates and Spartan alumni. To say that NSU’s academic and financial conditions are in crisis is an unfortunate misrepresentation on the part of the Pilot’s editorial writer.

We regret the unduly negative and alarmist tone of the July 18 editorial. However, we will continue our efforts to successfully meet the genuine and significant challenges relating to timely completion of annual audits, improved NCLEX student exam pass rates and increased student degree completion. We acknowledge that NSU has work to do in achieving these objectives. But, I am confident that we are up to the task and that better days are ahead for the university community and its alumni.