

Crossing Boundaries, Making Connections:

Curricular and Academic Support

Transformations at

Johnson State College

Title III

Strengthening Institutions Programs

Grant Submission Narrative

February 27, 2004

Activity: \$1,774,113 over five years: Transforming the Curriculum and Academic Support Systems to Improve Student Outcomes and Student Retention.

To strengthen student retention of students at all levels through improved advising and support services, and through a transformed interdisciplinary curriculum. Indicators of success in five years include: (1) Increase freshman/sophomore retention from 61% to 75%, (2) Increase six-year graduation rate from 34% to 50%, (3) Increased levels of student satisfaction with advising and interdisciplinary course structure as evidenced by focus groups and annual NSSE survey. Approximately \$968,000 (55%) for faculty development, release time and travel to accomplish grant activities; \$365,000 (21%) for endowment; \$338,000 (19%) for an Associate Dean of Interdisciplinary Programs; \$42,000 for a Coordinator of Internships (2%); \$36,000 (2%) for a Data Specialist to help with online advising, and \$25,000 for a First Year Experience Program Coordinator.

Project Management and Evaluation: \$50,000 over five years: 50% (\$25,000) for travel of evaluation consultant; 50% (\$25,000) for contract with external evaluation consultant.

Institutional Narrative

Profile of Johnson State College, Vermont

Johnson State College is a four-year liberal arts college located in the Lamoille River Valley of rural northern Vermont. Johnson State's 350-acre campus is in the town of Johnson (population 3,300) an hour's drive each from Burlington, Montpelier, and the Canadian border.

The institution was founded as Johnson Academy in 1828. It became the Johnson Normal School in 1866, and Johnson Teacher's College in 1947. The New England Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools accredited the college in 1961.

During the 1960's, the newly renamed Johnson State College developed a liberal arts curriculum, expanded the liberal arts faculty, and served a rapidly growing student body. In the 1980's it added majors in professional studies such as business, computer systems and hospitality management. The campus is comprised of fifteen buildings including four residence halls and a state of the art library completed in 1996.

Mission Statement: Johnson State College is one of five colleges in the Vermont State College system. It operates under the authority of the Vermont State Colleges Board of Trustees and the Chancellor of the VSC system. The Chancellor cultivates strong local leadership and gives administrators wide latitude for planning, curriculum, instruction and operations.

The Johnson State mission is: *To provide a learning community characterized by active engagement in teaching and learning, by high standards of academic work and human relations, and by seriousness of purpose. We endeavor to provide our students with the skills, knowledge and understanding which are the basis of productive employment, civic involvement and lifelong learning.*

Barbara E. Murphy became President of Johnson State College in July 2001. President Murphy, assisted by newly appointed Academic Dean Dan Regan, established a strategic planning task force in October 2002 to analyze the problems facing the institution, work with the college community in designing plans for institutional development, and establish the basis for a Title III proposal.

The faculty are organized into eight departments: Behavioral Sciences, Business/Economics, Education, Environmental and Health Sciences, Fine and Performing Arts, Humanities, Mathematics, and Writing and Literature. These departments are responsible for delivering the college's 28 majors as well as the General Education courses.

Student Body Characteristics

Throughout its history, Johnson State College has embraced the challenge of educating low-income, first-generation college students. The mean math score for JSC students is 476; the mean verbal score is 496. These modest attainments make student remediation for retention and advancement an ongoing challenge. Although 61% of last year's freshman class returned this fall, the college's 6-year graduation rate is 34%--a rate similar to that of peer institutions nationally but the lowest of the four-year Vermont state colleges.

Undergraduate on-campus enrollment at Johnson State in the fall 2003 semester was 1,058. In addition, some 428 non-traditional students are enrolled in the college's statewide External Degree Program. The college enrolls 162 graduate students pursuing master's degrees in education, science education, counseling and (in collaboration with the Vermont Studio Center) fine arts. Total enrollment is 1,648. Women are 62% of those enrolled, and men, 38%.

In-state students (the majority coming from five northwestern Vermont counties) make up 75% of the student body with 25% coming from 21 other states and 4 foreign countries. Hispanic, African-American, Asian, and Native American students make up about 4% of the student population.

The average age of first-year students is 19; of seniors, 23 (not including external degree students). Johnson undergraduates come predominantly from low-income households. The average income of the families of JSC students is \$45,786. Seventy-two percent of students receive financial aid. Many students carry full academic loads while working ten or twenty hours a week in order to pay bills. The average Johnson student graduates with a debt load of \$17,500.

Faculty Characteristics

The appeal of northern Vermont has attracted a capable faculty to Johnson State College. Of the 55 full-time members of the faculty 91% have earned a terminal degree; 42% are women and 58% are men. Over 100 adjunct faculty teach part-time at the college, 20% with terminal degrees and others with professional qualifications. The full time equivalent for adjunct faculty is roughly 50. The ratio of faculty members to students is 16 to 1. Faculty members typically teach 12-hour schedules each semester. The average advising load—carried by full time faculty members—is 19 students. Despite a heavy burden of classroom responsibilities, JSC faculty members are active and productive as writers, artists and scholars.

Comprehensive Development Plan Narrative (CDP)

A. Analysis of Institutional Strengths, Weaknesses/Significant Problems and Description of Analysis Process

ACADEMIC PROGRAM STRENGTHS

Johnson State College successfully recruits and serves low income, first generation students. Central to the JSC mission is the education of low-income Vermont students who are the first in their family to pursue a college education. Of 938 campus-based, matriculated undergraduates in 2003, whose parental education levels are known, 59% came from households where neither parent had finished a college degree and 39% from households where neither parent had any college level experience. The average family adjusted gross income (AGI) of Vermont students at Johnson State in 2003 was \$45,786. The AGI for the more affluent parents of out-of-state students at Johnson State was \$76,551. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated the mean family income in Vermont as a whole in 2002 at \$62,514 and the mean family income nationally at \$64,879.

JSC students benefit from academic orientation, encouragement and support. The JSC Academic Support Office is a hybrid of U.S. Department of Education TRIO funds and JSC college funds. Established in 1970, the office provides students with tutoring and skills counseling, and it offers a full range of assistance to students with special needs. The College has a fulltime Developmental Disabilities specialist on staff to help in this important area.

The Academic Support program—open to all students but with special service to TRIO students—served 562 students during the past year. The program provided new students with extended orientation during the first two semesters, including weekly meetings with advisors and mentors to help inexperienced students build confidence, do well academically, and make a successful transition to Sophomore year. TRIO services have an important impact on student retention. The Registrar reports these graduation rates for classes entering Johnson between fall 1992 and Spring 2000:

Students by type (Fall 1992-Spring 2000)	Graduation rate
TRIO eligible with an academic need and served by Academic Support	30.8%
TRIO eligible with academic need but declined service by Academic Support	22.9%
Total college student population	30.8%

Data covers new, full-time students not including transfers.

Johnson State students give high ratings to an energetic and capable faculty. Students affirmed their appreciation of faculty in the 2001 NSSE survey in which seniors reported faculty to be “available, helpful and sympathetic” (scored at 5.67 on a scale of 1 to 7). This view was reconfirmed by testimony at a series of five student focus group conversations in the fall of 2003. “Professors care and take an interest in you,” observed one

focus group student. Another said, “faculty are accessible—they know you, invite you to their homes and give you home phone numbers.” Other students made these comments:

- Faculty become close friends with students
- The science faculty are brilliant
- Political science and education professors are all over you about writing skills
- The faculty are available and go out of their way to help
- Students want to do well for professors; they don’t want to disappoint them

ACADEMIC PROGRAM WEAKNESSES/SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS

Too many students leave Johnson State before completing a degree. Although the first to second years return rate is a solid 61%, the six-year average persistence rate of the Federal cohort of regular students (1991-1996) was 34%, the lowest rate of the state college system. The comparable rate at Castleton State College in 2001 was 45%, at Lyndon State College, 46%, and at Johnson State that year, 32%. In many situations—financial crisis, family emergencies, partner problems, and others—the college has little ability to influence behavior. There are issues, however, that the college can address with the expectation of improved results.

JSC too often fails to meet the needs of two groups of students: its most academically prepared and its least academically, socially and financially prepared. Johnson State College loses too many of both its best and its most needy students. At the higher end of student performance, a comparison of grade point averages (GPA’s) shows that at the end of the spring 2003 semester, sophomores who stayed at JSC earned a 2.84 GPA, while students who transferred out had a 3.14 GPA. Students transferring out show a higher level of academic attainment than their counterparts who stay do. In exit interviews conducted by the Director of Residential Life of students leaving JSC, students regularly cite ‘not challenged enough’ as a reason for leaving.

In the 2001 Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), JSC seniors reported a lower degree of satisfaction with their “entire educational experience” than the national cohort group. Underscoring this evaluation, in four other areas; time spent on studying and academic work, thinking critically and analytically, worked harder than you thought you could, and challenged by exams to do (their) best work, JSC students also report a lower score than their normative counterparts. Higher scores would have indicated more attention to academic work, more rigorous thinking, and exams that are more demanding.

At the lower end of the scale are those who are struggling and whose academic, cultural and financial needs are not met. Their GPA’s are low. A sizable performance gap distinguishes the low end of the student spectrum from students who graduate, transfer, withdraw formally or take a leave of absence. The weakness lies

with a curriculum and administrative processes that too often fail to serve both the overwhelmed and the under-challenged. The consequences for this complex “double loss”—failing to engage to full potential the most capable students as well as those needing the most support—leaves the college vulnerable to drifting toward mediocrity and unable to distinguish itself from many other small colleges with similar commitments.

Too many students are unable to complete their degree requirements within four years. A complex set of problems leads to a situation in which students are unable to meet their course requirements within a four-year time span. In order to meet general graduation requirements or departmental major requirements students are often obliged to return for a 9th or even 10th semester at considerable financial cost, understandable frustration, and delay in career launching and debt reduction. While extended study is unavoidable for those students who have complex study plans or need to balance study with employment, the college seeks to shorten delays in time to graduation that are within the college’s control.

These factors obstruct the standard four-year graduation rate. There are too many majors and specialties—28 majors and 23 specializations within majors served by too few faculty members. There are an average of 1.7 full time faculty members for each major and specialty. This unfavorable ratio means that students are not able to find required courses scheduled when they need them in time for graduation, courses are too-often cancelled, and may meet with too-small cohorts of students. In addition, the academic week has narrowed to a Monday through Thursday time-frame meaning that it is difficult to schedule required courses without conflict and with enough sections to serve the need.

INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT STRENGTHS

Student’s benefit from continuous program evaluation and improvement. The new college administration has made a fresh commitment to strategic planning and a continuous process of institutional evaluation and planning involving students, faculty and staff. This commitment will ensure that evaluation of the results of Title III activities will be continuous and that the lessons learned will be studied and applied on an ongoing basis. The commitment to planning comes from several factors. These include a look at the demographics of Vermont, which is one of the handful of states that will see a decrease in high school graduates beginning before the end of the decade. On campus, many of the traditional programs of study have decreased in numbers over the years, while some new initiatives—Outdoor Education, Wellness and Alternative Medicine, Service Learning, and

Technical Theater—have increased. These trends suggest that there is and will be interest in JSC’s curricular revitalization, and that in those areas where the college has best ‘read’ its constituents lie great potential.

Students are supported by outstanding campus facilities: The State of Vermont’s capital investments in Johnson State College over the past forty years have brought the campus facilities up to competitive national standards. The new Library and Learning Center houses a collection of more than 100,000 books with a full complement of periodicals and electronic connections to the World Wide Web. The building provides classrooms, a language lab, and a computer lab and office space for faculty.

The old library was transformed into the Dewey Campus Center with office space for some 25-student clubs and organizations, a small dining commons, and offices for the Dean of Students, Academic Support Services, and the SERVE office for student volunteer service activities. The college gymnasium was expanded to include an Olympic pool and an up to date exercise facility for members of the college and local communities.

Construction projects in the 1960’s provided the college with an important campus expansion including the Dibden Center for the Arts housing a 550 seat gem of an auditorium, offices, practice rooms and an art gallery; the Bentley Science Building housing labs and classrooms for the science faculty; and two attractive residence halls.

Students are active in campus affairs. Peterson’s 2004 guide to Four-Year Colleges notes “the Johnson State College Student Association is a vital and active organization that has a strong voice in college affairs.” Faculty and administration invite students to sit on campus committees except for those dealing with faculty tenure decisions. The lively and active Student Association, Student Senate and campus newspaper Basement Medicine provide forums for student debate and action and have a constructive impact on the life of the campus. Recent activity has resulted in the installation of security phones on campus, the opening of the first campus ATM machine, and the inauguration of the “Badger Bullet,” a free, scheduled van service for the 75 minute drive to Burlington, Vermont’s major city.

Students are active in community volunteer work, service learning, and collaboration with professors in research projects. Johnson State’s nationally recognized Center for Service Learning, known as SERVE, has operated since 1987 to place the energy and creative talent of JSC students in the service of community needs. Students mentor local school children, take part in the America Reads initiative, work with local food banks, and are active in statewide environmental issues through association with the Vermont Institute for Natural Science. The SERVE Program has taken students on work projects to Central America and will be taking a group of faculty and

students to Vietnam in the spring as part of a study of Vietnamese history and culture and in order to investigate land mine issues. The SERVE office has established crucial links between the campus and the larger community. It has also demonstrated that participation in activities outside of the classroom but related to academic studies enliven and enrich a student's collegiate experience. The experience demonstrates the relevance of studies to life and work, and it strengthens the likelihood that a student will persist in studies until graduation.

INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT WEAKNESSES/SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS

Students and faculty fail to make full use of college facilities. There is a significant way in which the rich resources of the college are underutilized by faculty and students. Faculty and students concentrate their in-class hours between 10:00 and 2:00, Monday through Thursday. This comes about through freedom of choice as teachers and students strive to concentrate their classroom work in a four-day period and to leave three days free. This result squeezes course requirements and popular electives into an artificially short time frame. Required courses are not offered every semester. Student demand for courses is intense. The supply is confined to a tight window of time. Students, therefore, are often unable to find space in classes they want or need for graduation, resulting in the need for a 9th or 10th semester of work to finish college or departmental requirements,

In the spring 2002 semester 46% of JSC's classes started between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Looking at courses that began between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. on Mondays through Thursdays, the percentage leaps to 80%. Since, in any given academic year, close to 50% of the undergraduate students on campus are first-year students, experience shows that many need foundation courses that take place at times in conflict with other essential courses.

Twelve of the 18 courses that were "closed" to students in the spring 2004 semester were introductory courses. While students may have been well served by their second or third choices, they endured a distinct frustration factor. Their inability to enroll, say, in a beginning Biology or Child Development course delayed their further coursework in required prerequisites for a life science or psychology major.

Faculty advisors also note that JSC registration statistics may understate the problem. The listing shows only those students who remain on a waiting list and not those who immediately leave the queue to make another selection for fear of being blocked out of another course.

Students and faculty are limited by a narrow campus monoculture. Johnson State is a public college in a rural community in a largely homogenous state. Both the student body and the teaching corps are drawn from a

narrow monoculture that lacks ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. In the fall 2003 semester JSC enrolled 18 black and 17 Hispanic students, and 5 foreign students—one each from Columbia, Jamaica and Japan, and two from Canada. This thin mix of diversity is faithful to the monochromatic nature of the Vermont population but needs enrichment to provide students with a richer and more accurate experience of cultural diversity.

In addition, because of the relatively large number of majors and specializations taught by a relatively small number of professors, it is possible for students receive a narrow exposure to subjects, instructors, ideas and fellow students. The monoculture is more than narrow ethnic and cultural exposure. It also involves a circumscribed intellectual experience for many students. Students in the focus group conversations complained that “the same stuff is being taught in different courses,” or, that there is “repetitive study in different classes,” and that “the same faculty [are] teaching multiple courses [with] limited viewpoints and limited choice.”

Students are not supported by user-friendly tools for academic information of all types including information about majors, scheduling, course selection and registration. The JSC computer network does not include information to assist course selection and enrollment. It is not possible to file degree plans electronically or easily research degree requirements via the computer. A majority of faculty is unable to post course syllabuses electronically. Students are too dependent on in-person visits to the registrar’s office and may be missing early opportunities to become more self-sufficient and confident in taking charge of their educations. Students and advisers consume precious time handling tasks that could be streamlined through computerized processes.

FISCAL STABILITY STRENGTHS

Johnson State’s educational mission is supported by balanced budgets. After a period of financial troubles in the 1990’s, the Johnson State College budget has shown modest growth and has been in positive balance for the past five years. Income from tuition and fees (covering roughly 65% of income needs) increased significantly during a soon-to-be-ending period of growth in Vermont’s college age population. The Vermont State appropriation has increased in five years from \$3,176,800 in FY00 (supplying 25% of income), to \$4,053,771 in FY03 (providing 27% of income). Income from gifts, grants and other sources has played a significant but varying role as the college has strengthened and developed its grant writing and fund raising activities. The balance sheet for 2003 is a characteristic example of income and expenditures:

Johnson State College: General Operating Income

Source	FY03 actual	Percent
<i>Vt. Appropriation</i>	\$ 4,053,771	27%
Tuition and fees	\$ 10,125,827	67%
Other income	\$ 856,920	6%
Totals	\$ 15,036,518	100%

Johnson State College: General Operating Expenses

Function	FY03 actual	Percent
Personnel	\$10,278,063	69%
Other operating	\$ 4,182,277	28%
Equipment	\$ 365,802	3%
Totals	\$14,826,143	100%

The State of Vermont provides reliable support to Johnson State College. State of Vermont support to Johnson State College is relatively low resulting in some of the highest public college tuitions in the country; state support is nevertheless reliable and dependable. The economy of Vermont is relatively stable and public funding for education is expected neither to suffer drastic cuts nor to see dramatic increases. Vermont State Colleges Chancellor Robert Clarke has proved an effective spokesman for the system before the legislature’s appropriation committees. He has also taken steps to reduce to a minimum the expenses of the central office, leaving virtually the entire state appropriation to be divided equally among the five units in the state college system: Johnson, Lyndon and Castleton State Colleges, Vermont Technical College and the Community College of Vermont.

Johnson State serves non-traditional students statewide through a growing and successful External Degree Program (EDP). Johnson State College offers a statewide external degree program for older students who have already accumulated at least 60 college credits and who want to complete a degree on a part-time student basis. Each student works with an advisor who helps the student develop and carry out a plan to meet the requirements and earn the credits needed for a B.A. or B.S. degree. Student’s complete studies through EDP sponsored weekend and once-a-week courses, which Johnson faculty teaches on campus and at locations throughout Vermont. Students also work independently, take courses online, or enroll in regular classes at Johnson State or other VSC campuses. EDP students participating in the focus group discussions emphasize the excellence and challenge of the program and the fact that it is “family friendly” for people striving to fit education into busy household schedules.

The EDP has provided a significant economic benefit to the college. EDP enrollment increased by 84%, from 232 students in 1994 to 428 in 2003. With this growth in EDP enrollment, the total enrollment at the college (not including graduate students or continuing education students) increased from 1,391 in 1994 to 1,490 in 2003. The success of the EDP program has added a significant measure of financial security to Johnson State.

FISCAL STABILITY WEAKNESSES/SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS

Johnson State is too dependent on tuition income. With 67% of its operating income derived from student tuition and fees, Johnson State is particularly sensitive to short term changes and long-term trends in student enrollment. It is also an exceptionally expensive state college. JSC’s estimated total cost for in state students in

2003-2004 was \$13,208. This compares with an average cost for public four-year institutions in the U.S. (which had just sustained an average tuition increase of 9.8%) of \$10,636. With these realities in mind the coming decade will present formidable challenges.

Tuition dependency limits the college's ability to introduce needed strategic changes. The outlook for income and expenditures over the next five years suggests that there will be scant financial capacity to implement new plans and strategies for reviving the curriculum and improving student retention. This is perhaps the most insidious result of barely status quo funding: a quiet pressure to make few changes or risk precious capital on new initiatives. State funding in Vermont is already at the lowest level compared to peer institutions nationwide, and it is unlikely to increase significantly. Tuition and costs are already high and cannot be increased without fear of making a college education in Vermont unattainably expensive. Finally, although fund raising has been successful and shows considerable future promise for the college, it has not yet reached a high enough level to exert a major impact on the life of the college.

Financial problems cut short the college careers of many students. Looking at the ten-year graduation rate (spring 1990 to Fall 1999), 41% of students graduated with no unmet financial need during their college years. The comparable figure for students with over \$6,000 of unmet financial need was 34%. Student financial security is an important element in persistence to graduation. Those students who arrived without this barrier face one less obstacle to successful completion; for students who do face ongoing financial challenges, the struggle is compounded by working too many hours, lack of participation in a rich co-curricular life, and greater skepticism when confronted by administrative or academic problems.

Johnson State's endowment is too small to meet the college's needs. Over the past nine years, from 1994 to 2003 the college has developed an endowment that has increased from \$99,730 in 1994 to \$581,961 in 2003, less than \$600 per student. The JSC endowment is below the average of \$1.5 million of our sister four-year colleges in the Vermont State College system, and well below the average of \$2.5 million for New England state colleges of similar size and history.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCESS ANALYSIS

Problem 1: A low completion rate occurs because students lack sufficient support for becoming educationally engaged. (Academic, Institutional Management)

The college faces two major challenges in engaging students academically: advising and the failure to socially and academically integrate first-year students into the college.

The Role of Advising - The JSC strategic planning task force explored the causes of low student retention and concluded that a complex set of academic and managerial issues shared responsibility for the condition. A central problem in this connection is the uneven quality and effectiveness of the system of student advising, and lack of an established program to realize how effective advising advances the college's educational mission. Faculty advising tends to focus on details of college requirements and course selection and tends to be ineffective in providing and encouraging broader vision for students who lack sophistication and self confidence, especially those students who arrive with significant challenges. The problem, therefore, has implications for both immediate academic needs as well as goal-setting and future planning.

While praising individual faculty members for help—often outside of the formal advising structure—JSC student focus group participants zeroed in on deficiencies in the institutional arrangements for advising. One noted that professors are not always informed about the requirements for majors. Another complained “advising didn't help and that he did not even meet his advisor until his second year.” Students said that advisors sometimes discouraged them from taking courses outside of departmental offerings—as though there were a competition among departments to hold on to “their own” students.

Providing a strong system of advising is particularly important to students who come to Johnson State with academic deficits or without a clear conception of what they want to study or what they want to do in life. Analyzing the first year return rate of the class which entered JSC in the fall of 2002, of 150 students who returned 81% were in the top three-quarters of their high school graduation class. Of those, entering from the bottom quarter of their high school class only 18% returned for the second year. Students who enter Johnson State without a major field of study or a clear sense of career goals drop out of school at a greater rate than those with concrete plans. These categories of students are especially vulnerable to confusion and discouragement and are ripe candidates for what the literature refers to as “intrusive advising”. They need firm personal ties with advisers who can help reinforce the importance of completing the degree and aid advisees in forming plans for life and career—even if these are ‘working plans’ that later change as interests and skills change and grow.

Richard J. Light observes in his book, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak their Minds*,¹ “Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience.” It is clear that

¹ (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 81

Johnson State under-exploits the power of good advising to guide students into good choices and successful academic careers.

In an essay entitled “Developing Mission, Goals and Objectives for the Advising Program,” published in *Academic Advising: a Comprehensive Handbook*,² Eric White describes the six critical functions of college advising. As is commonly the case according to White, Johnson faculty typically operate in only one area—that of helping students organize their schedule and register for the semester—work that typically consumes more than two-thirds of the time JSC advisers spend with students. JSC faculty serve as student advisers without common goals and in the absence of a compelling overall sense of how advising fits into the academic mission and how advising could become the hub for a network of planning, goal-setting, and success-reinforcing activities.

The First Year Experience - An additional factor contributing to the low JSC persistence rate is the lack of an engaging and energizing first year experience designed to integrate JSC students into the educational endeavor. In the 2003 focus group discussions students cited a lack of challenge and interest in the freshman and sophomore college curriculum as one cause for student transfers and withdrawals.

Students observed that first year courses are often unchallenging and uninspiring, geared to the lowest level of student ability, and repetitive—altogether too much like the high school courses they recently completed. For students who may need two such ‘basic courses’, the problem is compounded and forces the shaky student to question the worth of college. As one student observed, “The same stuff is being taught in different courses.” The lack of distinctiveness of the curriculum and the absence of interdisciplinary linkages between fields, and between the academy and the outside world leads students to question the idea of remaining at an institution deficient in distinctive flavor, zest and appeal. Johnson State lacks a powerful sense of identity and is not current with student interests and approaches to learning. An array of departmental majors has developed piecemeal over the years without sufficient attention to how the requirements of one major—in education, say—might compare in scope to a major in liberal arts or professional studies.

There is compelling evidence that combining a strong first year course with interdisciplinary approaches to curricular organization result in higher levels of student aspirations, achievement and retention.³ They emphasize

² (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series, published by the Academic Advising Association, 2000), p. 185

³ “Interdisciplinary Learning: Process and Outcomes,” Lana Ivanitskaya, et. al., **Innovative Higher Education**, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter 2002), pp. 95-111.

the collegial nature of study and learning. They are fresh and appealing to faculty as well as to students. They embody academic interest at its most intense and launch students more effectively into a career than standard course offerings of the sort characteristic of current JSC offerings. Syracuse University's Vincent Tinto summarized the research findings that have inspired institutional thinking at Johnson State:

Frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and students has repeatedly been shown to be an *independent* predictor of student persistence. This is true for large and small colleges, rural and urban colleges, public and private colleges, and for two and four-year colleges and universities. It is true for women as well as men, for students of color as well as for Anglo students, and for part-time as well as full time students. Simply put, involvement matters and at no point does it matter more than during the first year when student attachments are so tenuous and the pull of the institution so weak. Finally and most importantly, the research tells us that student learning is the root of student persistence. Students, who learn, are students who stay.⁴

Problem 2: Among the students who leave JSC are those with the strongest academic credentials (Academic, Institutional Management, Fiscal)

Academic Challenge - The overall challenge and content of college offerings are also in question. The evidence suggests that Johnson State loses some of its most promising students. Some sixty percent of students in the highest levels of combined SAT scores transfer, withdraw, or fail to return before completing a degree. Focus group students—many of who contemplated transferring from Johnson at one time or another—cite several reasons for dissatisfaction on the part of well-qualified students.

The key reason cited is a lack of academic challenge. One student reported coming from a demanding high school and coasting through the first two years at Johnson with classes that were not demanding. Other factors cited included:

- A limited number of course offerings
- Too many courses in majors offered by the same professor
- Lack of intellectual and cultural diversity

See also, "A Model for Comprehensive Reform in General Education: Portland State University," Charles R. White, **Journal of General Education**, Vol. 43, No. 3 (1994) pp. 168-229

⁴ Vincent Tinto, "Colleges as Communities: Taking Research on Student Persistence Seriously," **Review of Higher Education**, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 167-177.

See also, Mary C. Starke et. al, "Retention, Bonding and Academic Achievement: Success of a First-Year Seminar," **Journal of the First-Year Experience**, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Fall 2001) pp. 7-35

- The difficulty of completing major requirements when too few course sections were offered to meet student needs

Finally, there is a sense that the educational program at Johnson State—despite many excellent offerings, outstanding teachers and satisfied students—lacks an overall structure and coherence that could work more effectively to challenge intellectually the strongest students while supporting and encouraging students who are overcoming academic deficits.

These are academic problems to the extent that they illustrate weaknesses in the JSC curriculum and course of study. They are managerial issues in that they challenge administrative leaders to work with student, faculty and staff stakeholders to reorganize the college program and to make it more of an intellectually coherent whole. They are fiscal issues in the sense that when viable students transfer or withdraw from the college there is a considerable loss of previous investment in that student's advancement and of the tuition income that would accompany progress to graduation. For a tuition-dependent college the departure of qualified students represents failure and loss and, it should be noted, any interruption in students' regular retention detracts from the overall institutional dollars available to offer financial help to needy students. A disproportionate share of staff time and resources must go toward recruiting students rather than supporting or teaching those already in attendance.

When Barbara Murphy arrived on campus as President of Johnson State College on July 1, 2001, she turned her attention to assessing the college's strengths and weaknesses and to planning. This process was advanced by the appointment in July 2002 of Academic Dean Dan Regan. In October 2002 the President and Dean appointed a Strategic Planning Task Force, with a core group of 13 members of the faculty and staff, and eleven working groups of four or five members each, engaging a total of fifty people charged with studying the college's existing realities and charting ways to:

- Redesign student orientation and design a first-year experience
- Expand interdisciplinary coursework
- Improve diversity education
- Extend classroom learning to experiences outside the classroom
- Improve utilization of college resources
- Increase professional development opportunities for faculty and staff
- Improve the assessment of student skills
- Increase enrollment through an enhanced college marketing plan
- Improve the use of data for college planning

- Strengthen institutional commitment to ongoing strategic planning
- Enhance individual and social responsibility

The strategic planning effort was undertaken in the context of ongoing review by the Vermont State Colleges and the forthcoming ten-year accreditation review (due in 2005) by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. A key purpose in the strategic planning effort was definition of activities to strengthen the institution with support from a Title III Developing Institutions Grant. The Strategic Planning group involved the college community in the planning process through reports to faculty, staff and students, through regular reports, a formal meeting of the president with the faculty assembly, a college-wide “town meeting” and subsequent forums designed to stimulate discussion, questions and ideas from the college community as a whole.

As part of the planning process, in the fall 2003 semester, with the help of a outside consultant, the college set up focus group conversations with students to seek their insights on the college’s strengths and weaknesses, and to explore the reasons why students may leave the college before graduation rather than persist in their studies through the B.A. degree.

Members of the faculty recommended students to take part in the sessions. College staff noted an interesting point that this simple process of identifying students for the focus groups appears to have acted as informal reinforcement of students’ success. Thirty-nine students took part in five two-hour group meetings. Their reflections provide a crucial source of information about the current conditions of campus life.

The Strategic Planning group has, meanwhile, kept the Chancellor and Board of the state college system informed of its plans, as well as the presidents of sister VSC institutions. The Johnson State administrative team has the authority to implement the plans developed in the strategic planning process.

The discussions of the JSC Strategic Planning task force have established these priorities for the college during the five-year grant period and after:

Priority 1: create a distinctive college community, based on a renovated curriculum emphasizing interdisciplinary studies, including a first-year course for first year students and a capstone course for juniors and seniors (successfully in place since 2001).

Priority 2: review and adjust college majors and programs within majors in order to ensure diversity of ideas and viewpoints, full scope for electives, and inclusion of at least one extended classroom learning experience in each student’s program.

Priority 3: provide institutional help to faculty in the form of professional development to build understanding and support for interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning, and to expand and strengthen faculty-advising skills.

Priority 4: Expand enrollment, retain matriculated students and increase the tuition-based health of the institution.

Priority 5: Increase the income generated by fund raising for endowment building and operational expenses.

Key Overall Goals and Measurable Objectives for the Institution
(Section A from which this follows begins on p.6)

B: Key Goals	C: Measurable Objectives
Improve the academic success and retention of Johnson State College students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By 2009 increase first semester to second semester retention rate from 85% to 90% • By 2009 increase the freshman to sophomore retention rate from 60% to 70% • By 2009 increase sophomore to junior retention rate from 43% to 50% • By 2009 increase from 74% to 82% the number of students in the first year cohort (first year, full time) who complete two semesters in good standing • By 2009 increase the graduation rate (within six years) of those students who arrived at JSC from the lower half of their high school graduation classes from 42% to 50% • By 2009 increase the graduation rate (within six years) of students who arrived at JSC from the upper half of their high school graduation classes from 42% to 50% • By 2009 reduce the number of students “undecided” about future plans from one-third to one-fifth of all entering first year classes
Enrich college academic offerings through curricular restructuring and development of interdisciplinary course offerings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By fall 2006 members of the incoming freshman class will enroll in an intensive, interdisciplinary first year seminar • By 2007, 20% more students over baseline will complete college and major requirements within an eight-semester full time program.
Demonstrate the connection between academic progress and life and career experience through extended classroom experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By 2009 expand the number of classes with a service learning component from 5 to 25 • By 2009 all JSC and EDP students will graduate with one extended classroom experience (research, internship, student leadership, creative project)

D. Institutionalizing Practices and Improvements

The activities to be undertaken under this Title III proposal will receive continuing commitment and support from Johnson State College to ensure that advances made under grant become permanent and that students will benefit from improved programs to ensure their academic success.

The ongoing costs of Title III enhancements include:

- The service of Academic Dean Dan Regan who will serve as the Title III Coordinator, and will devote one-half of his time to oversee the work of this project focused on student success and retention. He will work directly under President Murphy with full authority to implement the program. The costs of this service, which illustrates the college's full commitment to the realization of the project, will be underwritten by Johnson State College.
- A new Associate Dean for Interdisciplinary Programs who will work with faculty, staff and students on reorganizing individual courses and the overall curriculum in the direction of interdisciplinary studies. Johnson State will recruit and fill this position in the first year of the grant and will budget the position at \$70,000 per year for years 2 through 5 of Title III support. The college will pay an increasing fraction of that amount each year and will sustain the full cost of the position after the conclusion of five-year grant period.
- Creation of a faculty-staff committee to plan the new interdisciplinary course for first year students. Professor of Art, Kenneth Leslie, and Associate Dean of Students, David Bergh will chair the committee.
- Creation of a committee to develop the service learning and extended classroom experience component of the Title III plan. Ellen Hill, Director of Service Learning and Non-Profit Management, and Christie Haspray, Coordinator of the Advising and Career Services will chair this committee.
- Interdisciplinary faculty appointments. Johnson State will fill four-full time faculty positions in FY05 to replace people who have retired or moved elsewhere. Costs of the appointments will be covered from JSC's standard expenditure for personnel of over \$10,000,000 per year. For those and future vacancies the college will recruit candidates in part on the strength of their ability to make interdisciplinary contributions.

The JSC community is committed to completing the work of self-study and innovation thus far begun regarding student advising, a first year experience, transition to an interdisciplinary course focus, consolidation of major programs and development of on-line support for student program planning and registration.

Two factors will assist in the institutionalization of Title III improvements: The first factor—connected directly to this proposal—is the economic benefit to be realized by improved student retention at Johnson State. Johnson State students represent, on average and taking account of different tuition rates, about \$10,000 in net tuition revenue. The five-year objective of this proposal is to increase student retention from freshman year to sophomore year from 60% to 70% and from sophomore year through senior year from 43% to 50%. Hypothesizing 350 first year students, a change from 60%-70% will result in 35 more students staying on—a gain of \$350,000. That larger base makes the ongoing retention work a more doable task as we move from a sophomore to senior retention rate of 50% rather than our current 43%.

The second factor assisting the permanent implementation of Title III enhancements is related to the availability of resources for faculty development in advising and in interdisciplinary studies to be derived from increased income from annual drive fund raising and from a substantial increase in proceeds from endowment.

Johnson State anticipates an additional financial benefit from improved retention. The College currently has unused capacity in its upper division courses. Improved retention will better populate junior and senior level classes without increased staffing costs. A by-product of this positive financial benefit will be a larger cohort of students in academic programs where senior classes not uncommonly see four or five students in a class.

Under current conditions, roughly half the JSC student body consists of first-year students. This condition results from the necessity of offering multiple sections of introductory courses, many taught by adjunct faculty, in contrast to under-enrolled sections of upper level courses. Increased retention of students in the junior and senior years will establish a more healthy spread of course work and will render the institution more cost effective in carrying out its educational mission.