

State of the College Address

Address by President Barbara E. Murphy to the JSC Community

March 30, 2011

Thank you for coming today. There is no one right time of year to give a state-of-the-college address, but doing it in spring allows me to reflect with you on our efforts three-quarters of the way through the academic year. It is a time when we enter the completion stage of the year — highlighted by our Extended Classroom Experience showcase, Honors Convocation and Commencement — and see what we can learn together from these culminating activities: what a year's worth of research looks like for some students and faculty, how our chorale sounds after nine months of working together, and what shape our students' artwork, business plans and final projects have taken.

I would like to spend some time talking about *JSC 2010-2015: A Plan for Access, Engagement & Success*, our five-year plan. I'd like to briefly discuss each of the six priority areas and say something about each one — why it is important, what progress have made to date, what is next, how so much of what we are working on and have accomplished this year fits within our plan. While the plan reaches to 2015 — and there is work enough to keep us busy for that long — I will mostly talk about this year's accomplishments and look toward next year. Following that, I will talk about our budget — both for the year we will wrap up June 30 (the end of our fiscal year) and the year we will begin July 1 and run through the 2011-2012 academic year. And, I will welcome your comments and questions.

JSC 2010-2015: A Plan for Access, Engagement & Success,

Why did we set out to do a plan? Let's face it: the very words "strategic plan" cause eyes to glaze over. But I've come to realize that while planning is something we may not enjoy, its absence is apparent when it is not done. Without a sense of connection between what we are doing now and how that contributes to a larger effort, we can start to doubt ourselves, question our usefulness, and become skeptical about a shared future.

So we committed to create our latest plan. To make sure our plan addresses those issues most important to us, we adopted a "critical issues" approach. We began by asking ourselves, "What are the issues most important to the future of Johnson State College?" To take this one step further: "What are the issues so critical to our future that *not* to attend to them might jeopardize our survival and/or prosperity? Another version of this question is: what issues are critical to carrying out our core mission so that our plan does not become simply a meaningless set of words that we pull our every five or ten years for our accreditation reports?

Following this approach, we arrived at six priorities. I presented them last year at this session, but we are always a different group, and now a year has passed and I can report on progress — and obstacles — in each of the areas. I've been pleased to see the ways in which the six key priorities and goals are working

themselves into college conversations. I'll often see a proposal that references one of the goals (often tied to a funding or resource request) and talks about work in line with one of the priorities.

Because we are a college and most of what we do is in service to academic goals, we chose to lead with our two top academic goals and set each of the other four priorities in the context of meeting those two goals.

Priority #1: Increase academic challenge and student achievement.

We are extraordinarily ambitious in this priority area as we are in our overall plan. But in no other area than our first — and perhaps, second — priority will we be more changed once we have met our goals.

JSC students are successful when they are challenged and meet those challenges. To oversimplify, all else can follow from authentic challenges and high standards — and rising to meet them. Among the tasks we have set for ourselves is expanding opportunities for undergraduate research program by program. Our successes to date are encouraging: we have students working with professors in the environmental and health sciences, in psychology, in the labs and in the field, and observing and interviewing families about infant development. Our students have presented to major donors, to the Board of Trustees, to our legislators and others, both here in Vermont and at professional meetings in Washington, DC, and elsewhere. It is a rich and promising beginning.

While our science programs and faculty may be leading the way in establishing a culture of research, we can — and do — define this term in a way that expands to include us all. Students can work on primary-source documents with faculty members, serve as readers for prospective publications and design survey instruments for local businesses and agencies — such as the survey of second-home owners now under way by our business students. In this way we create a culture of research that broadens to encompass other majors and programs, taking care to design sound projects that will have value to faculty and students and the public, that we document our work and share our results, that we hold to high and agreed-upon standards of research and dissemination, and that we keep our investigations fresh and creative, reflecting our belief that *all* our students — with good foundations and practice — can find a way in.

We also have some academic housekeeping to do, and we've made progress this year. Several majors are under review for streamlining; others are undergoing course and program reviews. One of the many benefits of new faculty members is that they bring new eyes to our curricula, new perspectives on how knowledge in particular fields has changed. While the temptation is always to add credits in order to make a program more robust, we are mindful that "more" is not always better — and that a well-designed major can be a major achievable in four years. We have begun, but just barely, to redesign our general education core curriculum. This may be a good summer project for willing faculty members to undertake.

We have two new programs under design at this time: a "Communications and Community Media" proposal and a new media/digital arts concentration. Both are in response to current and/or prospective student

interest and are very much in the context of new and changing technologies, and faculty have been working hard on these projects.

We are making small but steady progress on our retention and graduation goals. At present, two-thirds of our students return for second year. We want this number to grow by a couple of percentage points each year; we want to affect the areas we *can* affect and to see our graduation numbers improve as year-to-year continuation improves.

Priority #2: Foster early and ongoing student success.

Our second priority is closely tied to the first. Students will be challenged and will achieve if they are become engaged early on, are encouraged from the beginning, and realize authentic success. By authentic I mean success based on real achievement — knowledge that at least has been accessed, if not mastered, and can be built upon.

Last year we completed five years of a very successful project to study and affect student success at JSC. While the very welcome and important federal funding went away, we have committed to continue — with our own College funds — many of the things we learned that support student success. Our Office of First-Year Experience, our Common Book program, our “Creative Audience” and expanded programming for students, our investment in academic facilities, and our efforts to involve returning students in ways that help new students succeed — these are just some examples of the progress we’ve made and the steps we will continue.

I believe that our work on this second priority — our emphasis on student success — is related to the good year we are experiencing overall with regard to student life. Student surveys indicate satisfaction with residential life, with our counseling and health services, with our SHAPE facilities, and with student activities. And we have seen a significant drop in problematic behaviors associated with alcohol and substance abuse. Students report a drop in binge drinking as well. While it is hard to draw a straight line between cause and effect, I suspect there is an important connection between holding to high academic standards and offering students the supports to meet those standards. As well, we are seeing good participation levels in clubs, groups, service, arts and events, and recreation.

An important commitment we made over the last five years was to learn as much as we could about first-year success and start extending it to returning students — especially second-year students, the next most likely group to leave college early. We have progress to make in this area; for example, we need to not to take our sophomore and transfer students for granted. We are conducting a small study to learn more about a cohort of returning students who started at JSC without some of the coursework we would have liked to have seen, but who came back for second year nonetheless. We hope to learn what contributed to their perseverance — e.g., did it have to do with course choices? Where they lived? Their major?

At the other end of the spectrum, we have completed the first phase of a study looking at 120 JSC students who had applied for graduation and were 6 to 12 credits from completion but did not follow through to

finish their requirements and actually graduate. By learning more about how to get all students off to a good start, sustain the right strategies and not leave successful completion to chance, we hope to meet our — and our students’ — definitions of “ongoing success.”

Priority #3: Identify and enroll students most likely to thrive and succeed at Johnson State College.

The third priority in our plan follows closely from the second. This is not about signing up as many students as we can, but about making meaningful matches as early in the admissions process as possible. Our admissions counselors are connecting early and often with students who express interest in our programs and the kind of college we are. Members of a new “Student Ambassadors Club” have been volunteering their time to contact prospective students in their majors and talk about their experiences at JSC. Some other examples of personalized enrollment efforts:

- On Friday, our first-ever Chamber Singers , a group of 20 JSC student singers led by Professor Bethany Plisse, will leave for a four-day , eight-concert tour at six high schools in Vermont and Massachusetts. This is the sort of targeted enrollment event that will show students, guidance counselors and families the best of JSC study, teaching, learning, and performance.
- Another exciting admissions event happened last month, when we hosted a group of ethnically diverse students from Cincinnati through our connection with Minority Recruitment Online. A busload of students visited campus and heard from our students of color about their experiences at JSC, and several positive connections were made. We were proud to be only one of two Vermont colleges included in that effort.
- Just this week, we welcomed close to 60 accepted students on campus, each hosted by a current JSC student volunteer for the day. It is enormously gratifying that we have students so committed to their own JSC experience that they want to share it with prospective students. Faculty members showed their own commitment by opening their classes to students, holding a session for prospective education majors, and serving on a panel to answer questions from parents and prospective students about majors and academic life in general.

Priority #4: Strengthen JSC’s contributions to and relationship with Lamoille County and Vermont.

When we first formulated this goal, we simply stated our intent to contribute to the community. Only after more study and conversation did we realize that as much as we want to serve where and as we can, we also want to learn *from* and *in* our communities. We want to be students of the greater Johnson and Lamoille County community and not lose sight of the fact that we are citizens of a very specific place at a very particular time. Examples:

- Our students in Quantitative Analysis are conducting a study of second-home owners in Lamoille County in conjunction with the Lamoille County Planning Commission and the Lamoille Economic Development Corporation, with the goal of quantifying the economic impact of these home owners.

- Students in BUS 4720, the senior seminar class for business majors, are working with Manufacturing Solutions Inc. (MSI) in Morrisville to create a business plan for a cardboard-recycling facility.
- Students in another business class are working with the Center for an Agricultural Economy in Hardwick on a number of projects and training workshops.
- The research of our environmental sciences faculty — with students — continues as we learn more about the quality of our region’s soil and water. Professor Dolci and three of her students have been studying the asbestos mine in Eden and Lowell and what the microorganisms there can teach us.
- A very new and exciting project — just in the conversation stages — would build on our support of the Johnson Community Meal project, a bi-monthly luncheon provided free of charge to community members, thus enabling us to extend this good effort even further.

We have a goal to organize these local research and outreach efforts into a “Center for Lamoille Area Studies” so we can make an ongoing commitment to local knowledge as part of our core identity and be known for this unified approach to studying and learning.

Priority #5: Align campus and technology upgrades with academic priorities.

Our final two priorities are “enabling” ones. They have to do with setting the conditions for us — especially those of us who teach and learn, which we hope is everyone — to do our best work, make new discoveries and share what we learn.

What is important to note here is that our renovations, expansions and other campus upgrades are driven by program needs. Our primary focus at this time is both the Visual Arts Center and Bentley Hall. Bentley renovations will result in all-new teaching labs and the addition of three new spaces, including a lab for student research, a new first-floor seminar classroom, and a lot more common space for students to gather. The building will be fully offline this summer while renovations are under way, so thanks in advance for accommodating this disruption.

Our Visual Arts Center will be our first expansion in more than 10 years. This will be a full renovation of the entire building and an addition of just under 5,000 square feet — a complete makeover of studios for teaching, as well as studio space for BFA students. This work in VAC will continue through the fall semester. During this time, art faculty will reside in McClelland Hall and the Library Learning Center, and classes will take place on the ground-level rooms in McClelland and in temporary space next to the elementary school. Here, too, we will ask for your flexibility as we share quarters and increase our presence down the hill, all in the service of a grand opening in January 2012.

We hope to make some modest changes in McClelland Hall as funds allow. We’ll focus on upgrading a classroom or two, updating the computer lab and creating dedicated student space.

Our information-technology changes are keeping pace with our physical-space changes. We are adding wireless options and improving our electronic tools — our website and portal — to make our communications more user-friendly.

Priority #6: Strengthen JSC’s future through gifts, grants and investments.

Increasing the number of gifts and donors to JSC is key to our future. A college needs many investors, believers, “angels” and loyal supporters to move beyond its present to its future. Among our accomplishments so far this year:

- We are piloting a “young alumni as donors” project this year. Soccer coach Ray Campanile has surveyed a dozen or so colleges, asking about their approaches to reaching alumni within the first decade of graduation and building their engagement and continued connections.
- We are designing a focused campaign to coincide with the renovation and expansion of the Visual Arts Center, reaching out to our MFA graduates, local art supporters and others.
- Several College directions have been identified as areas of interest for potential donors. These include the Common Book Initiative and our proposed Center for Lamoille Area Studies, and the extension of our Office of First-Year Experience to reach continuing students. We believe this project-focused approach holds promise for us; just this week I learned of a gift directed in honor of a faculty member and her research agenda, and we also are in conversation with an alumna about a possible bequest that would mark a significant leadership gift to JSC.

It’s not easy to reduce the core of our very optimistic plan to fortune-cookie-sized priorities — I’ve tried. Pressed to describe it succinctly, I would put it this way:

Our plan insists that we be both firm in our commitments and flexible in the ways we encourage and see progress and success; careful with our resources and generous in listening to new points of view; excited about individual students’ accomplishments as we clamor for more students to have their own opportunities. We should grow our research focus beyond the point where we can name every student doing a research internship. Mostly, our plan makes a clear statement that “good enough” is not good enough for JSC, and we are aiming high to design and ensure the highest quality of teaching, learning and processes that support these core functions. We will turn to our College plan to help us make decisions — and they will not all be easy — about assigning resources. It is an exciting plan. When we realize it, we will be different and stronger.

At this point, let me turn to the topic of College budget.

For our current budget year — and, as a reminder, our budget year begins on July 1 and goes through June 30 — we are now entering our last quarter. Given no surprises (and there shouldn’t be many left at this

point), we will finish our year in the black. We'll meet our budget, but we'll meet it closely. Our revenues were exactly what we budgeted, which is good news — but we budgeted conservatively, so there's not much to spare. Expenses were a little under budget, but we had budgeted them a little higher to allow a small contingency fund.

Our budget for the 2011-2012 academic year is in the preparation stage. We need to turn in a balanced budget projection to the chancellor; it will then be submitted to and approved — along with all the other VSC budgets — by the board of trustees. It is not in balance yet, but if you read the latest issue of *Basement Medicine*, you know we have a plan.

We projected revenue based on a detailed look at the size of the incoming class, our current rate of student retention, the size of our upcoming graduation class, our blend of in-state and out-of-state students, good guesses at how many students live on campus, EDP [External Degree Program] trends, and graduate student numbers. Those factors yielded our estimates of tuition-and-fee and room-and-board incomes. We also took into account our state appropriation — which will account for just 14.5% of our 2011-2012 revenues — on the income side. As you will see, this is an inexact science, subject to last minute changes. But we — the administrative dean, controller, registrar, and enrollment staff — got as “granular” and precise as possible to arrive at our revenue projections.

Then we turned to expenses. Personnel and their associated benefits are far and away our biggest cost, accounting for just over 58% of our expenses. And we started adding from there. The gap we came up with was about \$750,000 to \$800,000. To put this in perspective, ours will be a \$30 million budget next year, so we need to make up 2.5% of our budget. How are we going to do this? Through a series of reductions:

- From part-time faculty wages and/or full-time faculty overload: \$100,000 in savings (equivalent to one course from each department over each semester)
- From College-funded, non-work-study wages : another \$100,000 in savings (a reduction of what we spend, not an elimination; we'll look to summer first and not affect the award for which our neediest students qualify)
- From supplies and services: \$125,000, realized by hold this line item at least year's level
- From our contingency fund — our “cushion” that we carry : we'll withdraw \$150,000
- From our marketing and public relations budget: \$100,000

This series of adjustments gets us almost all the way there; with some fine tuning, we'll get to the last piece.

There is likely something on this list that someone thinks is a wrong choice. At President's Council — the 12 people I meet with regularly about College priorities — someone raised questions about the wisdom of including marketing on this list since enrollment and reaching new students is our “bread and butter.” We're committed to greater use of social media, website development and enhancements, and not compromising our ways of telling our JSC story.

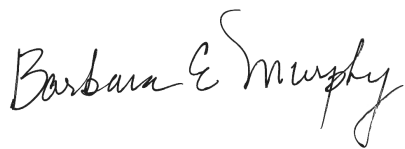
If enrollments are good — and I am grateful and very impressed by the wide participation in admissions activities of so many across the campus — this is a workable budget for next year. But it is a *one-year* plan. And I, along with many of you, will be staying very alert in looking ahead to the year after. Budgeting is both a cycle and an ongoing responsibility.

In Conclusion

We are doing hard work in a difficult economic climate. Many of our neighboring states are making staying home more attractive to students. Community colleges — for reasons of cost and convenience — claim a number of students who might otherwise be headed to a four-year college. But I still believe we have a remarkable ability to provide a context — human, social and physical — for students to learn and thrive and leave us very well-prepared for the next chapter of their — of *your* — lives.

This year is a great work in progress. I am impressed weekly, if not daily, by people's new ideas, willingness to very often say “yes,” requests for professional development, excitement in working together new course proposals — so many good things. It makes the harder things — sustaining enrollment, adjusting to funding levels — if not easier, so much more worth focusing on.

I thank you deeply for joining me in the ongoing work of our College.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara E. Murphy". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the page.