State of the College Report 2007

On Monday, November 12, JSC President Barbara Murphy and members of the JSC community gathered to discuss new initiatives, ideas and plans for the college. Below are President Murphy’s prepared remarks from the event.

A Mission-Inspired Future: State of the College

So much of what we celebrate in higher education is connected to our past. Indeed, the American tradition in post-secondary education is, to my mind, the strongest and most democratic of our social traditions. I am very much aware of this as I address you today: Veterans Day. While Veterans Day began at the end of World War I (on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, 1918) I associate it — probably because of my post-war birth date — with World War II.

The G.I. Bill and Its Legacy

Veterans returning to the states after the War ended in 1945 came home to the G.I. Bill, which opened up higher education to new populations in an unprecedented way. Money to enroll in college became available to people of very modest means — in many cases to people with no means other than the tuition benefits the G.I. Bill offered. This flood of new students changed the definition of "college student" and left a legacy for all of higher education: that unlikely students, children of farmers and immigrants, students with more determination than formal preparation, people with little financial resources and without family money could attend college and succeed beyond high school.

This era marked the birth of the community college movement when, for a while, colleges opened at the astonishing rate of one a month. This new cohort of student enrollment changed American higher education.

A Long History of Inclusion

Johnson State College was founded 175 years ago to educate Vermonter in order to staff and lead the state’s public schools. From the start, the college offered an accessible education, and young women (for a while it was only young women) traveled from the farms and villages in Vermont to learn. So we already had a good foundation of inclusion from which to deepen our roots and grow up even more. One problem, though, with loving your past, is a reluctance to see ahead. But, to ensure that Johnson State College remains strong, we must look to the future. We must consider what still endures, what still inspires, what still fits — fits us, as teachers and students — and then to adjust, to invent, design and create what we need to evolve.

It is a continual responsibility to review our work critically and to revise or transform it. I value this chance to share my own reflections with you today.

Mission-Guided Changes

I would like to talk about a few projects underway at JSC that represent original and fresh perspectives on our work. These are guided by our college mission statement, a statement that pledges us to cross academic and other boundaries; extend the classroom to the field,
the lab, the studio, the community; to participate actively with high standards, vigorous debate and mutual respect. I've offered a short-hand version of the mission, but I think I've captured the core of it. Ours is a mission statement grounded in a true belief that higher education transforms lives and as a mission-driven organization, we have the responsibility to return again and again and check in with its promises.

Demographics
I'll begin with a little detail about JSC demographics right now so we have a sense of who we are: we just enrolled our largest first-year class of the last four years. We are becoming slightly more selective in our admissions, still focused on a broad access mission, but encouraging some students to do more preparation before coming to JSC. This adjustment comes from a belief in students' ability to succeed, not out of a sense of exclusion. Our on-campus population is between 1050 and 1100 - it's hard to describe the EDP'ers who study on campus; hence, my imprecision with the number. Additionally, we have 500+ students each semester all over the state and another +/- 300 who take graduate courses. Our diversified population is one of our great strengths; although we show a slight downward trend from Fall '06 to Fall '07 (something we need to pay attention to) we should note, as well, that we have grown seven percent over the last four years, in large part because of three percent increases in our entering first-year classes.

Current Directions for the College
Back to some current directions that hold much promise for us:

1. I consider our focus on early student success one of the great accomplishments of the last few years. The Title III grant—an infusion of $1.8 million over five years — is the kind of thing a college usually gets only once in a lifetime. We are in year three of the grant and year two of our plan, having dedicated year one as a design year. Through much collaboration and wrangling, we have first-year seminars in place for all entering students and have these seminars recognized as a secure part of the general education core. These seminars will evolve over time as they are directed by faculty members' teaching interests, and teaching and research interests grow. I am pleased that we went with the approach we did: a shared set of criteria for course design, with focus determined by faculty members' own curricular passions. Many colleges design more of a generic course, heavier on process than content; I think our design fits us better.

Joining the seminar as part of our early focus is our staffing an office of "First Year Programs" to give the commitment a high profile. I'm reminded of Dr. Vincent Tinto's words to us a few years ago: student success is too important to "leave to chance." We have to be intentional if we want to see change and, he added, "whatever you measure will change."

I offer tentatively some real evidence of change. It appears that over the last four years, our retention rate from freshman year to sophomore year has improved from 56.7 percent to 65.64 percent — just under a 9 percent change. This is huge — not just because we have some early evidence that our attention to new students is showing good results, but because we are saving some students from a premature departure which they may not have
chosen and that may cost them additional time and money—real-life considerations. graduating with $16,000 in student debt and a college degree is one thing; graduating with a debt and no degree, an entirely different and discouraging problem.

2. The first year of our Common Reading Initiative was a true labor of love that reached hundreds of students—touching faculty, staff, and community members. High school students as well. It was as full and rich an audience as we could have hoped for and it was a thrill to see the project all the way through with you from our first tentative invitation to colleagues to read and select a book, to Ishmael Beah’s signing 150 books in the wings of Dibden Center following his talk last month. I believe we have begun a rich new tradition and found a way to signal that reading, talking, thinking, are both individual and communal activities at JSC and we are proud of this. I think we discovered, too, that deep learning is not really over when the last page is read or the lecturer left the stage. It continues with further dialogue and thinking.

Think about becoming involved in next year’s Common Reading Initiative — as either a recommender or a screener for the Fall ’08 choice.

3. Other recent successes include an increased focus on communication and outreach. JSC was described in our most recent accreditation visit as a "hidden gem." Once we acknowledge the compliment, though, it became quickly apparent that we needed to probe the "hidden" part and see if the reticence fits with a college that commits to "extended classroom learning as far as the community and local and wider world"; or "active participation and vigorous debate." I think it doesn’t and I am pleased that we have redesigned our Web site, made its navigation more intuitive and the entire site more searchable and inclusive. By the end of the semester, we will be able to hear music, see art, read a newsletter or even access Basement Medicine through our Web site. Parents of new JSC students are already receiving an electronic newsletter and we will be reaching out to all parents and alums in the near future.

In terms of in-person outreach, we continue our emphasis on local learning, service, and local knowledge. This year we will hold our second annual Extended Classroom Experience Showcase, expand art venues, and host community and school leaders on campus.

4. A very exciting new set of projects on campus will be realized over the next few years as the second phase of our master planning. We have received bonding authority to upgrade significantly some of our facilities. Projects include: the campus gateway project, upgrade to SHAPE facilities, electric transformer upgrade at the college apartments end of campus, renovation to teaching labs, and the largest and most dramatic piece — the transformation (it’s more than a renovation) — of Stearns Hall into a true student center. We all probably have a piece of the Stearns project we’re especially excited about. For some, a dedicated small performance venue is probably the best part; for others, a place to watch a film, maybe a place to play games with friends. For me, it is all those pieces but, also a physical representation of a place where students can gather as an audience or in small groups to hold a club meeting, work on a research project together, or ask a faculty member to join a conversation. All in a bright, attractive, fully accessible new
building that will welcome people and light the way to more conversation, activity, learning, and friendships.

5. **A strength of our college — one that describes new students and experienced students alike, and the people who teach and support them — is the wonderful range of interests our students show. These interests are expansive and they are innovative.** In one season, students have started up a Republicans' Club, a Tango Club, a group focused on the rights of children across the globe; they have chosen impressive Break Away sites, expanded the snowboard club, invited engaging speakers. We who work here guiding and teaching need to keep doing the work that supports students in their creative programming. And, we all need to remember how crucial we are to each others' growth and development — that none of our relationships can be taken for granted.

I have named as recent successes and areas of strength our early student success strategies, our reading and discussion project, our enhanced communications and outreach, our range of interests and activities and the physical transformations that are in store for us.

**Challenges Ahead**

But no catalog of successes can stand alone. It has to be placed near the unfinished work or the work not begun yet — the niggling problems that ask: "When are you getting to me?"

Here are some of those still-to-be-solved and realized items as I see them. Or, to use the language of the day — the challenges:

1. **First, the patience, good humor, and flexibility to live alongside a capital renovation.** While we break ground on the new Stearns Hall, we will need to locate some functions in some unusual places: the mail room, perhaps, in SHAPE; we'll make greater use of the mezzanine classroom, also in SHAPE, as we shut down the interior classroom in Dewey. Dewey will become the site of the book store, be a temporary venue for concerts that were in the Base Lodge, serve as meeting space as the 1867 Room goes offline. We will do our best to be clear about these interruptions and, in some cases, more permanent changes and the time table over the next 11 months. The Stearns construction will be aggressive: if all goes well, we'll be breaking ground in early spring with completion in late Fall, 2008.

To stay informed, we will rely on our Web site, portal, a new oversight/communications committee, tours, and information tables in Stearns. Please keep asking so you don't feel in the dark about plans as they progress. Dave Bergh and Sharron Scott will lead an Implementation Transition Team.

2. **A challenge ahead — and one to which we have committed — is to launch fully a major gifts campaign.**

JSC — like all VT public colleges — will never see the appropriations we believe fully define a 'public' college. While those of us who speak publicly about this should never give up requesting increased state support. Our latest strategy is to "move to 45th in the nation" of the 50 states, a modest placement in the rankings that will require eight percent annual
appropriations for the next five years. But petitioning for appropriation increases can't be our only strategy. We are increasing our development work, convinced that we have a college with a very strong future and one well worth investing in. We know there are people out there who want to share the work of the college by helping to fund it. We have a goal to hit the $2 million mark in our endowment this year. When we reach it, we'll need to celebrate quickly, reestablish our goal and then keep going and fundraise vigorously for ongoing funds to support our daily, creative, academic work. I will be asking for the assistance of many in this area.

3. A very real challenge faced by JSC and other New England colleges: the changing demographics of the region. Vermont, especially, among the Northeastern states, is looking at declining high school graduating classes — and the decline is only a year away. Those of you with kids or siblings in middle school may have observed that the ninth grade classes are smaller than the 12th grade classes. It will be essential for JSC to become a college of choice for more Vermonters and friends. Perhaps, more important, we must work to retain, with good programming, quality instruction, sense of community, and affordability, the students who choose us.

I truly believe that admissions is college-wide work. We do a good job of knowing and acting on this. This past Saturday's academic and student services fair and admissions day was strong evidence of that. There were close to 50 staff/faculty/experienced students on hand to meet and greet prospective students and their families, and I know we made strong, positive first impressions. But, recruitment is only part of the process. We need to become more knowledgeable about how students succeed at Johnson State College and why students leave. When students are succeeding at JSC, we must make sure we know the ways we have contributed to their departures. Our increased focus on advising and early connections is a good step in influencing students' JSC educations. This focus needs our continuing attention, and we must continue to refine our approach to student success.

4. Another aspect of student success requiring our steady focus: graduation rates. The latest indicators I read — on the VSC public Web page — show us on par with the national group we benchmark against. But that is a number between 36 and 40 percent — way too low for a college that emphasizes engaged learning and believes in higher education's power to play a crucial role in securing positive outcomes for its participants. I mean outcomes both broadly and specifically: college graduates have better lives than their non-collegiate counterparts — they are healthier, more economically secure, more stable community members. These are important markers and demand our full commitment.

As we begin an academic master plan — an assignment Dan Regan will lead — we will study the ways that our curriculum and scheduling play their parts in student success. Too often, we make our decisions about what to teach, when to teach, where to teach based on our old patterns of practice and without equal attention to use of facilities, student needs, and evidence about how instructional patterns fit learning and retention. A very course-specific approach to major requirements paired with a highly compressed pattern of course offerings can be unnecessarily daunting or impenetrable. We must and can discover some ways to
open wider our learning opportunities.

In concluding, I am going to reflect on the upcoming strategic planning process our Board of Trustees has announced for the VSC. The Board has decided to begin from the position of "5 strong colleges" as we move forward. This may not sound significant, but it is. Boards will sometimes begin planning with an "everything is on the table" mantra, signaling that colleges could be combined or phased out. In fact, our Board, eight years ago, took this approach. This time, the Trustees have as a starting point articulated their faith in the five distinct colleges, because—in their view—we are strong. But with the conferring of the mantle of "strength", comes the challenge to stay strong and we will need to depend—among other things—on the conventional measures of finances, enrollment numbers, student success, and the right mix of majors and programs.

**Ongoing Strength and Future Possibilities**

To flourish—and simply holding our own is not succeeding—we need to become more candid self-critics, braver in our self-assessment and willing to consider other ways of working and teaching than the ones we have relied on historically. And, we need to see each others' successes as crucial to our own. Too often, we measure our worth by a limited definition of 'departmental' or 'programmatic' success and these little organizational pockets are just too small to be real measures of deep education or a truly healthy organization. I invite you all as people who lead, teach, serve and learn at JSC to be fully committed to our ongoing strength and our future possibilities.

We have immense talents and dedication at this college; we can use them to build on as we continue to be vital, to be a great place to work and learn and to live proudly our mission.