Reflections on Our College

I am very pleased to be with you today to talk about our College. “State of the College” address has a very formal ring, so please think of this session more as a reflection on our current year so far: a look at our 2012-2013 year in context as we approach the mid-year point and a look ahead to the next.

Academic years have a way of moving quickly. I consider myself in the unique and wonderful position of being the storyteller-in-chief. And what I will share with you this afternoon necessarily comes from what I see and learn about and observe. It is my intention to talk with you about our accomplishments and triumphs as well as challenges that lay ahead at a time of both a demographic dip—at least for our population in our part of the country—and the beginnings of an economic recovery.

I mentioned “story” above. I mean story not as a fiction, but as a narrative that describes us to ourselves and to our potential members and to our external community.

To help set context, I will step back earlier than this year and refer to an extended survey we have been part of for about seven years. We participate in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). NSSE lets us see ourselves against a peer group of colleges in the northeast as well as against a national cohort. Participation in a survey like NSSE insists that we see ourselves in a broader higher-education landscape. To participate meaningfully means we are willing to look at ourselves in comparison. Here is some of what we have learned:

- Over these last 5+ years, we are seeing a slow but steady improvement in Johnson State College students’ perception of “academic challenge” at our college. This is really good news. Student engagement as a freestanding attribute is almost always a positive finding, but as a stand-alone value, it is hollow. We want our engagement to be focused on students’ rising to meet the standards of a serious education. For those of us who serve and teach here, we want to be the holders of those standards.

- Similarly, we have seen a growth in students’ perceptions of JSC as a supportive college—that is, a community in which students can do their best work and know how to ask for assistance to meet the challenges we are extending.

- We have spent much time and attention on the success of first-year students and early student success. A fair question we can ask is: how well are we doing? As it turns out, we can claim significant progress in some pretty impressive areas. Our first-year students—from the last year for which we have available data, 2011-2012—reported that they:

  - wrote more than 10 papers or reports of fewer than five pages;
- asked questions and contributed to class discussions;
- made a class presentation;
- rated positively their relationships with faculty members; and
- rated positively their relationships with administrative personnel and offices.

Not only did our first-years outperform their peers in these five areas, they report much higher levels than do their counterparts.

- Our seniors had similar gains in some of the same areas indicating continuity over time for these important acquired skills.

As I mentioned above, the findings are useful not only in charting our successes, but in pointing the way forward so we can continue to sustain an even fuller Johnson State College experience. Our students — first-year especially — reported that they spent more than 10 hours a week preparing for class. This finding is an indication that we are making real progress in academic challenge, but — and this is important — we still have a way to go. Our students reported that they did not hold with their peers in several other areas:

- Use of an electronic medium to discuss or complete an assignment;
- having serious conversations with students of another race or ethnicity;
- participating in a learning community; and
- completing foreign-language coursework.

We can see from these four points that we still need to make good on our commitments to open the world wider to our students. A Johnson State College education should prepare graduates for success in our own terrific state, for sure; but our state itself is changing. And more than that, a JSC education should equip graduates to thrive far beyond the Green Mountains.

Recently, a group of 15 people I meet with regularly as President’s Council spent time on an exercise focused on developing a “value proposition.” The term “value proposition” is not one everyone is at ease with; when used to describe a college’s work, it can sound a little too much like a transaction, as in “for your time and investment at JSC, you will receive this commodity in exchange.” But we pushed past the limits of the language and approached the task as a way to ask:

- What do we most want for students at JSC?
- Recognizing that the student-college project is relationship-based, what can we as a college commit to for our part in shaping that relationship in an enduring, meaningful way?
- What can we pledge to carry out and strive toward that will have implications far beyond the few years that students spend with us?
- Essentially: Why JSC?

After some hard work and deliberation, here’s what we came up with:
We invite you, wherever you may be, to take a journey with us toward your future. In return we’ll provide you with learning opportunities you may never have imagined; with challenges you may never have expected you could meet; and with the support you may need to rise to meet them.

Whatever your program of study, a research project, internship, service learning, performance, exhibition, student teaching, study travel or field experience will give you the opportunity to apply what you learn in the classroom to the world beyond its four walls.

We are a Vermont state college. Like the state we are proud to call home, our environment is challenging, yet rewarding and welcoming; opportunities abound for those who will seize them; and our inclusive community is committed to supporting your explorations.

Together we can harness the power of higher education at Johnson State College to transform your life.

The themes that kept emerging as we looked to identify the touchstones making up this proposition are journey, opportunity linked to high expectations, challenge and support, education beyond the classroom, Vermont, inclusive community.

It is worth pointing out that many colleges make use of some of these same themes; we did not invent the notions of challenge or community, for sure. But what we are inventing is our particular context to make them real and the ways in which we truly inhabit our roles in the project of our students’ education.

What we also realized in wrestling with the concept of what we propose to prospective students is that we didn’t “write” this statement as much as reflect on the best of what we know and believe about our Johnson State College. It is as much about listening to college conversations as talking. More and more, I am convinced that if we fail to keep our ears and eyes open to what our students are accomplishing—what our successful students are telling us, what our early departing students are saying to us—we will fail at our work. Staying alert and participating actively is not just an assignment for students; it’s an assignment to all of us.

The words I read to you above as a value proposition differ from our mission statement only in that we “sign on” more formally to deliver our mission; we keep in mind that student success is inextricably connected to our work as teachers, advisors, coordinators, administrators.

How do you use a value proposition? You think about it, you push against it, you write it down and talk about it, you excerpt from it and, mostly, you make it your own and see yourself and your work in it. You publish it or a version of it online and let it inspire you.

We are currently in the third year of a five-year college plan. Anyone can go to our website and read that plan. It is a College Plan for Access, Engagement, and Success. Among our work projects for the year are increased focus on the success of transfer students, greater support for sophomore students—the next likeliest time to become discouraged and leave college is after second year—more attention to research beyond the sciences, and enhanced focus on students’ lives after JSC. Carrying out these tasks will move
us closer to realizing our larger commitments as described in our mission and the statement I read you above.

Lest this sounds like way too much at once—a mission statement, a value proposition, a five-year College plan—I can say with confidence that our work fits together. The plan evolved from the commitments we made to early and ongoing student success. It is inspired by our mission and articulated by what we promise to our students.

How do we demonstrate the progress we are making? What are some of the accomplishments this year to date that show us examples of student challenge, teaching and learning in community, deep skills development, and ongoing engagement beyond the classroom?

Here are some of the projects I know about this year that represent to me faculty and students engagement in high quality work. They are true and tangible items students can identify going forward beyond JSC to graduate school or job interviews:

- We have our first group of START scholars. These are six students at the beginning of their JSC educations pursuing a biology or environmental sciences program. This group of students is in close relationship with Professor Kanat, who wrote the competitive National Science Foundation proposal that recognized Johnson State College and our faculty and students with a $500,000 grant. Our START'ers share a seminar, mentoring opportunities, and scholarships renewed yearly as they continue their good progress.

- Andrew Klansk is a biology major with aspirations to go on to medical school. He was one of six finalists—up against students from significantly larger universities—who presented at the Northeast Regional Meeting of the American College of Sports Medicine earlier this semester. Andrew gave an oral presentation about exercise for asthmatic adults and was supervised in his research by Professor Haverkamp.

- Through our BFA programs in poetry and fiction writing, we hosted major award-winning authors with national and international reputations. Almost as exciting as the opportunity to have students hear these luminaries was the chance for our students to interview and photograph them for our newspaper. Not every college is able to offer an undergraduate a chance to interview one of the most recognized writers in the country and the president of the Guggenheim Foundation. Aside from being a student opportunity—and, yes, truly, a resume builder—is the pride we feel when these writers say, “I know from a previous visiting writer that your students are kind and smart.” (That’s a quote from Lou Beach, our “common book” author this year, and he is so right.)

- The opportunities for internship experiences and the public presentations of those experiences are expanding—slowly and not yet as multi-disciplinary as they can be—but still in ways that insist our students demonstrate their ability to present and defend their work. Recently, several students gave presentations about the internships they completed this past summer, one of which—at the cardiology lab at Fletcher Allen Health Care—resulted in an invitation to continue in that lab as an employee.
• On December 6th, we look forward to a presentation by senior Ashley Carrington, who self-designed an internship under the supervision of Dean Bergh focused on JSC’s services to veterans and other military students. We look forward to learning both what Ashley has found and what she recommends to help us to continue our commitments.

• Our musical-theater students recently presented two nights of performance workshops. Our Chamber Singers completed a three-town fall concert series and shared the stage with other college vocal groups, holding their own quite impressively, while the fall drama production of *The Diary of Anne Frank* saw good, solid audiences and yielded invitations for three cast members to advance to the spring American College Theater Festival regionals in January.

• I also want to make note of student government officers’ self-identified projects. These include expanded hours in Stearns Student Center, better access to transportation, and more ways to share information on campus. I think we are distinct in expecting our student government members to “own” a project that they design and to which they hold themselves accountable.

This is my large handful of real and tangible student accomplishments that move classroom learning onto the stage, the page, the professional meeting and the lab, and into students’ portfolios. I know it is incomplete, and I hope you have your large handful, too, and will join me in committing to put in place the conditions and resources to grow these efforts more widely and deeply.

I don’t think I can overstate the importance of public evidence of student work—especially in the company of faculty—to enhance and expand our reputation, to open doors for students to good jobs and further education. I was so proud last month to host donors to campus and have four students speak about the process of selecting our common book (Melissa), an international volunteer opportunity in Rwanda (Ally), and two students (Christine and Kelly), whose entire college plans have changed thanks to their work with Professor Mireault of our Behavioral Sciences Department.

There was no other college I wanted to be president of at that lunch meeting (I feel that way often, but that lunch event was a particular highlight.) Our guests thought so, too, and have expressed interest in working with us on a continuing gift. Had I hosted them alone, I know it would have been a less meaningful afternoon together.

In outlining the projects above, the point I want to underscore is that extraordinary things happen at Johnson State College every semester. We have come to expect them, but we still have to work hard for them to be realized and sustained. Strong and very good work requires vigilance. When we see something taking root, we need to keep nourishing it with attention and perseverance. When we see something not flourishing—despite our repeated efforts—we need to understand why and make course corrections. And when they don’t work, we need to have the courage to leave old habits behind and start fresh. The challenge is to put the resources in place, to hold the standards high enough that more students in more programs of study can continually create, discover and reach.
This is our first full academic year with our major capital projects realized: Stearns as a true student center, and Bentley and the Visual Arts Center as impressive science and art facilities. By all accounts these were good areas in which to put our focus; they serve majors in their programs as well as all students through required coursework or elective courses. So, now our job is to turn inwards—to fully explore what we do within our facilities, our labs, classrooms and studios. I don’t want to minimize the enormous effects of upgraded facilities; they inspire and support us. But they will continue to serve us only as long as we commit to filling them with new learning and to making and sharing that new knowledge.

So, I have moved into the “challenges” part of my talk by insisting that we hold to high standards, ensure ongoing opportunities for more students to realize and demonstrate deep learning, and that we do so in ways that are steadfast and original. I will stay with the theme of challenge—a word that does not have a very easy synonym. In my search to avoid overusing “challenge,” I came across “demanding or stimulating situation”; I think that’s pretty good and captures both the weight and opportunities of our work.

Let me talk about three topics, here, saving the big one for last.

**Teaching and Learning Technologies:** We need to do more. We can tell ourselves that our students’ reporting themselves as behind their peers in “use of an electronic medium to discuss or complete an assignment” is because we are thriving in a face-to-face environment. But I think we would be missing a chance to self-assess. I hear the frustration of faculty members who are eager to learn about and employ more state-of-the-art teaching and learning technologies. I know too that we have I.T. workers doing their best to keep our computers working and loaded with the software we need to do their jobs.

While we will likely not move as fast or in the particular ways that everyone would like, we will progress in this area. Your voices and input are crucial; so is your patience as we add another member to our I.T. staff, increase faculty participation on I.T. initiatives, launch a new college website, and join the VSC Teaching and Learning Technologies task force. (Thank you, Greg Petrie and Amy Beatty.)

**Energy Conservation:** We continue to make progress in monitoring our use of energy and reducing our consumption. And, yes, it often feels like not enough. It is frustrating to read coverage of colleges’ receiving significant attention for going trayless in the dining room (an adjustments that saves huge quantities of water and electricity), installing water-bottle filling stations, doing away with individually bottled beverages at hosted functions, moving to motion-activated light switches, and composting our food waste—when we have been doing these practices for several years now.

It is true that these efforts aren’t as dramatic as some other, large-scale projects. I was speaking with a staff member from Vermont Energy Investment Corporation at our high school “Greening Summit” a few weeks ago about my frustration not being able to fund at present a large-scale investment in alternative energy. She said to remember that the most effective way to save power is not to use it in the first place. That was a good reminder that our early efforts are solid and not to be dismissed.

That said, we met with Laraway Family Services last week to tour and learn about their solar trackers and the funding source they worked with to see if we might be a candidate for such a project on campus. We
hope to purchase a second biodiesel bus. We will tap our Green Revolving Funds to replace outside campus lighting to make it both more effective and less reliant on electricity. (The revolving funds are a VSC-wide commitment allowing us to borrow from ourselves for an energy-efficient project that will pay for itself—that is, reduce costs by the amount of the investment—within three to five years’ time.)

I can also commit that we will continue to seek funding for a significant alternative fuel project. That investigation will likely mean assistance from external sources.

**Student Recruitment and Retention:** The most significant project before is—I told you I was saving our most compelling work for last—is with regard to our admissions and retention efforts. As many of you know, we saw a downturn in new enrollments this year of about 5 percent. Most of the decline had to do with Vermont first-year students being under-represented among the students who joined us. This is a problem for a several reasons.

First, we are a very good college, and we ought to be a top choice for young Vermonterns; our mission is to serve them. Second, a campus needs a core population to thrive; we like good sized-classes, student cohorts for learning initiatives of all sorts, and students for bands, teams and groups in general. Finally, there are revenue implications that make balancing our budget difficult.

In addition to falling short in new Vermonterns, our returning student numbers were flat; we did not have as many “year 5” students come back. What we don’t know yet is whether that is attributable to having had more graduates last year—a good thing—or having students who did not meet all their goals and left prematurely.

It is not an all-discouraging picture: We are attracting students from a higher academic profile, we are graduating students more quickly, and our retention rate overall has held steady in a down economy.

There are of course revenue implications. For those of you wondering how a 5 percent drop translates into dollars, I can say that it is about $1.4 million dollars. (Our overall budget is approximately $30 million.) I can assure you that we will balance our budget this year through a combination of cost reductions and some savings in our Board-approved College reserve. I plan to host—with Sharron and Toby, our dean of administration and comptroller, respectively—a couple of open sessions in early spring to talk in more detail about revenues and expenses so we can all be better informed about our revenue sources and where and how we spend our money.

At this point, we are optimistic about mid-year numbers as well as our (very early!) indications for fall 2013. Since 74+ percent of our budget comes from tuition and fees, this is most hopeful. Our admissions staff—joined by so many of you—are working heroically on the road and—some of us think more importantly—on campus through targeted outreach and campus events.

On a related point: Vermont has an impressive high school graduation rate—one of the highest nationally—but the gap between Vermont teens who say they want to go to college and those who do shortly after graduation is huge. Despite a dip in young people born in the early and mid-1990s, there are capable students out there for us to know and invite to join us.
There is no way our Admissions crew alone can welcome new students and their families to join us. If you are not enthusiastic and excited about drawing new learners to our college, I ask you to get on board and join this important project. I have assigned target goals for the entering class; Penny Howrigan and the Admissions staff are taking this challenge seriously and need all of our help.

Upcoming Admissions activities include hosting guidance counselors on campus and at selected off-campus sites, saying “yes” to every interested group that asks to visit campus, focused efforts by our coaches to prospective student-athletes, and a plan in the works to have Winooski High School and Burlington High School students come to campus via the “Badger Bullet” to share a meal and a basketball game or concert. I think that parents and prospective students appreciate meeting any of us who are serious about our work and commitments, but there is no getting around it: They really want to meet the people who will be their—or their sons’ and daughters’—teachers. So a special note of thanks to faculty members who meet with students, take them on tour of their departments, call or email them, and participate in Family Weekend and other important Admissions events.

As crucial as recruitment is, her twin—retention—may be even more important. We have mission and fiscal reasons to recruit first-time students to JSC; we have those reasons and more to help students who are already with us succeed. None of us likes leaving a project half-finished, especially one that involves hard work and borrowed money.

We will always have students who leave us early, but students shouldn’t leave us because the degree requirements are cumbersome or unnecessarily complicated, because they didn’t know where to go for help, because they didn’t get to have conversations with people of different backgrounds, because they missed the professional meetings they qualified for but didn’t have resources to attend, because they missed out on an internship they never knew about. I invite all of us to truly take on student perseverance and graduation as a personal and College commitment.

Victor Tinto, a scholar on this topic who has inspired much of our early student-success work, talks about “improving the quality of students’ overall educational experience” as the key to student progress and success. Put simply, he challenges us to raise the quality of education, hold to our high standards with ready supports, and have compelling reasons for students to continue. Do that, and the numbers will take care of themselves.

One of the last things we want for our students is that they experience JSC as a place to “coast.” That is also the last thing we who work and teach here should want for ourselves. In truth, it takes energy and commitment to succeed at JSC, whether we are paid for our work or are paying for our learning. This commitment requires that we work together—sometimes across traditional lines or departments—and that we be candid when our strategies aren’t working, and vigilant when they are.

Most good experiments require that we stick with them for three years in a row before concluding success or a need for a new approach. For example, we have tried and are trying several approaches to “learning communities.” Let’s choose a model and commit to it for a few years; if it doesn’t yield hoped-for results, fine; we’ll try another. We are smart people with imaginations, and most problems have many solutions.
Let’s begin to answer better the question prospective students and parents are asking: “What can my son or daughter do with that major after he or she graduates?” Half the answer can and should emphasize critical thinking skills, the ability to work as part of a team, knowing how to give and receive feedback, and having the ability to speak comfortably and with authority. These are crucial, long-serving abilities for sure. But the other part of the answer has to be about learning and preparation specific to a field of study. “Yes, you’ll be able to take on in-house written and online communications and social media” if you complete this major; or “Yes, you could field-test for the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation as other graduates from that program have done.”

The questions get sharper as an economy asks much of parents about spending. We need to hold our ground against skeptics who—often with short-sighted information—doubt the value of post-secondary education. But we have to do better than “trust us, you’ll learn a lot.” We can commit to much more than that by observing our students, by hearing from our graduates and young alums.

Before I hear your questions and comments and corrections—I am thinking about a recent article in our fine student newspaper Basement Medicine. It was a review of the recent JSC Talent Show organized by members of our “Think College” project. It reminded me and, I suspect, many of us about what we value and hold dear about Johnson State College.

In addition to vocals—solo and multiple voices—and instrument playing, the acts, as I recall, included demonstrating unique tendon-flexing of neck musculature, foot-stomping fiddle-playing, break dancing, even suiting up in full firefighter gear in under a minute and more.

I was sorry to have missed the show, but the article did a terrific job of describing real talent and performances by people used to giving performances—brave efforts by those who stepped out of more familiar zones to play in public—and a presentation by someone willing to laugh at herself (tendon flexing?). It also showed people willing to improvise when the music wasn’t quite available, to be flexible and cover for and with each other, to depart from the initial program.

Who wouldn’t want to be part of a college where students share particular skills, cheer each other on, create in community, take risks, and dazzle us all with talents?

I invite you to continue to help build the Johnson State College narrative by staying alert to and aware of the great work being done here, being part of student success at every opportunity, holding high expectations, offering supports as needed, and telling our story to each other and those not yet lucky enough to be part of the JSC community.

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