I am pleased to meet with you today for a state of the college conversation. We are almost exactly at the midpoint of fall semester, so it is a good time to look at our year so far. I’d like to speak for 20 minutes or so and then open the room to your questions and comments.

As a starting point, we are in Year 4 of a five-year college plan. Our plan is ambitiously and boldly named “A Plan for Access, Engagement & Success.” An update of accomplishments and work projects for this year is available on our website, so you will be able to see our progress to date, work already under way, and work yet to be done.

We have made a lot of headway; we also will not have fully reached our goals by the end of next year. Plans are, after all, aspirational. Going into Year 5, we can decide if we want to “re-up” our plan—to stretch it to a sixth year—or call it done and celebrate our finished work. Whichever route we choose, we will turn much of our attention very soon to a project that will involve many of us — most of us — next year: preparing an institutional self-study that we will submit in as part of our accreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. I will take some time now and talk a little more about that.

Continuing accreditation by a college’s regional association is probably the most consequential approval a college needs in order to do its work of educating students. Accreditation means that we can participate in Title IV financial aid programs; we know them better as PELL grants, Stafford loans, and work-study funds—important vehicles for students to make educations possible.

Since 63% of our revenue (more than $17 million annually) comes from students’ tuition and fees, and most students are supported by Title IV funds, these are high stakes. As important, accreditation is our seal of approval by one of the country’s six federally authorized accrediting agencies. Accreditation is a voluntary process, but it is a rigorous one in which peers review peers with a high degree of commitment and attention.

While we won’t host our accreditation visitors until November 2015—two years from now— the process of preparing has already started. The self-study is an intensive look at every aspect of Johnson State College—academic programs, faculty, student services, finances and facilities, library and information technology, and more. Four of us comprise the core group heading up the accreditation self-study process—Academic Dean Dan Regan, Faculty Librarian Joe Farara, Professor Greg Petrics and myself — and we have already attended a training session outlining the process. As Professor Petrics says, “We will be doing scholarship on our own college.”

The areas that NEASC — the New England Association of Schools and Colleges — wants us to report about overlap significantly with our college plan. So our college plan is serving us very well in the run-up to our next round of ongoing accreditation.

Back to our plan: It has six priority areas. I will mention each one of them as well as challenges ahead and the many successes we deserve to note. Do know that I will probably leave out some great examples of successes that you know about; my examples are only representative. Our first priority:
1. Increase academic challenge and student achievement

- We start with this one because nothing is more important to a college’s success than the success of students — success that derives from deep and demanding academic expectations. Some highlights:

- We are into Year two of our START scholarship program; a dozen students— highly competent and well-supported students—under the guidance of Professor Les Kanat are preparing for life in the sciences. The entire initial cohort returned to JSC, all in very good academic standing. Another group joined as new students. The program inspired a gift to the college to add a Math START scholar to the group through his/her four years at JSC. That new student will start in fall 2014.

- At least 20 students I know about have already expressed interest in and asked for funding to attend conferences, professional meetings or inter-collegiate competitions. We are helping students expand their worlds, increase exposure to professional settings and build resumes.

- This year we have set aside modest directed funding to pilot “special Initiatives.” I invited faculty and staff members to propose a new activity that would benefit from a small budget to “jump start” it. Response was terrific and those projects selected include a JSC team to participate in a collegiate Model U.N. conference; a project to propose research between health sciences and biology, funding to adapt a successful senior seminar in studio arts to an immersive first-year experience, support to host an expert on learning communities to engage us in a broader conversation about high quality strategies that work, and support for students and a faculty member to attend an international conference in new media arts.

What do we still need to do in this area of academic challenge and achievement? We need to improve first to second year return rates and strengthen promising initiatives for sophomore students. A project called “20Q” carried out by our office of First Year staff will provide us the information we need to go forward.

We still need to include more students in more opportunities to do scholarship and creative work. This is a challenge to academic areas that are not yet fostering active research and creative work with students. If we can have a START program in the sciences—now expanding to math—where else can we reach?

2. Foster early and ongoing student success.

There is much overlap between our first and second goals as they hold in common a commitment to student success and support. Essential to early success is a sturdy program for new students.

Toward that end, we have a distinctive and enviable first-year program. Its components—a Common Reading Initiative and its related activities which make up the Creative Audience course comprise a challenging but inclusive set of cross college and cross-disciplinary learning.

We know that academic challenge must be complemented by academic and student life supports. Toward that goal, the Office of Academic Success is piloting an academic “coaching” model. The word change is intentional and reminds students that they have the skills and abilities, talents to be brought forth. Taking academic supports to students where students are— e.g., residence halls — is also a promising practice. We probably need more good ideas on how to best reach students when and where services are needed.
Students rarely succeed academically if not making best choices outside the classroom. We should be proud of our leadership in offering programming to support good decision-making in life skills areas like choices around alcohol, substance use, sexual practices, nutrition and recreation. Some examples include:

This year’s Creative Audience programming focused on wellness and lifestyle choices. Our college is also taking the lead in discussing openly with students the personal decisions they make. Recent press coverage in and beyond the state recognizes us as leaders. We are also leveraging our grant-funded student-athlete development position for all-college work.

As a result—or, certainly, an associated benefit—we are seeing a reduced number of discipline issues and an improved quality of life at our college.

JSC is making true strides in seeing and modeling that an education community recognizes that students are people with lives in, outside of, and beyond the classroom, and that those lives will extend for a lot longer than the on-campus years.

In keeping with this recognition, we are newly combining career and internship services in the Dean of Students area. Both functions—internships during college years and career planning for post-graduation—have to do with trying out in new ways and in new settings the results of learning that come from rich classroom experiences, faculty guidance, and structured application of an education.

I hope we are ambitious in this area: I also hope that we are creative about extending our range of internships and career exploration strategies so that students can try out and receive guidance from mentors as close as the next town and as far away as an ocean away. Let’s learn from exciting new entrepreneurs and professional role models, some only a decade away from their own college graduations.

3. **Identify and Enroll Students who will Thrive and Succeed at Johnson State College**

This is our toughest goal to achieve in a recovering economy and in a demographic not yet in our favor. I want to talk about what we are doing—and we are doing a lot—to increase enrollment. I also want to give an enrollment update.

As our student newspaper *Basement Medicine* reported, our enrollment is “off” by about 55 students this year. This number is largely explained by a shortfall in entering first-years—more specifically, entering out-of-state first-year students. We are doing very well attracting Vermonters, which is great. We are a state-assisted college and part of our mission speaks to our role as a regional college.

But as many of you know, out-of-state students pay more money in tuition, so a shortfall of beyond-Vermont students has greater budget consequence.

As a very brief revenue review: our budget is just over $28 million this year. 63% of the revenue to support the budget comes from tuition and fees; 17% of it is derived from room and board; the state appropriation accounts for $4.5 million and the $1 million balance comes from miscellaneous sales and services.

Where does our money go?

- Salaries and wages ......................... 41%
- Benefits .................................... 24%

(Total wages + benefits ......65%)
Since all but 16% of our revenue (the state contribution) comes from tuition and fees, and room and board, you can see why our enrollment—recruitment as well as retention—is so crucial.

However, enrollment management is not just a revenue concern; it is also an educational and social obligation. It needs to be our ongoing business—and it is—to recruit those students who are excited to come to JSC, believe they have made an informed decision to do so, and are committed to staying and succeeding.

We are reaching prospective students in several ways, including by making earlier and more frequent contact with prospective students. If you come by Martinetti Hall after hours many days you are likely to see a squad of work-study students phoning students and their families who have inquired about our college. We are inviting them to visit, fielding their questions, and encouraging ongoing engagement. We have a new staff member in Admissions who is tailoring every campus visit to the particular needs and interests of the potential student; these include making connections with a faculty member, a particular academic program, team coach—whichever contact is likely to provide important information to help the decision-making process.

We are hosting diverse groups to campus. We are offering creative and innovative programming like Performing Arts Day or Community Journalism Day. We hosted a statewide high school volleyball competition for the second year. We want prospective students to see our impressive campus, to know—as we do—the high quality of academic and student life experience someone can have at Johnson State College.

This is a fine place to come to college and an equally fine place from which to graduate. While we have attracted fewer students than we would like this year, we have attracted students of great promise already making their marks—START scholars, students with impressive service and high school records, good citizens. Our job is to spread the word.

It is also our job to ask ourselves some tough questions: Why are we attracting students to some academic programs and not others? Do we have the right range of academic opportunities? Are we making some of our majors too intricate—not too challenging, but too cumbersome—to navigate? Are we articulating early enough the out-of-classroom possibilities that await our students? Are there good pathways to move from another college to JSC?

And if the answers suggest that we need to make changes, course corrections, or move in new directions, let’s outline that work and get to it. We don’t want to be in the position of saying, “Oh, that other college has a program in something-or-other; we should have done that; we could have done that!”

We have some new programs recently completed or near completion—e.g., an Accounting Proficiency Certificate awaiting approval for Title IV funding, a pre-professional program in the health sciences, an expanded wellness major for our EDP audience. We need to keep thinking, all of us.

4. **Contribute to and learn from Lamoille County and Vermont**

This is our civic engagement goal. This is not just a “be good neighbors and citizens” goal, although we want very much to be that; this is also a goal that acknowledges our keen awareness to truly inhabit, contribute to, and learn about where we live.
Examples of our good presence abound. We carry out service projects nearby, we are in our first year of a partnership with Vermont Public Television to bring quality documentaries and discussion programs to the community, we offer dedicated student services to military-connected students and community members. To complement students’ volunteerism, faculty and staff have a strong presence staff and faculty members on area school boards, nonprofit organizations, planning commissions and town governing groups.

Dean Bergh’s recent job title change to Dean of Student Life and External Relations is evidence of our commitment to this goal of local engagement.

With participation from Dean Bergh and Academic Dean Dan Regan, I am launching the President’s Roundtable this December. It will be an advisory group to me, with members coming from business, government, schools and the nonprofit sector to advise us about the abilities and skills employers seek in new employees, to offer their input into our curricula, and to know us better. If “all politics is local,” much of education is too. Learning to study our own community is a window into studying whole worlds.

5. **Align campus and technology upgrades with our academic priorities.**

I hope that – like me — you are pleased with the upgrades and expansions we have carried out over the last half-dozen or so years. These include Bentley Hall and the Visual Arts Center and — most important — the lab, teaching, and studio spaces in which students learn, research and create. Stearns Student Center is a highly used and busy building; and thanks to student interest, it is a working building, open widely offering study as well as social space. Other projects that have upgraded and expanded our facilities include SHAPE—our recreation and inter-collegiate athletics spaces, McClelland Hall with its new dance studios and common space for education and social sciences students to gather and study — and Dewey Hall, for a range of student services. Like any good campus master plan, ours needs to continue, and we are in the process of projecting our space and information-technology needs going forward.

In the information technology area, we made a great decision to focus the hiring of our newest member of that department on teaching and learning technologies. We have a way to go to include all faculty and to offer the services being requested, but we have made a great start.

6. **Strengthen JSC’s future through gifts, grants and investments.**

This is a goal we might call an “enabling” goal. Successful realization of it will make possible much progress on the goals that precede it. Let me identify some areas of progress:

- We have realized an increase in both the number of donors and gifts to the college as well as in increase in in the dollar amount of gifts. While we have many people — friends and alumni, among them — yet to reach, this is good and steady progress and demonstrates the many supporters and participants we have.

- We have enjoyed greater alumni participation this last year as measured by homecoming attendance, attendance at specific college events (“Dinner with the Boss” is an example), small but growing sponsorship of this year’s Common Reading Initiative, a math scholarship to become part of START program, and gifts to support named spaces in the Visual Arts Center. Connecting funders and donors — current and prospective — with the current and long-range plans of the college is work that requires creative thinking by many of us. We should not underestimate the potential generosity of JSC friends.
• I am very pleased to announce that we are a named beneficiary of a trust by a longtime donor in memory of his late mother, an early Johnson State College alumna who studied teacher education with us at the beginning of the last century. We will receive — via this generous trust — our second million dollar gift.

The world of fund raising is called “development” because it truly is about relationships and investments over time. Our ongoing responsibilities in this area are to increase our endowment, build further on our culture of philanthropy by greater participation of staff and faculty and friends, and increase and support the authoring and submission of grant requests.

As I move toward the conclusion of my remarks — inviting and encouraging yours — I want to reflect on two areas to which we most need to turn our attention:

1) **Budget and enrollment**
   We are hard at work exploring more precisely the implications of our 2013-2014 enrollment on our budget. And of course we are recruiting for new students to join us this spring semester. As I know better the specifics of revenue and cost savings, I will share that information; I hope to do so in broader conversation and hear your ideas and observations.

2) **Faculty numbers**
   Several of our longtime faculty members have retired, and a few plan to do so at the end of this academic year. The time is right to introduce a new cohort of faculty members to our college. While I cannot meet all well-articulated requested needs for the upcoming year, I have authorized five searches to begin as soon as possible this semester, and a second round is committed for next year if at all possible. If strong teaching and learning are the lifeblood of our college, our attention must be firmly focused on them.

Where are our opportunities?

We can turn enrollment challenges into openings to improve and expand on those things we value and do very well; similarly, we can take the opportunity to articulate initiatives that know we need to design and put into practice. We have much to offer present and future Johnson State College students and so many ways to make our own jobs — those of us who work and teach here — rich and meaningful.

Here are some projects we are continuing to explore:

• We are working to further refine our articulation degrees to develop more specificity for students who want to join us. An example would be welcoming Community College of Vermont students who complete the CCV STEM studies degree into our environmental sciences program as seamlessly as possible. Let’s let that one path inspire us.

• We are a good college for transfer students; we respect transfer students as adults who bring learning with them and we know that students who transfer seek clarity about their credits and degree progress. By the most recent estimate I know of, there are 75,000-100,000 Vermonters with some college background but not yet a degree. How do we reach and invite them to our college?
• We continue to learn more — through focus groups and brief Q &As with students— what works for students at JSC and what is still lacking. We will then address those gaps and document our findings and responses.

• We are reviewing our programs and majors to identify where enrollment is strongest and where it is not, and to understand what this telling us? Are we in step with what our aspiring students and our prospective employers are seeking?

• We are staying alert to opportunities for new degree areas of study. We have some promising starts; as two examples, our digital media program has taken off; and our inclusive elementary education degree is garnering attention and interest.

These are thoughtful and carefully considered new initiatives and I think they hold promise for us. Thinking beyond them, we need a bolder approach to testing the market and exploring promising possibilities. I believe this challenge extends to both campus-based programs as well as programs we might offer through our External Degree Program. We do so many things well and we need to expand our reach.

And, finally, what strengths do we bring to the opportunities ahead?

• We bring our long tradition of educating Vermonters and students from well beyond our state borders with integrity, thoughtful programs, dedicated teaching, and a belief in students’ potential for success.

• We attract bright and serious students and boast accomplished and successful alumni. Our staff and faculty are highly qualified to do the work we do.

• We have good programs within our disciplines and the capacity to do more collaborative and cross-discipline work.

• And, we live our college lives —as students, faculty and staff — with an enthusiasm born of a belief in and commitment to our mission to “transform lives through education.”

Thank you for your attention and interest, and let’s continue this conversation.

# # #