Thank you for coming today and joining me for an update on the wonderful college we share. Today marks the tenth week of the semester—a point that reinforces to me how fast fall is moving, how much happens in a semester, and how rich and full the life of this college is.

My plan for this session is to talk about some initiatives in progress this year, directions we are exploring, and the inevitable challenges that we are making our way through. I will be as specific as I can be and happily hear your comments and questions after my remarks. A couple of members of the Presidential Search team are here and are willing—within the parameters of that process—to take any of your questions.

I’d like to start with one of my favorite projects of the year to date. Staff members Elaine Harvey and Eric Kirk proposed the idea of a series of videos in hopes of starting a “Campus Wide Open” series. The first one “stars” Eric and Elaine—these are posted on YouTube—and introduces the idea inviting people on campus—students, staff, faculty—to use the platform to talk about a project on campus or just life at our college. They have produced one on Constitution Day, another on Creative Audience, presented the Rowing Challenge, and several more. The latest series are “Conversations on the Rock” in which pairs of students interview each other atop our big rock on the Quad. I think you’ll enjoy this this six minutes of hearing JSC students compare notes about life, inspiration, goals, belonging.

It’s a little addictive, watching Campus Wide Open. I admire the creativity of the project, the wide openness—perfect name—of the students in conversation and the frankness as they explore relationships to other people, to their educations, to JSC. It puts me in mind of one of my favorite JSC student comments: “I came for the mountains. I stayed for the people.”

Thanks to all of you who are part of this and so many other new collaborations and initiatives this year.

I’ll highlight some of our — your — good work this year so far. I know I won’t be conclusive, though I’m aiming for a cross-section of academic and student life projects. I trust you’ll agree that this work shows we are not just hard-working, we’re willing to risk and take further what we believe to be promising. And this work is evidence of our thinking both deep and wide.

You might remember that a key goal of our College Plan, now in year five, is to ensure “early and ongoing student success” and to realize this outcome in a climate of challenge and high standards. A few examples from this year:

- This year’s Common Reading Initiative: A Pearl in the Storm opened the way for conversations about grit, failure, resilience, the environment and adventure. Students built boats—three of them, beautiful and simple — under the direction of expert local boat builders, working together on several Fridays earlier this semester. The boats had their maiden voyages on the pond this past Friday; they floated beautifully on the water on a perfect autumn day, and I was so proud to be here at Johnson State, to be there at the pond, and to see your work in action. It is not all that often that we get to see our efforts take sail—or, in this case, get rowed.
- All of our First-Year Seminars now have mentors. 25+ staff members offered to connect themselves to the seminars — to share a meal, to be of service, to provide company and support as part of each first-year student’s “cheering section.” As with most projects like this, the mentors are learning as much as the students.

- Learning Communities: This long-planned initiative evolved this year into a model that pairs two courses for first-year students. Two faculty members relate their courses — one a First-Year Seminar, the other an introductory course — into a united approach that allows students to know classmates more solidly, see the benefits of faculty members working together, and to benefit from a mentor attached to the paired courses. We’re increasing the number next year to four and introducing a living component. One faculty member engaged in the project says the students within it are showing confidence and enthusiasm beyond what he would have expected from new students.

Learning Communities are another example of good ideas extending themselves based on a creative willingness to carry a good thought further, to revise and make better. Such projects require not just will but an open attitude, even when we know some of our ideas might not work. More and more I’m convinced that it takes a lot of ideas to give way to just a few good ones.

And some of these new ideas, sustained over the past several years, DO seem to be working. While a one-year change is not a trend, a very promising note we see — last year to this year — is a 5 percent uptick in first- to second-year returning student numbers. That is a big difference. And you, alongside our students, should take some credit. While our director of institutional research, who tracks such things, will not commit yet, we think we may see an upward tick in second- to third-year returning student numbers as well. We’re not ready to call this yet, but I’m encouraged.

Another successful new student initiative is new in all ways: the product of new legislation, a pilot design, and new first-time college students. I’m talking about Early College—a program that enables high school seniors to spend that senior year as college freshmen—earning a full year’s worth of credits. The beauty of the program is that it offers an alternative experience for high school students who are ready and able to tackle a challenge, and the program can save them a year of college tuition. And the bonus for us: They are smart and interested students — by all accounts a good fit in our classrooms. Our outreach was particularly effective. More than other colleges in Vermont, we recruited not just our full complement of 18 students, but exceeded it for a group of 20. Clearly this cohort knows that JSC is an attractive and welcoming academic community.

On to some projects that extend to students both early and ongoing:

- We are celebrating a climate in which students are making safe and thoughtful choices. While this data is last year’s—we don’t have fall 2014 numbers yet—we saw a dramatic decrease in the number of alcohol-related violations. While our students had initially reported higher-than-average drinking rates on arrival at JSC, by mid-fall semester their rates were significantly lower than the national average in consumption, as were the negative behaviors typically associated with consumption. This powerful information unfolds as students are circulating recommendations from a recently completed “Peak Performance” course in which they designed “healthy choice” strategies to extend to campus peers. We are currently preparing for upcoming workshops on diversity and inclusion, one of their recommendations. So we clearly are creating the college environment we envision, believe in and want to be part of.
• Our START scholarship program for students in biology and environmental sciences continues to grow. From an initial six, we now have 17 START scholars funded by the National Science Foundation, all working toward futures as scientists, medical practitioners, biologists, environmental policy experts. They join a growing culture of students carrying out research with faculty members. That group of 24 “Lab Rats” has members who traverse streams, analyze bacteria from the asbestos mine site, consider the effects of biofeedback on student stress levels, and continue to understand more about how babies know what’s funny.

• Just last week four Environmental & Health Sciences students presented to a full room about their current internships: providing after-school recreation at the local elementary school, working at a county Humane Shelter, supporting wellness activities at the local hospital, and researching patterns of phosphorus pollution. I was impressed by the feedback afterward: how our students demonstrated knowledge not just in the content of the areas in which they interned, but in the ways they negotiated the social and interpersonal aspects of their experience and the work they know will be in their future. Our students demonstrate what a high-profile panel of Vermont employers told us last summer: “Give us graduates who are curious and want to know; nothing matters more.” For these reasons we hold students to high standards in and beyond the classroom.

In terms of what else describes our 2014-2015 year so far:

• We have a new website designed primarily for prospective students. Recent alums are featured so that students can “see themselves/yourselves” a few years out. While there is still work ahead, including new content to make the site more transfer-student friendly, its clean look and ease of navigation have gotten good reviews. We feature career development more prominently, reminding us all from day one that a meaningful life is built from a series of thoughtful choices.

• Our faculty members have presented here and abroad in finance, adolescent learning and the transformation of the U.S. political culture; served as an artist-in-residence in Greenland, performed a jazz concert on the Dibden stage—original music composed during a sabbatical semester.

• Student Alyssa Slaimen, a political science junior from Wolcott, was named to the Vermont State Colleges Board of Trustees; business senior Tia Drake was appointed executive director of the Vermont chapter of Future Business Leaders of America; education major Amber Fitzgerald won an undergraduate award for her work promoting education to and with Abenaki youth.; and students in our JSC Pride Alliance earned the Spirit Award for their participation in the Vermont Pride Day in September.

• We hosted our first Ellsworth Scholar in Residence—a first in 15 years, at least: Joanne St. Louis, a visiting professor from the University of Ottawa Law School, who was understandably impressed by the intelligence and curiosity of our JSC students.

And all of this before the end of October!

Next week, six JSC’ers— students and a faculty member — will attend FUSE, the Forum for Undergraduate Student Editors, to explore the terrain between classroom writing and editing and what lies beyond in the professional sphere.
Before transitioning to the challenges of making this all work, and positioning ourselves for the College’s future, let me say a few words about our role in the communities in which we reside.

I have the pleasure of hosting a President’s Roundtable once a semester, and we just held our fall meeting. These meetings are a twice-a-year opportunity for me, with JSC colleagues, to present to a group of area educators, legislators, business people, and leaders in the arts community, the trades and environmental and human-service organizations about some aspect of current activities under way at JSC. The goal is to help the group become more familiar with our varied and relevant college work and to hear their perspectives on ways to extend that work and add to local knowledge. Most recently, three JSC faculty members presented on their research in biology and education: how they involve students as research assistants, why we consider such work a high form of education, and what we are learning.

Our faculty members were impressive, and the discussion and questions were thoughtful. I believe Roundtable members, each session, gain an appreciation for the ways Johnson State College is a true citizen of Lamoille County and invested in its future.

Along this same theme, we are working with Vermont Student Assistance Corporation on an initiative to raise aspirations of area high school students to consider college in their near future. Lamoille County high school seniors — those with parents who did not complete college — report the lowest intention to go directly to college after graduation. We are working as part of a coalition to see if we can move that dial.

Another example of being where the work needs doing: some of our education students are available before school, on site at the local middle school, to help with homework. In addition to our regular SERVE projects, these efforts are ones to be proud of. And this spring, we will formally launch our JSC Veterans Center. For any skeptics who doubt the benefits of a college in “their backyard,” I offer us as case study of highly involved, good citizenship.

On to a look at our current enrollment:

Like most similar looks at enrollment in a New England public college, ours is a mixed picture. While we fell short of overall enrollment goals by the equivalent of 45 full-time students, we saw promising signs from which to build. Where we came closest to our goals was in the all-important area of landing new, first-time students. We were just four students below what we had projected (262 vs. 266); in the current climate of our neighboring states’ making it attractive for students to stay home and given a reduced pool of 18-20 year olds, this was very good.

Where we fell noticeably short of our goals were two areas in particular: incoming transfer students and students in our External Degree program. Our transfer numbers were down by 16, a big hit. We were short approximately that same number of EDP “full time equivalents.” A handful of fewer graduate students rounds out the picture. (Remember that EDP and graduate students often are not full-time students, so there is a mismatch between the number of “heads” and what constitutes a full-time equivalent for budget purposes.)

The good news in enrollment—and there is good news—before I talk budget more precisely:

We have a full complement of Early College students. It’s true, they may not continue with us, but we are committed to their having a JSC experience that will encourage serious consideration of our college. Their number —20 —helped us get close to target with our entering, first-year students.
We have had significant growth in student athletes. Over the past few years our student-athletes have increased in number from 126 to 155. That’s a 23 percent jump, and it means not only more students, but better-persisting students and better rosters.

We are seeing improved persistence of first- to second-year students. As I mentioned earlier, this is an impressive, 5 percent uptick. We’re also seeing better persistence among Vermont students and out-of-state students, and possibly a similar (though less dramatic) increase in persistence among second- to third-year students.

Student numbers in the residence halls are up as well, by 4 to 5 percent, representing an increase of 20 students living and dining on campus. This too is good news for revenue and campus life.

These gains are important and may signal promising trends, but it would be naïve to declare victory when we have a shortfall. An estimate of the 2.9 percent hit in tuition revenue, when folded into our overall operating budget, is just over $200,000. (Remember, this is $200,000 of a $29 million budget.) We can find this money—we have already offset about half of it through reductions in operating expenses—and we will come up with the remaining $100,000. At this time, I am not asking you to cut back further in budgets, though that could change later in the year. Academic departments have worked and are working diligently to stay within allocations.

I am keenly aware that JSC is still in for several years of hard budget balancing. The budget we are living in now, the one approved by our Board, depended and still depends on significant changes in our cost structure while we regain enrollment. And while I do believe we will regain ground in enrollment, it will be hard work over years and will still require cost curtailment.

Here are some of the strategies we are taking to build enrollment:

We are undertaking a full review—by a consultant from a respected national group—of our admissions and enrollment protocols. This includes an examination of our communications, recruitment materials and schedule, and an onsite visit this month by David Wallace of the American Association of Registrars and Admissions Officers. I am grateful to our staff for saying to a friendly critic, “Have at it and let us know how and what we might change to be better.”

There is an energetic and growing appreciation for the notion that student recruitment is a college-wide process with multiple steps along the way; that we are building relationships and there are essential roles for staff and faculty and administrators to play. Every one of us needs to believe—as I do—that we might be the reason a prospective student does or does not choose to be with us.

Within EDP, we have stepped up our work with advisors, involved JSC Admissions staff very directly in the EDP recruitment process, and engaged in a series of “Lunch & Learn” events with area employers to increase exposure and visibility of this flexible and efficient bachelor’s-degree-completion program.

We are continuing to expand our early-student activities that show promise. Mentioned already, these include Learning Communities and First-Year Seminars with embedded mentors as well as extended new-student orientation. And we’re continuing to review the ways in which academic support services can evolve with early and ongoing student success in mind. We are becoming smarter—through commitment and conversation about how best to serve new first time students—how to appreciate the full range of backgrounds and learning types.
We have set bold enrollment goals for spring 2015 and fall 2015, both for EDP and on-campus and on-campus students. Work to meet those goals is well under way, and we know we have to be dogged, creative and vigilant.

We are designing and launching new academic programs in response to student inquiry: Pre-Physical Therapy, Health & Sport Psychology, Sport Management, and — still in the design phase with a pilot course in place for spring—a program in criminal justice. In the case of the first three, we listened to Admissions staff, engaged faculty in conversation and strategy development, and moved forward.

We are reorganizing our work from the student’s perspective. Our new Office of Student Financial Services launched this fall, and we are preparing to roll out a combined Advising and Registrar Center next semester to reinforce the reality that an academic record is a living document that begins as a degree plan requiring advising and tending-to along the way. I know both of these reorganization feats have hit some snags, but they are worth the effort and underscore that we are able to imagine our work in new ways and see long-standing systems through new lenses.

And still ahead, we have a series of questions to probe and to answer with solid evidence:

• How can we know better what our true costs and revenue are? What does it cost to prepare a mathematics major, a biology major, an art major? Are we assigning resources and incurring costs at and in the right places?

• Are we appropriating our resources—money and people — in ways that grow and sustain enrollments and students? We know some of this information, of course, but we need to carry it further.

• How can we do some creative softening of boundaries and division lines to create stronger and more innovative programs? For example: If business and outdoor education are both interested in and committed to preparing graduates with strong leadership skills, can they work together more intentionally? Could a senior seminar in behavioral sciences combine with a senior seminar in political science?

• Are we as flexible as we can be on behalf of student success? This is not about lowering standards or being wildly inconsistent; it is about acknowledging that there can be many ways to organize learning, to show competence, to demonstrate mastery.

In conclusion, we will close this year’s budget gap. But budget-balancing is a multi-year project; we knew that going into this year. Our indications for spring enrollment so far are positive. It is all of our jobs to help ensure that students who are here now don’t leave prematurely because of factors we can influence or control.

Sustaining enrollments is not just about full-paying equivalents and budget-balancing. Much more, it is about making good on our mission and delivering on the social and educational compact we make with students who declare themselves degree-seeking students at Johnson State College. We have the faculty, the staff, the skills and the heart to do this work. Like our students, we need to match our beliefs with our resilience and move ahead into a future that is rich, complex and dynamic.

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