State of the College Report 2009 - JSC: Here, Now, and Ahead

On Monday, February 2, JSC President Barbara Murphy spoke to the college community on the present and future of the college. The following is a transcript of her remarks.

Several factors coming together make this a good time to hold this meeting and for me to present some information and observations and to hear yours — about JSC here and now.

We just began a new semester, we inducted a new president — an extraordinary time in our country’s history — and we are facing, as a state and country, as sober an economic time as we have in decades. As I think about this mix of forces, I see reasons to be hopeful and confident as well as reasons to be concerned about the realities a recession has for us individually and for our College.

I’d like to briefly review the priorities we have set for this year to guide a multi-year college plan, and look at these areas of importance in the context of a climate of “sober optimism” or “optimistic seriousness” depending on how each of us sees things.

**Areas of priority:**

**Enrollment**

(I could say enrollment, enrollment, and enrollment) Within this area, is the all important work of drawing the right students to Johnson State College. By ’right’, I don’t mean a particular type of student — our student body is too rich and varied for this to be true; but, I do mean students who will thrive at our college, who will commit to the discoveries and commitments that JSC expects and fosters.

This goal insists that we have the best messages and strategies — human and technological — to reach potential students, and the ability to live up to the claims we make about our college when we are working with potential students. We have a talented and hard-working admissions staff and we are lucky in this resource. Now, we need to do some hard-headed planning about goal-setting, evaluating the ways we reach and stay in contact with prospects, and the level of service we put forth in responding to their questions, whether they are about transcript evaluation, clarification in choosing a major, or scholarship opportunities. Our admissions staff members are often our best window into areas of needed improvement since they hear from people who are not yet loyal to us and are engaged in a process that lets them compare several colleges at the same time.

**Early and Ongoing Student Success:** this area began with our Title III grant in which we took on the awesome responsibility of improving the first year experience of students with a goal of increasing their rates of continuance and graduation. We have had successes in this area, most notably with student engagement, as measured by engagement in campus events increasing each year as is evident by participation in activities at SHAPE, the ECE Showcase, Dibden and attendance at athletic contests, even the dining hall on Fridays and weekends. Student satisfaction with First Year Seminars is also reported as very positive.
Our first to second year retention rates are 5% higher than they were in FA05, but at 63%, they are not yet high enough and we still have a ways to go (and, as Robert Frost would add: “promises to keep”).

Our graduation rate — at least the one of first-time full-time freshmen (a tricky cohort for our college that start so many students as transfers or program completers) is also higher than it was five years ago but not as high as the standard we benchmark against nationally. I should note, here, that our numbers of degrees granted increases every year and is high in the context of our student numbers, with our EDP students and graduate degree students contributing significantly.

Our challenge in the “early and ongoing” goal is to keep making the first year all that it can be for students — to experiment, to adjust, to listen to students' voices and — as important — not to lose the energy and creativity we have built into the first year at JSC but to extend it through the second, and third and fourth years so the full JSC experience is marked by learning that builds on itself as well as the intellectual growth and maturity of students as they (as you) acquire new learning and abilities.

**Academic Planning:** I think this is the hardest of our priority areas. It forces us to open up some of our tightest conventions — the construction of majors, the design of the general education programs, students’ time to degree completion, the role of advising, and the ways in which we measure student success. I think the hard question that will guide the Dean and Faculty members in doing this work is “What is the best way to design and deliver college academic programs — informed by the expertise of faculty members and their disciplines — but, at heart, designed with students’ success in mind?” Not an easy task, and not one that can be answered once and then never reopened. The construction of knowledge changes, the tools of teaching and learning change, and the social contexts change, too. I think we have some excellent academic programs at JSC; I also think we are reluctant to imagine them different from what they are or that programs — like us — can grow and change.

**Campus Master Planning:** This is probably the most fun one on our plates. We have just over two years to complete the capital projects for which we bonded. These include improvements to our SHAPE facility — for the full campus community, the greater community, and our varsity athletes so we can keep pace with our conference members. Also in our planning are improvements to labs — science and art — and upgrade of our main entrance — our ‘front door’ to campus. An electrical transformer project completes this simultaneously ambitious and modest list. There may well be some additional wonderful news in the area of campus improvement. For those who have been following the economic stimulus package drafts as they take shape, they include — at this point — $13 million for renovation of higher ed facilities in Vermont. Our small state makes this our number as the dollar amounts are prorated by numbers of FTE students at public higher education entities in a state. Estimating that this might mean $1-2 million for JSC, I identified Bentley as the area of greatest needs. A combination of environmental and health science programs, number of science labs, and the opportunities for energy upgrades make this the best fit. Again, there is no definite commitment yet but the Bill is making its way to the Senate.
While no one has the checkbook out yet, we do have to commit to being “shovel-ready” and I said we would be as soon as the money is identified. Other possible stimulus money could come our way for I.T. needs and heating/energy efficiency projects. If there is money for job stimulus programs that fit with our programmatic strengths and the emerging priorities out of Washington, I would identify ENS and EDU as the likeliest areas to explore and fund.

**Development:** is the fifth priority area, one that is crucial to our ability to take on projects and commitments beyond those regularly funded by appropriations and tuition and fees. It is often said — with much truth — that external money is the only force that will move good colleges to greater abilities. In this time of no appreciation on our investments and lessening state support, gifts and grants are of paramount importance. Our renovation projects are giving us a great opportunity to reach out to alums and other funders and show them real improvements. A stuck economy helps make the case for scholarship gifts even more vividly and new activities like the Common Book Initiative or our annual Showcase of Student Research give us fresh and compelling projects with which to interest donors. I’ve come to believe strongly that a campus that is dynamic and eager to launch new initiatives shows itself as a campus that is confident about its future. And, what donor doesn’t want to invest in the future?

The newest and final of the priorities identified for work and planning is one focused on JSC’s civic engagement — with our near community, our state, and beyond. It is important that this be an inclusive and cross-sector initiative, encompassing non-profit and business neighbors as we identify and establish the places we already are or should be and/or want to be — beyond our very porous borders. Campuses are, after all, the most open institutions in our country — a gift as well as a responsibility for us all. I think we are very good neighbors — whether it is with local businesses like Vermont Soy Products and the food salvage project in Hardwick or sharing student art in the senior care center in Craftsbury. I think we can deepen and expand these partnerships and be — as well as be known as — a solid presence in our part of the state.

These are ambitious goals; they are also necessary and timely and touch every part of our work from funding to academic quality to student success and citizenship. They are also timely as they are this year — timeless, since they speak to the root of our mission: access and inclusion, quality of academic experience, and a high level of community and participation.

I’d like to shift now to a look at the contexts in which we are planning and doing this important work: the economic and political settings that we are living in as we carry out our mission.

**First, the demographic predictions** — even if they are overstated — require our serious attention. The combination of an economic downturn requiring many students to stay close to home or to forego a year of college along with a drop in upcoming high school graduation rates could have sharp consequences for us. So far, we look good. This spring, we had a larger-than-last year number of students begin and continue at JSC. We have 64 more
students than last spring semester. Our Fall 09 numbers look on track with last year. But, we would be foolish to relax just yet. Much can change between February and August as a prospective student's family circumstances can shift dramatically in the next half year. We need to stay as focused on our EDP enrollments as on our campus-based programs. In difficult times, programs like EDP are often sought out for their part time study opportunities, their role for employees in transition, and their more flexible fee structures.

Our best strategies are to continue reaching our prospects with full involvement of our staff and faculty and to make the case we really believe in: that JSC is worth the investment and, for some, the sacrifices needed to finance an education. As important, retention, graduation — student success — are more crucial than ever. Students will be tempted, in tough financial times, to stop out for a while. If we truly believe in education, we need to help students persevere, to double our efforts to help secure scholarship assistance, to keep our academic programs strong and current . The more we build and believe in excellence, the more and truly we will communicate it.

The next year — economists agree on this much — will continue to be difficult. Here at Johnson, we have had two rescissions to our budget and are preparing to build next year's budget at nearly 3% below the post-rescission budget. In dollars, this is about $600,000. (I'm being optimistic that we won't have another budget adjustment between now and June 30th; but speculation runs both ways on this.) As I have said, we prepared for this year's downturn and are managing it well with savings brought forward. Next year will be different. Enrollment is our strongest asset for preparing a balanced budget — both new and continuing students. The tuition rate our Board approves will be a crucial piece of the picture and while our Board is sympathetic to our budget realities, they are also attentive to Vermonters' ability to pay. Finally, the state contribution and our own fund raising complete the revenue picture.

The small steps we are taking now — reducing travel expenses, cutting back on 'extras' and staying vigilantly within our individual budgets will see us through this year and will help position us for the 2010 budget year. The next few months will be active ones as we prepare to match expenditures to revenues. I commit to communicating with you regularly along the way through this process. We are a sturdy college with a 180-year-old history and we have the abilities and skills to do the work of balancing a budget.

Stimulus package: This could be a wonderful infusion of money to Vermont and all the states as part of jump-starting the economy. While we all have been told to "be shovel-ready" to undertake projects — with a focus on the sciences, energy â€“ saving investments — the Bill of which the package is part — has yet to go to and pass the Senate, and then become operational. Still, this is a great chance to be optimistic and gives us good reason to organize our thinking around what we need by way of modernizing our science facilities, become less reliant on traditional fuel sources, and — perhaps as a system — make significant I.T. upgrades. While any stimulus package money will not be ongoing money — one or two years at best — the infusion could make a huge difference to us. Should this money come our way, we will want to be ready and will work
any specific projects into our capital planning already underway.

Chancellor Search Most of you will know that Bob Clarke who has served as Chancellor for close to 10 years steps down this coming June. Three finalists are announced: two internal candidates and a third, a former College President of two North Dakota State Colleges. What will a change of leadership mean for Johnson State? Whoever emerges as new Chancellor will — as any new leader of any higher education institution would do — look seriously at the financial future of the system and its colleges to assure viability. This position was advertised as Chancellor of a five-college system and I believe any of the candidates will assume the job with this intention; but, finally the viability of the system as a whole will be the Chancellor and Board’s mission. I feel it is incumbent upon us to do what we already do — but, perhaps, with more intention and focus — to make evident to as wide an audience as we can — the economic, social, and intellectual contributions the Johnson State College makes to the people of Vermont. I believe we are unique, invaluable and indispensable and the more of us living and making this case, the better.

Any new leader — a chancellor, in this case — has the responsibility to be assured of the value of the entities for which s/he has fiscal and programmatic oversight. For this reason and many, we need to communicate broadly and deeply our place in Vermont here and now.

Having spoken about our priorities as well as some of the realities in which we are living and working this year, let me begin to close by underscoring some activities and commitments we need to make starting now:

Examining our degree programs for increased flexibility while preserving their integrity. This will fall under the work of the Academic Planning group. How are students doing in completing degrees within the framework of four — or five — years? Is it possible that all our programs can be completed within four years? Which majors encourage timely progress? Are we allowing students the flexibility to take electives outside the major and general education requirements? Should we be working on developing certificates or other focused programs, especially helpful in this economy?

Continuing to discuss our early student success initiatives and ways to extend them. I am asking the Academic Dean to present — through a college-wide session — the just-received evaluators’ report of our Title III progress. It is an interesting and positive report and will confirm our accomplishments as well as the work ahead.

Focus on EDP: alongside our campus priorities, we need to be more public about this unique program. We need to publicize it more widely, invest in it, pursue external funding for it, and continue more seriously the conversations and early planning we have begun on an online degree program through the External Degree Program.

Emphasis on pursuing external funding. Foundations are still making investments and, while much reduced, Congress will still make some “special appropriations” — more familiarly known as earmarks. JSC, along with the other VSC colleges has identified several
projects we believe are candidates for a special appropriation. We have recently signed on to an online Grants Resource Center and will have greater tools to research grant possibilities. If there are small injections of one time funding we can make to jump-start grant writing and submission, we will do so.

**Budget Management:** I continue to need your ideas. I have already received a couple of dozen good suggestions from turning the heat down, to reducing printing and mailing to cancelling our bottled water purchases. Good ideas, and we will consider them all. For now, keep the ideas coming and remember to honor our travel guidelines. The travel priorities are the three “A’s”: Advancement, Admissions, and Athletics. Beyond that, let’s talk about it.

**We will continue to invest where we must and should.** A key question I keep pondering is, “How do you want to emerge stronger from this recession?” Hunkering down and turning within will leave us in a compromised place when the economy strengthens and we cannot afford to retreat and risk falling behind. We are continuing our faculty searches and our capital projects; as we can afford it, we will make energy improvements in the interests of both fiscal savings and environmental considerations.

**In conclusion,** while it may be easier or more fun to lead a college in a time of economic prosperity, it is no less engaging and interesting — and important — to do so in a period of scarce resources. Daily, we are all asked and must ask ourselves, “what matters most?” and the sharpness of the question helps us to make decisions and set priorities. I know we will carry on with confidence and will meet with success. I also know that having the trust of 1,900 students is inspiration enough for all of us to bring our best selves to work and do what we do with strength, intelligence, and dedication.