

Report to the Faculty, Administration, Trustees, and Students of

Northern Vermont University

Johnson, VT and Lyndonville, VT

by

An evaluator representing the New England Commission of Higher Education

Prepared after a study of the institution's substantive change proposal to unify Johnson State College and Lyndon State College as Northern Vermont University, progress report, and a visit to the campuses
1-4 April 2019

Submitted by:

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This report represents the views of the evaluator. Its content is based on an evaluation of the institution with respect to the Commission's criteria for accreditation. It is a confidential document in which all comments are made in good faith. The report is prepared both as an educational service to the institution and to assist the Commission in making a decision about the institution's accreditation status.

Introduction

The Commission of Higher Education accepted a substantive change proposal from Johnson State College and Lyndon State College in December 2017 to unify as Northern Vermont University (NVU) with two campuses: NVU-Johnson and NVU-Lyndon. This report reviews progress since NVU was formally launched in July 2018. It addresses three areas of emphasis requested by the Commission: (1) developing an effective governance structure for Northern Vermont University that provides for the participation of constituency groups at both campuses, (2) consolidating the planning and evaluation activities of the two institutions and implementing an institution-wide approach to assessing student learning, and (3) meeting enrollment goals and achieving a balanced budget that ensures sufficient staffing for Northern Vermont University's two campuses.

The evaluator thanks the institution for the gracious hospitality and substantive meetings throughout the visit that was conducted 1-4 April 2019. In addition to reviewing the substantive change proposal (28 July 2017) and the progress report (21 February 2019), the evaluator verified the information provided during the site visit. Meetings were held with the president, the provost, the executive leadership team (individually and as a group), the president's leadership team, Faculty Assembly leadership from the Johnson and Lyndon campuses, members of the Student Government Association from the two campuses, Vermont State Colleges System (VSCS) Chancellor Jeb Spaulding and the Board of Trustee Chair Church Hindes. Additionally, there was an open meeting with faculty and staff and students at each campus. All requests for additional information were promptly met.

Unification of two previously independent institutions is a complicated, emotionally charged undertaking. The evaluator encountered overall support for the unification with some admitted nervousness, anxiety and reluctance. It was also evident that misinformation and rumors are part of the backdrop in spite of evident attempts to communicate clearly and often. In spring 2017, unification updates were posted twice per month. This ceased when Marketing took on greater work regarding recruitment and there is a recognition that devising a more frequent and regular communication mechanism may be a good idea. The importance of keeping alums engaged and informed with up to date information is also recognized but may be difficult to achieve.

Definite campus culture differences exist and were apparent to the evaluator in discussions with faculty and staff and some upper-level students. There is a clear desire to maintain the cultural identity of the campuses but how to do that within the construct of unification is difficult. Lower-level, first-year students arrived at NVU and are not looking back. Within a few years, the student population will have changed and will be far less focused on the separate identities of Johnson and Lyndon. The lingering question is whether the faculty and staff will be in step with their students.

Institutional unification is occurring with greater frequency in higher education as many institutions face serious fiscal challenges brought on by enrollment declines linked to demographic shifts. The VSCS Board of Trustees supported unification, in part, for the obvious financial benefits it hoped would accrue, but also, in order to provide expanded learning

opportunities, which they viewed as more important than the fiscal benefits. The need for revenue gain is unequivocal. Resources are needed to ensure sufficient staffing at both campuses and for programmatic and facilities improvements. Without a relatively rapid turnaround, the momentum for change will be challenged and the intense competition within the higher education arena will be more acutely felt.

In spite of the challenging environment, even the most negative voices appeared positively inclined regarding the leadership of the president and her executive team. There is widespread recognition that the pace of the work has been daunting and that “bumps in the road” are part of the landscape. There was also genuine concern for how hard the leadership team is working and appreciation for their efforts to split time equally between the two campuses.

Developing an effective governance structure that allows participation of constituent groups at both campuses

Faculty Assemblies exist at both campuses and a Faculty Council, made up of Faculty Assembly leadership from each campus meets as a coalesced body at least one time per semester. Although there seemed to be a recognition that a single, unified body with equal Johnson and Lyndon representation might be desirable, there is a reluctance to move to that structure at present.

The current structure appears cumbersome, at best, for a unified institution. Each Faculty Assembly meets once per month, votes on measures and then the resolutions are passed to the other campus. A meeting at the Lyndon campus occurred during the evaluator visit and a vote was taken on the potential change into a four-schools structure. The faculty voted in favor but only after amending and inserting a requirement that the department chair structure would not change but would allow departments to move into a school. This motion now goes to the Johnson campus for their action. It is not clear to the evaluator how progress can be made with this approach. Separate Faculty Assemblies do not represent Faculty shared governance for Northern Vermont University in its entirety. A once a semester meeting of the newly created Faculty Council is not an indication of a desire to work collaboratively on the many issues facing the institution and requiring faculty input. The role of faculty in shared governance is very clear but does require ongoing attention and engagement if the institution is to benefit from the partnership with faculty.

In response to the evaluator’s question to the Faculty Assembly leadership at NVU-Lyndon regarding the unification of faculty governance, it was stated that the Faculty Assembly is in contract language. During the same conversation, there was a reference to the challenges faced by the Curricular Committee due to differing views on governance. The Faculty Assembly representatives spoke of having a collegial relationship and there is a general agreement that given the scale of the task, progress is being made.

Shared governance is evident in the new budget development and academic reorganization processes currently underway and described later in this document.

Consolidating planning and evaluation activities at the two campuses and implementing an institution-wide approach to assessment of student learning

The General Education curriculum was redesigned to create the NVU General Core Curriculum (GCC) which is university-wide and shared by both campuses. The re-designed GCC also extends to NVU Online. A Davis Foundation grant was instrumental in providing support to develop an assessment model, including rubrics and assessment protocols for the new GCC. All previously approved GCC courses are to be re-evaluated to assure alignment with learning outcomes. Assessment software was being selected at the time of the evaluator's visit and will be used to train faculty during summer 2019. Student artifacts collected during spring semester 2019 will then be assessed and the program assessment will be rolled out for Fall 2019. Although progress has been slower than hoped, it does appear to be moving forward and a retreat and workshops are planned to get faculty fully acquainted with the new program and the assessment protocols.

Each degree program in the VSCS must go through the Program Review and Continuous Improvement Process (PreCIP) every five years. This process, modified to be more data-driven by assessing Learning Outcomes (LOs), requires programs to submit 5-year assessment plans. The year after a program submits its PreCIP report is Year 1 of the 5-year assessment cycle. Discussions regarding academic program mergers are ongoing with some programs actively planning and others just beginning the conversation. Departments and programs are facing a timeline challenge since decisions regarding unit-level organization need to be known before LOs and assessment plans can be created and submitted.

It is apparent to the evaluator that more academic programs will need to coalesce over the coming years in order to maintain quality, offer expanded student opportunities and deal realistically with changing enrollment patterns. Academic reorganization will be ongoing for a period of years. Currently, department and program-level deliberations are arrayed along a spectrum from formal merger at one end to nascent discussions at the other. It is realistic to conclude that departments are going to be reluctant to develop LOs and assessment plans until their final configuration is settled which may impact their compliance with the PreCIP process timeline.

At present, each campus has its own system of assessing LOs. NVU's Associate Academic Dean is working to develop a new yearly assessment process that is consistent for both campuses. It seems realistic that the current approach to compliance with the standards related to assessment creates a situation where NVU accountability will be problematic and the required VSCS assessment will be more difficult to achieve.

A system-wide data system for NVU is in place and involves NVU personnel but the necessity for the VSCS office to provide institution-specific data and the capability for institutions to access this data cannot be overstated. Without institution-specific data beyond IPEDS, it is difficult to proceed with strategic decision making. The evaluator was informed that the Office of the Chancellor was beginning to move in the direction of providing more institution-specific data; however, there is an immediate need to expedite this project. Dependence on the Office of the Chancellor for institution-specific data is currently a lengthy and at times inaccurate process.

At present, NVU is hesitant to hire IR personnel who would be unable to pull institution-specific data from the system's database.

Developing sufficient Institutional Research capability is a work in progress but recognized as critically important. NVU-Johnson is very appreciative of receiving a Title III grant focused on improved persistence and retention of students in the second year and beyond, including a focus on near completers. Improving persistence is one of NVU's goals associated with growing enrollment and improving the fiscal situation.

Meeting enrollment goals and achieving a balanced budget that ensures sufficient staffing for Northern Vermont University's two campuses

The Progress Report of Feb 2019 provides details in how actual performance has differed from that projected in the Substantive Change Proposal. Attrition and tight budget management resulted in better performance and reduced usage of reserves so that FY2018 ended with a \$985,000 surplus. It is expected that FY2019 will end with a deficit of \$2.3 million, largely due to enrollment and institutional aid pressures associated with unification. The announcement of unification caused brand confusion leading to reduced applications, acceptances and admits. Also, increased regional competition put pressure on NVU Online. The current forecast is for FY2020 and FY2021 to show deficits of \$1.77 million and \$1.36 million, respectively with a projected budget surplus in FY2023.

The natural cycle of attrition, retirements, and resignations has allowed the consolidation of leadership positions in a variety of areas (finance, facilities, marketing, information technology, financial aid, registration, human resources, and athletics) in addition to the Executive Team. As a result, there have been substantial savings which have permitted searches to be started for tenure track faculty, and full-time and part-time staff.

Several factors beyond the control of NVU play significant roles in the ongoing deficits. The first is a reduction in the medical reserve distribution of \$700,000 per year beginning in FY2020. The second factor relates to a change in the allocation of the state appropriation.

NVU was appreciative of the special appropriation of \$2 million over three years to assist with aspects of the unification process, e.g. legal, branding, marketing and technology. The historical allocation of the appropriation had been a split into five equal shares (Castleton University, Johnson State College, Lyndon State College, Community College of Vermont and Vermont Technical College). Under the previous allocation model JSC and LSC each received 20% and NVU in toto would receive 40%. The state appropriation was increased by \$3million in FY2018 but that was followed by a Board of Trustees decision to reallocate resources with the NVU appropriation reduced by \$416,000 per year x 4 years = \$1.664 million. In addition, a slight adjustment in payment to the Chancellor's office of \$70,000 per year leads to an overall appropriation reduction of \$1.384M to NVU. The proportion of the NVU budget contributed by the state appropriation under the old and new models is 19% and 14%, respectively. The Chancellor commented to the evaluator that if the reduced NVU appropriation proves to be a problem, it will be reviewed.

The new, modified zero-based budgeting process was introduced to the campus by President Collins at the Spring Semester welcome events, at the Faculty Assembly at meetings, as well as sent via email to all faculty and staff. Nominations were requested for the Budget Review Committee and ten years of financial performance data were shared with faculty and staff.

The zero-based budgeting process involves the submission of recommendations from the Budget Review Committee to the Executive Team, review and possible revision by the Executive Team which is then shared with the Committee for re-work. The final recommendations will be shared with the President prior to presentation to the Finance and Facilities Committee of the Board of Trustees on 29 May 2019. The full board is scheduled to approve the budget on 20 June 2019. Following approval by the Board, a budget presentation will then be made to the campus outlining critical areas of investment and adjustment. It will take several years to know how well the process is working and whether the campus feels it is an inclusive process and the budgets produced are data-informed. The evaluator heard no negative comments regarding the new process during the site visit.

The Progress Report of February 2019 describes ambitious enrollment goals for the period of FY2020 through FY 2024. Undergraduate enrollment will increase through out-of-state gains and in-state declines. Graduate enrollment, both in- and out-of-state, will increase. NVU Online will grow in-state and 208% out-of-state and Early College will grow. In toto, the goal is for headcount to change by 98 in-state and 330 out-of-state over the five-year period.

It is clear that Admissions personnel are working well across both campuses. The hire of a Dean of Enrollment and Marketing for NVU was a positive development and many enrollment and marketing initiatives have been instituted. Enrollment data show an increase in applications and acceptances for fall 2019.

Everyone at NVU is aware of the increasing challenges facing every institution in New England. Demographic changes, the evolving role of technology in higher education, and competing demands for state resources play into an increasingly competitive marketplace. Out-of-state enrollment at NVU-J has ranged from ~ 22-25% over the period of 2014-2018 and that at NVU-Lyndon has ranged from ~36-45% for the same time period.

The evaluator has some concern regarding the ambitious enrollment plan given its central importance in revenue generation. The enrollment increases are essential to realizing revenue needed to address staffing issues and provide increased student opportunities envisioned as a central pillar of unification. It will be essential to have a well-developed and publicized prioritization plan that will adjust as enrollment goals are met, exceeded or fall short.

Consolidation of services within a System's central office is an increasingly common approach within state higher education systems. Within the VSCS, Accounts Payable consolidated in October 2016, Accounting consolidated in summer of 2017 and the Payroll consolidation will occur in July 2019. The Chancellor has expressed interest in extending consolidation to include the Chief Technology Officers (CTOs), currently campus-based, but there are drawbacks to such a plan. Portfolios that can be designed and managed identically for all campuses are logical candidates for centralization. CTOs need to be responsive to the myriad of variations that occur within the IT realm on any campus and are therefore typically most effectively utilized when

campus-embedded. A council of CTOs that meets regularly, such as already exists in the form of the VSCS IT Council, would be an alternative mechanism of utilizing the group's expertise without losing the skill set at each campus. Moving forward NVU also has ambitious goals regarding the expansion of Online enrollment and the use of technology, e.g. telepresence, to expand student opportunities, two areas that will require a robust IT skill set located within the institution.

Summary

Although the unification to form Northern Vermont University began in July 2018, it is a complex undertaking that will fully evolve over a multi-year period. President Collins and her leadership team are respected for how well they are managing the task. There was recognition of the fast pace of the initiative and for how hard the leadership team is working. Sincere concern for their well-being was expressed. It was clear that faculty and staff at both campuses are focused on creating a supportive and engaging learning community for the students. In spite of some reservations and recognized culture differences between the campuses, NVU personnel are intent on making the transition as successful as possible. Both campuses are actively engaged in consolidation as it relates to budget planning, academic reorganization, and enrollment growth.

Although not itemized in the Commission letter to President Collins of 7 December 2017, the progress on academic reorganization should be mentioned. Provost Atkins and a working group of the faculty, with equal representation from the Johnson and Lyndon campuses, have proposed a four-school model that would incorporate the units at both campuses into a single academic organization. The proposal has very recently gone to the Faculty Assemblies for approval. A coordinated academic organization will be important for the department and program changes that will occur over time. As mentioned previously, academic reorganization is critically interconnected with assessment planning. Another critical interface is between programmatic organization and the year-ahead admissions cycle with its need to accurately portray exciting, and perhaps new, academic offerings to prospective students and their parents.

Strengths

The NVU leadership team, led by President Collins is well-regarded and respected by the campus communities.

The General Education curriculum was redesigned to create the General Core Curriculum which also extends to NVU Online. NVU is very appreciative of a Davis Foundation grant which was instrumental in providing support to design the assessment model for the GCC.

Although the assessment of LOs differs between the campuses, the NVU's Associate Academic Dean is working to develop a yearly assessment process that is consistent for both campuses.

Financial performance has differed from that projected in the Substantive Change Proposal. Personnel attrition and tight budget management have resulted in better performance and reduced usage of reserve funds so that FY2018 ended with a positive balance of \$985,000.

The Admissions operation is an integrated entity across both campuses. A number of enrollment and marketing initiatives have been instituted and enrollment data show an increase in applications and acceptances for fall 2019.

Provost Atkins and a working group of the faculty have proposed a four-school model of academic organization. The proposal is currently working its way through the Faculty Assemblies at each campus.

Concerns

There appears to be no immediate desire for moving to a truly unified faculty governance structure. Faculty Assemblies at each campus meet monthly. The once a semester meeting of the newly formed Faculty Council does not signal enthusiasm for tackling the myriad issues awaiting a true shared governance approach.

The System-wide PreCIP process requires programmatic LOs and 5-year assessment plans to be submitted in Year 1 of the 5-year review cycle. Uncertainty regarding academic unit organization creates timing challenges since the unit-level organization has to be settled before LOs and an assessment plan can be devised.

Critical institution-specific data currently is provided by the VSCS office, a lengthy and sometimes inaccurate process. More sophisticated and responsive IR capability is crucial for strategic decision-making.

Year-end deficits are projected to be generated in FY2020 and FY2021, with a projected surplus in FY2022. A reduction in the medical reserve distribution and a change in the allocation of the state appropriation are two factors playing a role in the continued deficits.

Consolidation of services within the System's central office is viewed as appropriate for some portfolios, e.g. Accounts Payable and Payroll. The possibility of moving CTOs from campus to the VSCS office is not supported on the campuses where in-house IT expertise is necessary to manage a portfolio that is not identical from campus to campus.