

Transforming UVM—The College Option

It is undeniable that the University of Vermont, along with virtually every other entity in America, is grappling with real and immediate financial challenges. Much of our attention is focused on the task at hand, and I have every confidence that our collective hard work, perseverance, and creative thinking will allow us to prevail. But building a stronger and better institution for our students, faculty, staff, and the citizens of Vermont entails more than mere budget balancing. Our vision to be among the nation's premier small research universities remains central, attainable, and compelling, but it requires our most earnest attention if it is to be realized. By some measures, we are there; in other areas we must improve our position. Let me be clear: We do many, many things well, but there is ample room for improvement.

To be more specific, there are several essential things we must accomplish:

- Enhance student success and satisfaction in order to increase retention and graduation rates;
- Strengthen and make more readily apparent our academic quality;
- Reduce administrative redundancies and increase efficiency; and
- Reduce academic redundancies, enhance academic collaboration in teaching and research, and eliminate significant barriers that students and faculty must too often surmount or work around in order to meet their goals.

We have several initiatives moving ahead that will address these issues, including a more comprehensive and formalized First-Year Experience, the planned implementation of business service centers across campus, and a proposal to create a Center for Student Success where students can enjoy “one-stop shopping” to receive guidance on a variety of academic, career, and personal

needs. In addition, we need to make significant progress on improving the quality and consistency of the advising our students receive at UVM.

After nearly seven years at this wonderful institution I have concluded that our current academic structure detracts from our ability to fulfill our aspirations for the highest levels of academic excellence. Too often I hear from students frustrated about access to multiple majors, minors, and electives across colleges and schools. Too often I hear from faculty that our academic silos create frustrating and sometimes insurmountable barriers to interdisciplinary collaboration. Too often our students tell me that they cannot get the courses they need to graduate, and that they do not see the coherence or purpose of the curricula they are following. And too often I have the feeling that UVM's true, and remarkable, academic quality remains in the shadows and needs to move into the light: from conversations across campus I know that many others share these feelings.

I would like to share some reflections on the academic structure issue, and also share some of my preliminary thoughts about a model for change that I personally believe may have high potential for allowing us to pursue with greater ease and enhanced success our shared vision for UVM. There are without question other models worthy of consideration, but I have given considerable thought over the course of the last two months—informed by constructive dialogue with the deans, the Faculty Senate Executive Council, and the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees—to one particular structure that I believe could greatly enhance UVM's performance in areas key to our advance:

- Enhanced focus on student success at all levels
- Improved student opportunities for multiple majors, minors, and access to electives

- Curricular coherence and clarity
- Stronger and more readily apparent academic quality
- Administrative streamlining
- Enhanced opportunities for faculty leadership combined with reduced service burdens for faculty
- Elimination of unnecessary internal curricular and bureaucratic duplication (costly in faculty and student effort as well as in dollars and other resources)
- Promotion of cross-disciplinary collaboration and innovation
- Strengthening of graduate education and research as a direct collateral result of removing the silos in undergraduate education
- Strengthening of the role of the provost as chief academic officer
- Intensification of shared faculty and staff ownership of academic quality and student outcomes
- Further differentiation and distinction of the University through extension of the UVM tradition of educational innovation in the Marsh-Morrill-Dewey line

In my view there is a strong case to be made to examine a model that creates a single undergraduate college—the College—of The University of Vermont. Some two years ago, after extensive discussion with deans, faculty, staff, and students, we offered in “Signatures of Excellence: UVM in the 21st Century” a case for making the most of UVM’s human scale and distinguished intellectual heritage to achieve academic excellence at the highest levels. We argued that UVM could build competitive advantage on our distinctive history and values. Our competitive advantage derived, we suggested, from the historic commitments of our academic community to the intellectual tradition of James Marsh, James Morrill, and John Dewey; to excellence in that

tradition in undergraduate, graduate, and professional education; to liberal education, the environment, and health; to a vision of teacher-scholars collaborating with talented students and staff; and to Vermont's values of practicality, environmental stewardship, civic duty, fairness, social justice, and respect for individuality. And we argued that, despite our having less institutional wealth, private support, and public financing than many other colleges and universities, bold and innovative measures aligned with those core values and commitments would allow us to place UVM in the vanguard of American higher education. I believe that is even more true today than it was two years ago.

Today, more than ever, a period of unusually intense economic challenges requires us to be mindful of the need to use our resources wisely in order to convert UVM's manageable size and distinguished intellectual heritage into enhanced academic quality for the benefit of students, faculty, and staff and the State of Vermont. We would be remiss if these distinct advantages, perhaps unique to our institution, were not utilized to our competitive advantage.

Above all in the interest of promoting academic excellence, the College of The University of Vermont would bring together all undergraduates at the University and the faculty who teach them in a single degree-granting college. Faculty members would enjoy the benefits of a disciplinary base in an academic department or professional school-within-the-college along with the enhanced opportunities for intellectual exchange and collaboration fostered by being members of a single collegiate faculty dedicated to the institutional ideal of the unity of knowledge. Students would enjoy the benefits of curricular cohesion, including a common general education requirement and a coherent, non-duplicative set of options for study in the life sciences, in environmental science and policy, in business and entrepreneurship, and in integrated pre-law and pre-medical programs. Students would also enjoy the very substantial benefit of an integrated

academic advising center—the Center for Student Success—that focused on the success of students up to the point at which their work becomes concentrated in their major fields of study.

The College would comprise a total of thirty-eight units, including departments and schools-within-the-college: the Schools of Agriculture, Business Administration, Education, Engineering, Nursing and Health Sciences, the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources, and the Honors College. Although the design of the College might on superficial examination seem to resemble the unitary undergraduate colleges at the center of some of the nation's elite private research universities, it would be a highly distinctive form of organization for a Land Grant public flagship, true to UVM's long history of educational innovation. Even so, the College would have some resemblance to—but would be much smaller than—some of the central colleges in the great public research universities. For example, it would be between two and three hundred faculty short of the number of faculty in single colleges within UCLA, Berkeley, Michigan (Ann Arbor), and Wisconsin (Madison), and would have a much smaller number of students as well. At Wisconsin, to cite just one instance in a little more detail, the College of Letters and Science has more than 800 faculty, 38 departments, 5 professional schools-within-the-college, and more than 17,000 students.

The College would be led by an Executive Dean or Dean of the Faculty (who would report to the Provost, along with the Deans of the Graduate College, Libraries, and the Medical College). Administrative positions would be reduced in number, and a single consolidated service center would support the business operating needs of the entire college. A highly strategic academic advising center would be created at virtually no cost through assignment to the center of many of the academic advisers employed in FY 2009 within the colleges and schools. (Administrative streamlining achieved through the creation of the College would be paralleled by

aggressive streamlining in central administration of the number of persons with the titles vice president, and associate and assistant vice president.)

But the principal benefits of the College would be neither administrative nor budgetary but intellectual and curricular. Drawing on the distinguished intellectual tradition of Vermont, the University has in recent years pursued signatures of excellence based on four enduring principles: that “education is a social process that should continuously engage the members of a diverse community . . . in the creation of new knowledge and in teaching and learning from each other,” that “an understanding of the unity of knowledge must be actively promoted,” “that the highest good is attained through the practical application of rigorously tested hypotheses and research findings,” and that to those ends there must be “an uncompromising commitment to freedom of inquiry” (“Signatures of Excellence: UVM in the 21st Century,” October 2006). The College of the University of Vermont would have its foundations in those principles and would be a logical outgrowth of the high value placed at UVM on education as a social process and on the ideal of the unity of knowledge. (The “unity of knowledge” is a subtly oxymoronic concept—it can be thought of in virtually antithetical terms, as indicating that all things known relate to all others in a unified structure of knowledge, or that the very plurality of disciplinary perspectives and methodologies is required to achieve a rounded, integrated understanding of virtually anything. The former is a rather Platonic notion, the latter a more empirical and practical one—and yet they seem to come in the end to much the same thing, a version of that very American paradox “e pluribus unum” [“out of many, one”]. That might almost be the motto of the College of the University of Vermont.)

The College would support in very powerful ways the University Vision of being among the premier small research universities and the University Mission of preparing students to be accountable leaders. Some specific examples:

- It would position the Executive Dean to partner with the Provost and other academic leaders to ensure that faculty hiring is strategic with respect both to meeting instructional needs on all levels and to the building of cross-disciplinary teams to strengthen areas of focus in research and graduate education.
- It would create a collegiate assembly—the Faculty of the College—that brings together faculty members from across the institution, promoting curricular cohesion, pedagogical and scholarly collaboration, and intellectual interchange across the broadest possible disciplinary spectrum.
- It would create shared faculty ownership through that collegiate assembly in the quality of the educational process and outcomes for all undergraduates. That quality, the excellence of undergraduate education, provides critical and indeed indispensable leverage for the scientific and scholarly rise of the University.
- The Center for Student Success, focused on student retention and success, would be the keystone of the University’s effort to raise graduation rates into the range typical of the nation’s top small research universities. Only by doing so, with correlative increases in UVM’s ranking among national universities, will the University be able to maintain its value proposition, to attract capable, diverse undergraduate students, and thus to build, on the foundation of excellence in undergraduate education, an increasingly strong portfolio in research and graduate education.

- For undergraduate students, the College would remove most of the barriers that detract from ease of access to all of the programmatic resources and richness of the institution's undergraduate offerings.

Obviously there would be many details to be worked out, and the transition to realization of all of the benefits of the College would be gradual. Any such restructuring would begin with approval of the new academic and administrative structure by the Faculty Senate and the Board of Trustees. The next step would be identification and appointment of an outstanding individual to serve as the first Executive Dean. Under that person's leadership, the Faculty of the College would take a full two years to develop College policies and curricula, including the general education program and the consolidation of previously balkanized major fields of study in areas such as biology and life sciences. Throughout the period in which new curricula and academic policies were in development, students would simply meet current Catalog requirements, and it would be at least three years before a class enters whose only option would lie in the new curricula approved by the Faculty of the College.

Forged in the crucible of an extraordinarily challenging economic environment, the College of the University of Vermont would draw on profound sources of strength and value rooted in both the long-term and recent history of the University. Achieving significant levels of administrative savings along with a more faculty-centric culture for managing the academic enterprise, it would at the same time—and more importantly—improve the educational and service environment for faculty and students and would promote high levels of curricular cohesion and intellectual collegiality. At the same time, it would reinforce a culture of excellence and collaboration essential to the University's success as a premier small research university devoted to superb undergraduate, graduate, and professional education, to scholarship, research, and creative activity,

and to service. It would, on the undergraduate level, be the signature agency for leveraging the University's human scale to create an innovative structure for the twenty-first century Land Grant premised on a commitment to seeing problems and their solutions whole, through the lenses of many applicable disciplines, and that structure would have far-reaching implications for graduate education and research as well. This initiative could turn the urgent imperatives of the moment into enhanced distinctiveness for an institution that would, through this bold but sound departure from received practice, stand out among all of the nation's small research universities and public Land Grant institutions for creatively reinvigorating the great Vermont tradition of educational innovation represented by Marsh, Morrill, and Dewey.

With confidence that this and other ideas related to academic restructuring idea merit very serious and immediate attention, I have determined to appoint a working group charged with developing no more than three organizational structures to compare against our current structure, a deliberative process that should include consideration of consolidating all the undergraduate colleges under one dean. It is high time that we move forward with a process to solicit other ideas, weigh advantages and disadvantages, and move ahead with exploring and, I hope, implementing structural changes that will streamline and strengthen our University.