

Dean's Report

March 4, 2008

I began my term as dean not quite knowing what to expect, other than that the position description was a bit daunting and that, as Grant indicated, I would receive a lot of email messages. Thus far, I've learned that Grant was correct about the email, and that the position is challenging, not the least because I spend so much time in meetings and because, for the first time in my adult life, after 15 weeks, nothing ends. Nonetheless, St. Lawrence is an institution where there is plenty of goodwill and support -- from Dan, from others on Senior Staff, and from all of you—thus making this transition significantly easier than it might otherwise be. As a result, the position feels challenging, engaging, educational, and not infrequently, fun. I've learned a lot since July, not the least about initiatives in Academic Affairs, and I will spend some time today discussing what I have learned.

As those of you who were able to make the final presentation by the Middle States Committee know visitors coming to St. Lawrence see students who are engaged in their work and feel valued by faculty, as well as a faculty that works hard to teach in creative ways. We are in many ways in a good place, yet I also see challenges. Two of the most important to me are linked: First, rethinking the learning outcomes that we expect all students to achieve and planning for how the curriculum across four years will help them to do so and, second, assessing the work that we do so that if we are not meeting our goals, we know it and can change what we do. My hope is that 10 years from now, we will not only have a curriculum that we think meets the goals of a residential liberal arts college in the 21st century multicultural, global world in which we live, but that we can also say with some confidence that our students are graduating having met our goals.

We have a number of initiatives, generally funded by grants, that I think will help us to take our mission and turn it into an even better educational experience for our students. I want to spend just a few minutes talking about each of these, and then talk about the larger curriculum planning process. But, before I talk about specific grant projects, I want to say a little about how we seek broad, programmatic grants and how I've come to understand my role in this process. Grant opportunities are often connected to the interests of foundations and, they are generally embedded in national discussions about higher education. The challenge for us is to respond to Requests for proposals in a way that meets our needs. One of my roles is to work with Dan and the Development Office to define our priorities and see how well they fit with foundation priorities. When we get RFPs, we often do not have a lot of time to get proposals together, with the result that they are not always vetted widely on campus, rather they are developed by people with a particular interest, often (but certainly not always) people on Dean's Staff who see the grants as a way of furthering their work. As the Middle States self-study pointed out, this process can lead to grants about which many on campus know nothing. I understand that we need to prevent this as much as possible. At the same time, I think it is important to articulate occasionally how what we are working on fits together. Thus, my request to speak with you today. I'll first talk about 4 grants on which we are currently working, and then discuss proposals that we are in the process of writing.

1) Core Commitments – As I noted in the letter that I sent announcing this grant in May, this project asks us to consider how we are educating students for personal and social responsibility. The project that St. Lawrence defined is based on using deliberative dialogue to ask students, faculty, and staff to consider whether and how we should be engaged in promoting democratic citizenship for a multicultural society. Deliberative dialogue is a process intended to help people to think together about an issue in order to consider different courses of action (London, <http://www.scottlondon.com/reports/dialogue.html>). We are in the process of “framing” the dialogue – or defining different potential ways of seeing the critical issues -- on this topic, and will have two pilot dialogues groups of students test it this semester. Next year, we will invite faculty and staff to also participate in dialogues on this topic. We hope that these conversations will help us to think about some of our current aims and objectives, such as what it might mean for students “to develop a personal ethic of considered values,” whether such language is strong enough to represent what we want to foster, how an institution that has such goals need to consider its own values and methods of achieving them, and whether we have in place means for students to develop personal and social responsibility. One of the topics that we hope to discuss as we move forward over the next two years is our honor code, which some members of the Honor Council believe to not have a large enough influence on student culture. Additionally, Thelmo has considered the possibility of adopting a social honor code. Helping students to talk about these issues is very much connected to the grant project.

2) [Bringing Theory to Practice](#) – We have had two versions of this grant, first as a demonstration site and now as an intensive site. This project is intended to test the ways by which engaged student learning has an impact on student health, in particular mental health and alcohol use, and on civic engagement. The key form of engaged learning in the demonstration phase of this project was service learning. Although there were other facets of this project, a central piece of it took place in the FYP, where, initially Director of Community Based Learning Ron Flores and PCA Associate Prof. Rebecca Daniels and later Ron and Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs Liz Regosin taught a course that centered around service learning and reflective writing on the work that students did in the community. Students in this course, as well as a comparison group, have completed a number of surveys to give us a sense of the impact of the course on their development. Our work, like the national project, demonstrated mixed results, particularly in relation to mental health and alcohol use. It had, though, a number of impacts worth considering further. It suggests that students may move backward in relation to some measures of civic engagement initially, but that they then move forward and stay ahead of many of their peers in relation to self-confidence, listening ability, empathy, and understanding of social justice. In other words, they are better primed to achieve a number of our institutional aims and objectives after this experience.

There remain questions: 1) Is there something about Ron, Rebecca, and Liz that led to these outcomes? 2) Would this result occur with students not initially interested in service learning? 3) Do other forms of engaged learning, whether community activism, classrooms where students have great voice, or classrooms where students complete

reflective learning journals have similar positive outcomes? This last question forms the basis of the intensive site project that focuses on the FYP broadly. I understand, as does Associate Dean of the First-Year Cathy Crosby-Currie, that we applied for and were awarded this grant with less than optimal conversation with FYP faculty, but I think that Cathy has put a process in place so that this can be a valuable opportunity, one that can tell us much about how pedagogy in the first year helps us to meet our aims and objectives. Of course, we also need to understand how to maintain whatever gains students make. I think the Middle States visiting team was correct in suggesting that we might expand our commitment to Service Learning. Much evidence indicates that when service takes place in the context of courses that encourage reflection on social structures and public policy, students develop more sophisticated understandings of society, and that service leads not simply to more service, but also to broader reflection on social issues and greater political engagement. Ron and Liz have just worked with the Development Office to write a Vista application that would allow us to continue to develop service learning connections with literacy programs and with health programs. With a VISTA member, we can further build community-based learning in ways that both benefit the local community and that have benefit our students, benefits that we increasingly understand in ways that will help us to think about the best ways to build the program so that gains in self-confidence, listening, empathy, and thinking about social justice can be sustained and expanded.

3) [Sophomore year](#) – Last year the Teagle Foundation awarded a grant to a consortium of colleges that includes SLU to address the question How do we make the sophomore year more successful? Associate Dean of Academic Advising Bob Thacker has been working on making the sophomore year a year in which our students move forward, rather than backward. As Bob puts it in a white paper that has been circulated some in draft form and will soon posted for all to read, “it is not surprising that the sophomore year is a time of confusion, questioning, and some exploration. In keeping with this, at St. Lawrence sophomores come into Academic Advising on their own at a far greater rate than members of any other class, and the questions they bring are usually more philosophical than functional. Because, like most liberal arts colleges, we require sophomores to declare a major by the end of March during the spring semester, some portion of this inquiry is major related, yet much of it is not....” The work that Bob is doing asks us to explore with sophomores who they want to be and what they want to do through enhanced advising and discussion that focuses on reflecting on their goals, talking to other students about their goals, and thinking about how these broader goals fit with their educational plans. To this end, six faculty members, including me, will be offering a number of .5 unit sophomore seminars in the fall. The seminars will “will be characterized by two features: first, they will focus on questions of personal values and direction and, second, they will involve student responding to course materials in ways that encourage them to examine their own direction and to ask where their education is taking them. In addition, these seminars will be small by design and will also serve as a deft way to further explain the disciplinary practices at hand. That is, these seminars might well be used as spaces to recruit majors since, most likely, students will take sophomore seminars in departments and programs which they are considering as possible majors.” Additionally, Bob proposes developing a cadre of advisers who are trained to work with sophomores. This initiative can lead to both better advising and a more evenly distributed advising load.

4) In June, the Maurer Family Foundation committed to a generous gift of \$1.5 million over five years to establish an endowed chair in Rhetoric and Communication. In July, the Andrew R. Mellon Foundation awarded the university a five-year, \$250,000 start-up grant to cover the period until the Maurer endowment is fully funded, as well as to provide additional programming funds. These recent funding developments, when coupled with ongoing strategic planning by faculty working on related initiatives, enable the university to inaugurate the [Rhetoric and Communication Program](#) during the current academic year. You may remember that Kirk Fuoss was appointed to the Maurer Professorship and is directing this initiative. Thus far, he, in conjunction with Director of the Munn Center for Rhetoric and Communication Hillory Oakes and Director of Research Instruction Joan Larsen, and a larger advisory board, has put together three initiatives for this year.

One of these is expanded Peer Tutoring. The WORD Studio offers students one-on-one tutoring on assignments involving research and/or oral, written, or visual communication skills. The WORD Studio's new rehearsal space allows students to videotape and receive feedback on drafts of oral assignments. Students who serve as WORD Studio tutors undergo special training in PCA 225/ENG 229: Peer Mentoring in Rhetoric Communication, which will help them develop the skills necessary to provide feedback on multiple modes of communication.

A second program is the development of Peer Education Modules. Faculty and staff associated with the Rhetoric and Communication Program are working with students to prepare peer education modules on a variety of topics related to research and communication. A list of topics will be available at the end of the semester so that you might consider building them into fall courses.

Finally, the RCP is planning Faculty Development Workshops Targeting a Specific Sophomore/Junior-Level Course in a major. Building a program that develops skill across four years requires work in the majors. As a quick glance at the learning goals identified last year illustrates, this is reflected in how departments define their goals. In the coming months and years, the Rhetoric and Communication Program will work with departments and programs offering a major to identify a single sophomore/junior-level course—ideally one required of all majors—in which discipline-specific research and communication skills are highlighted and work with those who teach these courses to consider how better to teach research and communication skills. This is being piloted with the Psychology Department this semester.

In addition to this work, we continue to develop grant proposals that we see as critical for moving the University in the directions that we need and want to go. For example, I've worked with large numbers of faculty on a couple of proposals that I think could be significant for enhancing the education of our students in ways that meet important learning outcomes. These include a proposal that will soon go to the Mellon Foundation to help us to build deeper connections between our various environmental programs and an HHMI Grant that would allow us to continue to build interdisciplinary connections within

the sciences and to bring students into this interdisciplinary conversation and work from the start, while also allowing us to offer more mentored student research opportunities.

We are writing a proposal that would help us to explore new ways of doing international education. As Richard Jenseth, chair of the Committee on International and Intercultural Education, summarized so well at our last faculty meeting, we are committed to international education, but we also need to manage the budget in a way that allows for growth without the kind of budget increases that we have experienced in past years and that provides opportunities to all of our students, regardless of their financial need. Associate Dean of International and Intercultural Programs Assis Malaquias, all of our program directors, and the CIIS committee are grappling with this issue. It is clear to me, though, that we have given them a huge charge, one that cannot be carried out without assistance. Thus, we will propose bringing consultants to campus to help us to think about new directions, as well as to consider how effectively the resources that we spend on programs now are being spent. Finally, we will ask for money to pilot some new programs, most likely programs that do not require the kind of infrastructure that we currently have for the programs that we operate. I also want to assure you that we have defined seeking funds to help support short-term travel in an equitable way as a fundraising goal.

Until we have a clearer sense of funding, we will continue to limit courses with short-term travel to those that can be supported by departmental funding or the few that can be supported with the very limited in the CIIS budget. CIIS is revising approval and notification processes to make them clearer and easy to follow. Until they are available on the web, please contact Assis if you are planning travel as a component of your courses very early in your planning process.

I want to insert an additional point about travel with students here -- With all courses segments or experiences involving overnight travel, it is important that you notify CIIS of your plans so that we know where our students when they are traveling with faculty. You will soon be able to enter this information easily on an on-line form.

Thus far, I have been discussing what I see as interesting initiatives that we have been able to move forward on because of external resources. Yet, I see a central component of my work as helping us to rethink how we define and meet our overall learning goals. In particular, I think we need to ask whether the distribution system effectively defines what we hope all systems will learn during their four years at St. Lawrence. The Academic Affairs Committee has begun to consider this question by first asking whether the aims and objectives that we have are the ones that we should have, or whether there are additional competencies, for example quantitative reasoning or visual literacy, that we might reasonably expect students all students to have achieved. I, and the committee, see the process of curricular change as a delicate balance between using the governance system, in particular Academic Affairs, while also drawing from expertise on campus, taking advantage of grant opportunities, and engaging the faculty as a whole in this conversation. Academic Affairs has added meetings to its calendar so that it may do both the work of approving courses, programs, etc, and explore documents about liberal

education and the curricula of our comparison schools. This work is leading to the articulation of learning outcomes that the committee believes should be central to a liberal arts education, and many of which we already define as central. The committee's goal this semester is to begin to deepen its understanding of what different learning outcomes might mean by talking with other groups and individuals on campus focused broadly on the general education needs of our students. These discussions will help us, along with the May College Planning Group, is to frame conversation at May College so that those who are able to attend will be able to join in and further this conversation. These conversations will then continue with the entire faculty next year. Once we have a sense of our overall goals, we will begin to think about different models for addressing those goals.

In this context, I want to discuss one additional grant proposal on which we are working currently. The Teagle Foundation recently contacted a number of institutions about a project titled [Systematic Improvement in Student Learning](#). We submitted a pre-proposal for this project, and we were among the 21 schools, out of 45 applicants, invited to write a full proposal. This proposal, whether ultimately funded by Teagle or not, is indicative of the direction that we need to take with planning and assessing student learning. In our pre-proposal, we indicate that we will focus this project on our diversity requirement, a requirement that we think is interesting for a few reasons: 1) we believe that we want to maintain it, but have a sense that it needs more precise definition; 2) we require more than one course now, and could envision using this 2 course sequence in a developmental way; 3) there is evidence that thinking about diversity and overall cognitive development are related. This allows us to ask two questions: 1) Are there ways of teaching about diversity that are particularly effective for fostering cognitive development and 2) should we sequence the requirements for diversity so that students take courses that take advantage of the cognitive development that occurs over the time that students are in college? We plan to put this proposal, as well as a number of other documents connected to my discussion today, on the AA website. I will also send a letter out tomorrow to invite those of you are interested in this work to come either or both of two discussions that we will hold this week and next to help us to better define the questions and approaches that we will outline in our full proposal.

In addition to the important work that you do in your classrooms and department, those who are part of Dean's Staff, and the Academic Affairs Committee, are working to strengthen programs and build new possibilities. I have not talked about all that is happening today, and in fact thus far, I've skipped some entire programs, including the library and IT. As Tech Fest demonstrated, the possibilities for using IT to enhance teaching and learning continue to develop. To help students to better use technology, Sondra has developed a peer tutoring program that is now up and running. The library continues to change as resources are more electronic, and as the possibly means of saving work and accessing it become more and more sophisticated. This is an area where I hope we do increased faculty development in the next year, because I think resources are changing at a rate that few of us have kept up with. In general, I find the conversations that I have with both University Librarian Bart Harloe and Science Librarian Eric Williams-Bergen fascinating. I encourage you to ask them what's new regularly, and I

have encouraged them to do workshops showing you how the library is changing, and what that means for teaching and learning, regularly.

Overall, there is clearly much going on in Academic Affairs. As I said earlier, one of my goals during the time that I am the Dean is to be sure that as we write grants and pursue new initiatives, we do it in a way that invites participation and that allows us to both initiate new programs that will be supportable in the future and respond to needs that already exist. To this end, I hope to speak to and with the faculty as a whole once or twice per year. In addition to asking questions of Dean's Staff members who are present today, I also invite you to look at the Academic Dean's website where I will post the comments that I have made today. Links to documents that might be of interest will be provided in the on-line version.