ADVANCEMENT SECTION

REPORT OF A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT

TO

Northland Community & Technical College
Thief River Falls, Minnesota
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FOR

The Higher Learning Commission
A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

EVALUATION TEAM

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I. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Northland Community and Technical College is a member of the Minnesota State College and Universities system, which includes 25 two-year colleges and seven four-year state universities. The system, created in 1991 and began operations in 1995, is governed by a 15-member Board of Trustees. The Board appoints the System Chancellor and presidents of the 32 colleges and universities. The College has two main campuses, almost equal in student headcount, that are approximately 50 miles apart. The distance presents challenges relative to organizational structure, fiscal responsibilities, and student demands for services. During the visit, the team observed that the system leadership, college administrators, and teaching faculty were committed to fulfilling the College’s mission. It was noted that the College has experienced major reductions in state funding over the past two budget cycles, yet found ways to maintain academic program quality and upgrade student learning facilities.

II. CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM

A. Community Advisory Boards

There are two community advisory boards for the College: East Grand Forks and Thief River Falls. The advisory boards are very involved with strategic planning and have the best interest of the College as the primary deliverer of academic programs and economic and workforce development opportunities. Most members attest to contributing financial resources to local campaign drives for scholarships or the like. There appears to be a general lack of communication between the board members at the respective campuses, different meeting schedules, and some ambiguity as to their role or goals. The College would be strengthened by having the community advisory board members from each campus meet jointly at various times throughout the year with a common agenda and annual goals. In addition, it may be beneficial to develop a written charge, including membership composition, for the community advisory boards.

B. Realignment of Academic Organization

In order to support the College’s ongoing commitment to create “One College: One Culture,” the team encourages the development of a uniform academic organization whereby departmental leaders have the same designation and the same compensatory provisions for administrative responsibilities. One helpful resource may be by James Martin and James E. Samuels, Merging Colleges for Mutual Growth: A New Strategy for Academic Managers, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, which provides a substantial list of other institutions which have experienced mergers and may provide some organizational strategies. The team believes that developing a shared structure for academic oversight will support the achievements to date in melding faculty from two different cultures into an effective team with shared values.
C. Financial Ratios

The Commission asked the team to give specific attention to the College’s low financial ratios and to report measures taken to improve these metrics. The MnSCU System assures that all colleges and universities must operate with a balanced budget. The Composite Score Ranges provided by the Commission for public institutions were reviewed and discussed with the College’s Interim Financial Director as well as the MSCU Associate Vice Chancellor, Financial Reporting. After a careful review of all documents including the last three years of financial audits for the system, the Supplement to the Annual Financial Report for the year ended June 30, 2009, and the College’s current balance sheet, it is evident that the College continues to run in the black and has a positive reserve account. A review of the Composite Index scores for the College showed that it was in the zone for 2006, above the zone for 2007, in the zone for 2008, and significantly above the zone in 2009 (2.48). The composite score ranges provided by the Commission will vary from year to year as the College receives or does not receive large capital appropriations. Yet due to a strong strategic plan, coupled with an integrated planning and budgeting processes both within the MSCU system and the College, the college will continue to operate with the necessary resources to fulfill its mission. Record enrollments for FY 2010 also added to the positive financial position of the College. Conservative estimates of enrollment figures for FY 2011 will keep the budget balanced. However, the team advises the College to move quickly yet appropriately with its search for a qualified chief financial officer who will oversee the entire process.

D. Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

The team understands the priority that the College faculty and academic administrators have placed on implementing and measuring program-level learning outcomes to help build shared commitment among faculty on campuses with different cultures prior to the merger. The team also understands that the employment of a new president and subsequent reorganization and personnel changes, as well as the development and implementation of a new strategic plan has impeded progress in implementing the assessment program. However, the team believes the College must now give priority to executing full implementation of the program by appointing cross-departmental faculty teams to develop strategies for measuring Institutional Learner Outcomes consistently across all departments/divisions and for measuring course-level learning outcomes consistently across multiple sections of the same course. Attention should be given as well to clarifying the relationships among course, program, and institutional learning goals. Full implementation of the assessment program to provide core feedback regarding student learning is essential to effective planning and budgeting.

Undoubtedly, the recent addition of a Director of Institutional Research will facilitate the timely feedback to faculty of enrollment, graduation, transfer, and placement data so that these data can be included in annual assessment reports and inform curricular and instructional improvements on an annual basis. The Institutional Research Office could also be the agent for producing a consolidated annual assessment report for the college, which does not appear to currently exist.
One methodology that faculty may consider to implement for consistent assessment of course-level outcomes is to define a few key/core outcomes measures for formative feedback during the progress of a course and for summative feedback at the end of a course and imbed these into certain assignments, the mid-term exam, and the final exam. Faculty could then retain the freedom to develop their own individual assessment instruments, while still committing to incorporating these shared measures and to forwarding results to a central collection point so that composite results can be evaluated. Perhaps the program chair for course-level shared measures and the Director of Institutional Research for institutionally shared measures could assume the responsibility here. Another variation could be to establish a cross-departmental faculty taskforce to review and assess the Institutional Learner Outcomes each semester, thus further ensuring consensus about the efficacy of learning across all programs. Not all Institutional Learner Outcomes have to be assessed each semester; instead faculty can establish a rotation system to ensure periodic assessment of all identified outcomes, thus reducing the burden but still ensuring timely feedback.


The team also recommends that the institution develop a documented system for sharing assessment results with all college constituencies, including advisory committee members, students, and the community. This could easily be accomplished by establishing special log-ins to the Desire2Learn systems, such as that provided to the team members or by creating an Academic Assessment section for the web-site that would provide summaries of key results to the public at large. When the Academic Assessment program is fully implemented, the College needs to establish a methodology for periodically assessing the program itself to ensure that it continues to serve the needs of students and of the institution.

E. Diversity: Faculty & Staff

The College continues to struggle with the challenge of improving its racial/ethnic diversity in the senior administrative and faculty ranks. The team, upon reflection, acknowledges and recognizes several efforts made by the College to increase the diversity of its applicant pools. While the efforts are present, the results are less than what the College wants to see. With regard to recruitment of faculty of color, the College is encouraged to examine the minority faculty hiring initiative developed by Metropolitan Community College District (Kansas City, MO). This initiative seeks early identification of potential faculty of color and strives to place them in the organization with carefully defined mentor and support to improve the likelihood of their success. The team noted a significant number of students of color, especially in student leadership positions on the East Grand Forks Campus and athletic team rosters on the Thief River Falls Campus, but the absence of notable faculty and staff of color on either campus. The team was only able to interact with two staff of color
during the entire visit. The team was disappointed in hearing the standard excuses for failure to act: budgetary concerns, location of campuses, union contract, competition with business and industry, etc. The team recommends that the College work prescriptively with the MSCU system on this issue; there are existing resources that could assist the College at the System level or within the University of Minnesota system, should the College feel inclined to take action.

F. Supplemental Revenue Sources

Just as many other colleges across the nation are facing financial challenges, Northland is as well. In light of diminishing state revenues, the team encourages the college to intensify its pursuit of external funding through its Foundation and through the aggressive pursuit of grant funding as it has done recently with the aviation grant and its application for a TRIO Student Support Services grant.

The Foundation and campus administrators and faculty might explore potential corporate partnerships which could result in donations of equipment, funding for industry-targeted scholarships. Several good models exist including achievements of The Oklahoma State University Institute of Technology, http://www.osuit.edu/, and the Johnson County Community College Foundation, http://www.jccf.org, which have garnered substantial support from business and industry.

Foundation staff might also develop a plan for contacting College alumni not only to support annual giving, but also corporate giving. Former students who have achieved success in their fields of study can be valuable resources for equipment and financial donations. Another source of support is the College’s community advisory boards.

In addition to pursuing the new Recovery Act funds, which provide substantial new resources for community colleges, the College might consider applying for a Title III Strengthening Institutions grant to help build its libraries and targeted academic or student support programs. Another good resource is the TRIO Education Opportunity grant program, which can provide outreach personnel to help the College reach its diversity goals.

G. Consolidation of Committees

The Shared Governance Council, Assessment and Program Review Committee, Academic Affairs and Standards Council, and the Retention Committee are all standing committees at the College. The composition of the committees is made up of a cross-section of faculty and staff which is a good practice for the College. There appears to be an overlap in areas of program assessment, student assessment, and program viability, to name a few. While it is good that more than one committee is looking at some of these issues, the overall effect of the committees may be greater if there is clear communication among the groups as well as a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each. It may be worthwhile to look at the committee structures and charges and re-align them to gain some better efficiency of time and effort.
III. RECOGNITION OF SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PROGRESS, AND/OR PRACTICES

A. Physical Facilities

The college is to be commended for its commitment to ensuring physical facilities that support student learning. The recent renovation of the entrances to the East Grand Forks and Thief River Falls campuses set the stage with inviting and eye-catching decors that make students feel valued and which impart an atmosphere of quality and student-centeredness that support the institution’s mission. The new, open student commons areas and many hallways are equipped with comfortable furniture, numerous computer stations, and wireless connectivity of which students are taking full advantage. Science, computer, nursing, automotive, and other labs are well-equipped with current technology. Lecture classes are attractive, well-lit, and functional. The aviation program at the Thief River Falls airport is equally impressive with care and attention given to its entry, consolidated student support offices, and functional classrooms. The custodial staff does an outstanding job of maintaining both the facilities and the grounds.

B. Strategic Planning Process

The strategic planning process was done extremely well and is to be commended. The plan appears to be a living document rather than something to be placed on a shelf until the next planning session. The processes that lead to the existing plan were clearly a culmination of the effort of both the internal and external communities which points to a truly cross-functional approach. The individuals that the visit team talked to were happy with the process and took ownership of what they had developed. The College Advisory Board participated in the environmental scanning part of the process and also took ownership of the resulting document. The appreciative inquiry process, which provides a focused way of planning for the future, was used as the guiding principle throughout the exercise. The NCTC plan is clearly in alignment with the MnSCU System plan and has the support of the system president. Finally, the College’s plan is well supported by the departmental plans across the institution. Each plan, whether it is facility, technology, academic, etc., is linked to some part of the College plan.

C. Collaborating

The college has initiated an effective strategy for identifying, placing on alert, and assisting low-producing programs by appointing a cross-departmental taskforce. Representation from marketing, student services, faculty, IT web support, and community representatives to develop revitalization plans ensures a broad-based commitment to improvement and builds alliances among college departments and between the college and business/industry representatives who have a vested interest in the programs. Recent increases in enrollment in the paramedic program and in aviation technology and the procurement of the new grant that expands the aviation program to include un-manned aircraft maintenance provide clear evidence of how beneficial this cross-functional strategy can be.