



The President's Monthly Perspective

September 2006

After almost two months as President of Unity College, I'm beginning to understand that space and time have a new and different meaning. So much happens during the course of a day. A day seems like a week. A week is like a month. A month is like a year. Or something like that. Despite such time stretching, you never fully accomplish everything you intend. You know you have to be at a certain place at a certain time. What becomes increasingly crucial is your ability to integrate your agenda with the flow of events.

What I've also come to realize is that events move so quickly that I don't get a chance to speak to as many people as I'd like. Despite my best efforts to get out and about (perhaps the single most enjoyable aspect of the job), I haven't connected to as many people and constituencies as I would like to. It's a priority for me to consult widely, to build personal relationships, and to communicate well.

Hence with this essay, I initiate a (mainly) monthly report. The format and content will be different as each month demands. Some of the essays will be in the form of reports. There will be some months when I'll deliberate on a knotty Unity College problem, or some controversial issue in higher education, or some environmental issue. In each case, the essay will be a way to both communicate to you what I'm thinking about and a way to invite your comments, critiques, and best wisdom. I hope that my presidency becomes a collaborative learning opportunity for Unity College.

This month I'd like to tell you what I've been up to and what I'm thinking about. My overall goal has been to learn as much as I can about the college, while still moving forward with everyday business, building external relationships, and launching some new initiatives as identified in the strategic plan. I've been gathering as much information and advice as I can. Based on what I've learned thus far, here's my agenda for the next month. I'll try my best to be comprehensive; although I'm sure I'll forget some things!

The Provost Search

The President's Council will meet later today to consider various aspects of a job description for a Unity College Provost. We will also discuss the best way to proceed with the search, including committee representation, interview process, recruitment, etc. With the next two weeks, we will have a search committee, a protocol, and all aspects of the process should be in place. This is a crucial position for the college (as you all very well know) and I will do all that I can to make the process inclusive, open, and fair.

Enrollment Management and Marketing

I am always thinking about this! There are so many marketing issues that are crucial to the success of the college, including discount rate and tuition, website and publications (see below), academic programs, scholarships, partnerships, etc. I don't believe that all of these variables can be reduced to marketing, but I know that our ability to promote the college is crucial to our success. Hence I am chairing the Enrollment Management Group and I am directly involved with the Marketing Committee. I have asked Alisa Gray to initiate two interrelated studies that will provide us with very helpful data. She is in the early stages of outlining a Capacity Study that assesses the relationship between enrollment size and cost. This study will inform among other issues a consideration of the appropriate size for Unity College. How can we make such a determination? How does capacity impact the strategic plan and vice versa? We need much more data so as to be fully informed. Quite frankly, at this point we don't know how many students represent the optimal number, what kind of support we would need for them, and what the various economies of scale are. Second, Alisa will continue to research various pricing phenomena so we are more informed as to the relationship between discount rate, tuition, and the economy.

Additionally, the President's Council will initiate a discussion as to the merits and/or necessity for a Vice President for Enrollment Management and Marketing. We will discuss what the job might entail and how we would reorganize some of our administrative functions in relationship to such a position. This, too, will be a widely deliberative process. I expect each member of the President's Council to consult with his or her constituency. My predisposition is that this position can make a big difference for the future of Unity College. Nevertheless, I am open-minded about it and seek wider counsel.

Publications and Website Management

Does it go without saying that we want Unity College to have a great website? I am convinced (and I hope you are too) that Unity College is a wonderful college with great heart, fine faculty, and motivated students. I am equally convinced (and I hope you are too) that not nearly enough people know about the school. All of our marketing consultations clearly indicate that bolstering the web and our publications is the single best way we can promote the college. Doing so is one of the best investment decisions we can make.

Hence I have been closely involved in this. The first tiers of the new website will be live by Monday morning. We are negotiating with several vendors (including STAMATS) to produce the copy and artwork for another thousand pages. Everyone has been very patient with this process. It is incredibly time consuming. But we are moving forward.

I have asked the Marketing Committee to develop a website development plan that disseminates responsibility and accountability for moving the process forward. I have the first draft of the plan and once I've gone over it we'll make it public. It's crucial that we

do this the right way and we respect the various templates, protocols, and procedures. In the long run, it will make for the best possible website and it will save us time, work, and money.

I am working with the President's Council to consider the merits of a new position for Director of Publications, which will include some website work, as well as oversight of all of Unity College's publications. This position at Unity College is long overdue and would go a long way to presenting the best possible face of the college to the outside world. It will also streamline and economize a great deal of work that has been handled by committees. I am highly predisposed to launching a search for this position and I am prepared to do so within a month, after proper consultations have been made.

Oh yes, I also intend to have a President's webpage with a monthly essay (not this one) on how an environmental studies education generates character.

I encourage all of you to think of imaginative ways that you can tell your story on the web. It will make a big difference in promoting the visibility of Unity College. I hope you eventually see me as a relentless pest in this regard!

The Unity College Sustainability Initiative

I am convinced that the idea of sustainability is the single most important direction for the future of environmental studies. Unity College is well situated to contribute to this effort.

I have completed the first draft of a memo that describes a Unity College Sustainability Initiative. This will include two committees, one to deal with infrastructure and master planning and a second to deal with academic programs. It also outlines the purpose and function of a forthcoming "sustainability planning charrette." I've given the draft to several faculty and students, mainly the folks who have been most recently involved in these efforts. Once I get their comments I will make it public. Look for it next week.

It is absolutely essential that this initiative entails the widest possible deliberation and consultation. It is crucial that our objectives are linked to cost accounting and strategic planning. Please understand that I strongly believe that the faculty is the best body to consider the academic programs and I will encourage them to work through our curriculum accordingly. My role (hopefully) is to inspire us to proceed, to link our efforts to a regional and national agenda, and to suggest ways of doing so. However, the faculty are the experts as to how to proceed academically. Indeed, academic renewal is complex and multi-faceted, and sustainability studies (or whatever we wish to call it) are merely one aspect of an exciting deliberative process. Nevertheless, I am convinced that this is a terrific opportunity for Unity to exert national academic leadership and I will do whatever I can to make my case.

Strategic Planning and Cost Accounting

I am intrigued by and respectful of both the approved and still unapproved governance documents. I still need more time to fully study and understand them and I have the feeling that perhaps we all do! My role is to insure participatory process and inclusive decision-making while still having the flexibility to proceed with important initiatives. The higher education environment is highly competitive and opportunistic. The President should be free enough to move forward with new initiatives while still adhering to participatory governance and strategic planning. As a team, we will get better at this as the months proceed. I will also confer with the Board to establish a timely protocol for implementing the as yet un-ratified aspects of the governance documents.

In the meantime, I feel the best way to insure accountability is to fully respect the goals and outlines of the strategic plan. This will also help us move forward with more inclusive budgeting processes. Over the next month I will launch a process by which I meet with every department on campus to go over their role in the strategic plan. We will generate a 3-5 year list of funding priorities, linked to the long-range objectives of the college. I will take an active and visible role in this process. I will attend to the details, timelines, and procedures for this process, and propose an approach accordingly.

Performance Objective

The faculty did an excellent job last year developing a protocol for promotion and evaluation. It's crucial that we have a similarly thorough process for all administrators. Through consultation with the President's Council and Human Resources I will propose a performance evaluation process for all senior administrators (including myself), and ask them to do the same for their staff. My goal is to create a process that is simultaneously efficient and thorough, and links skills, talents, and professional aspirations of the individual, but filtered through the specific functions and tasks of his or her position.

Board Relationships and Fundraising

One night a week I take a road trip and I visit with a board member. I've undertaken what is essentially a grounded theory project in which I ask each board member eight questions. Each interview takes approximately two or three hours. I have thoroughly enjoyed both the interview process and the one on one time. When I'm finished Unity College will have an excellent profile of its board.

I am also asking each board member to consider setting up a reception for me where he or she can introduce me to prospective philanthropists or other "movers and shakers."

Here are the questions:

Why are you on the board?

Please tell me about your background, your interests, and the environmental issues that you most care about.

What are your aspirations for Unity College?

What is your view of the concept "sustainability"? How do you think that Unity College can play a leadership role in promoting sustainability?

What do you think are some of the most important elements of an environmental studies undergraduate education?

Do you think that environmental learning builds character and virtue? If so, what specific virtues?

Tell me about your contacts, connections, networks. Which of these people may be future donors, board members, or special friends of the college?

What specific expertise do you bring to the board and how do you feel that you can best contribute?

Other News of Note

I'm starting to run out of steam. I think I've told you about most of the highlights of the first six weeks, but I'm sure there is something important I've forgotten.

I intend to reconvene the Diversity Committee. On September 22nd, Neil Bonam, the director of the new State Office for Multicultural Affairs will be coming to campus to meet with Libby Seigars and myself. We hope to discuss linking diversity initiative to service learning.

I intend to reconvene the Awards Committee for the purposes of strategically thinking through the speakers we wish to bring to campus, the awards we wish to grant, and other artifacts of celebration.

On September 13th, Tedd Benson and Hilary Harris of *Bensonwood Homes* <http://www.bensonwood.com> will be on campus to help us assess a range of master planning and building options. Tedd is an old friend and this consultation is a wonderful courtesy. We will host a fireside chat in the library. Check the calendar for details.

In the next monthly report, I'll provide an update for all of these processes, and we'll talk some about the inauguration.

Once again, I'd like to thank all board members, staff, faculty and students for being so welcoming. I am very grateful to you for all the fine work you've done and for your extraordinary commitment to the college.

Mitchell Thomashow
President, Unity College