

**State of the College of Letters and Science: Introduction to College Planning
by Dean John Koker**

*delivered at the COLS all-college meeting
Thursday, April 2, 2009 at 3:30 p.m. in the Reeve Union Theatre*

Welcome to the Spring 2009 COLS Faculty/Staff meeting. Thanks to the COLS Faculty Committee and Greg Kleinheinz for helping me organize this meeting.

Many of you may have come today to learn more about the consequences of our budget situation and the direct affect it will have on the College. I will talk about the budget, and there will be time for questions and open discussion, but the main purpose of this meeting is to begin a planning process for the College. The planning I propose is not motivated by the current financial climate, but the climate does make it timely. This is something that I have wanted to do for some time, as I prefer that decisions I make be guided by College priorities. During tough budget times, the decisions I make become tougher, and thus planning becomes crucial.

As I was preparing for today I was thinking about one of my favorite things to do with my Dad when I was a kid – go to the “dump.” I would be in the backyard playing and it didn’t matter if I was the go-ahead run leading off of a make-shift second base or if I was one of the two left on my “red-rover red-rover” team. Once my dad called, “j’wannna go to the dump, J” I’d run to the driveway. I’d climb into the front seat of his old, rusty Rambler: the backseat and the trunk packed full.

I am not sure why I liked going to the dump. Maybe it was the trip home during which he’d always ask, “Are you thirsty?” The correct answer was yes, and thus a stop at a local tavern – for me that meant orange pop and coins for the pinball machine.

However, I really liked the dump. It was intriguing to travel the gravel paths of this strange, alien looking world: a place filled with odd sounds, interesting smells and a lot of stuff that no one wanted anymore.

My dad never asked me to participate in the decision about what was taken to the dump. I know a lot of it was the household trash that couldn’t be incinerated in our backyard barrel burner – cans, bottles, aerosol cans (not a lot of recycling). But one day I realized there were other things “dumped” – things he decided alone that we didn’t need...

While we are going through a time of great uncertainty in terms of state funding and the national and global economy, the College of Letters and Science here at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh is committed to moving priorities forward, capitalizing on opportunities, and building upon successes of the past. There is no doubt that the financial constraints of the present climate make new initiatives difficult. However, we must be able to protect and invest in priorities that the College has identified as key to its vision and purpose. The problem: I am not sure that our vision is clear. By identifying and clearly stating priorities, goals and objectives now, we will be positioned to efficiently take advantage of opportunities as we move forward.

As the most varied College at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh with more than 325 faculty and staff, we offer courses in 35 different majors as well as number of emphases, minors and graduate programs. We are responsible for almost all of the courses in general education. As we begin a planning process, we must recognize that most faculty and staff identify strongly with their department, program or unit and that students are engaged more in the academic work of their major. The planning process I am proposing will build on the work of the individual units across the College to develop effective leadership and intentional collaboration among faculty and staff to achieve specific goals and objectives that are consistent with the University goals, the important work of departments and non-departmental programs and the new University Student Learning Outcomes that support a Liberal Arts Education.

For the most part, units and individuals across the College are working towards the same basic goals. This is not as apparent as it should be. The planning process I propose will provide the opportunity for College members to have intensive, structured time to foster ideas, create goals, formulate objectives and devise plans to guide the College in its work and to improve student learning.

As we begin to plan, we need to examine our strengths and the prior work that has been done to develop priorities. I am not suggesting planning because we are a College in disarray, but because it has the potential to make us stronger.

A major strength is our personnel. I continue to be impressed by the dedication of our faculty and staff to teaching and curriculum development and by the amount of collaborative work done with students. In addition, the quality and quantity of the professional, creative, and scholarly work of our faculty and staff are remarkable. Enhancing the connection between scholarly and creative work and effective teaching, College faculty and staff continue to be productive in their respective areas of specialization, publishing over 150 journal articles, books and book chapters, presenting over 200 papers at professional conferences, and exhibiting their artwork and performing musically and theatrically both regionally and nationally this past year.

We continue to build. As of today we have hired 22 new tenure-track faculty (and will perhaps hire four more). Including the past two years, we have hired 61 new tenure-track faculty and a number of new academic and classified staff. When interviewing these candidates I often remark that if this weren't a good place with excellent colleagues, I would not have spent the past 18 years here.

The College continues to emphasize the significance of and to be successful in student/faculty collaborative research, supporting student travel for research presentations, highlighting such collaboration in a public forum on campus, and engaging students through special grant funded projects. The value of discovering and sharing new knowledge is being actively promoted through learning and engagement outside the classroom.

Last year the College was able to send 20 students to regional and national conferences for the purpose of highlighting their research results to an audience of professionals. Papers and posters were presented from students of varying disciplines across the College. Several students presented collaborative research at the Fifth Annual UW System Research Day in Madison.

The College should remain committed to supporting such research opportunities for the invaluable personal growth and experience they provide our faculty, staff and students. Seeking and providing funding as well as offering a spotlight will hopefully result in continued collaborative growth. Unquestionably, these experiences are invaluable; building confidence in ways that cannot be duplicated in the classroom.

The College continues to work to highlight the value of a liberal arts education by weaving the message in our curriculum. Emphasizing interdisciplinary connections, faculty and staff have been intentional in the classroom in promoting the mission and significance of the liberal arts. Departments across the College responded to evolving environmental and international issues by developing educational programming, both here and abroad, to prepare students to live responsibly and to contribute to the ever-changing global society in which they live. The College has also fully embraced and promotes the mission and outcomes of the Liberal Education Reform Team (LERT), that a “liberal education is a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a strong sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement that usually includes a general education curriculum along with more in-depth study in at least one field or area of concentration.” Continuing relationships with organizations such as health care agencies, correctional institutions, tribal colleges, and performing arts centers have helped to extend the liberal arts mission of the College beyond our campus.

The College is strong and I could continue to highlight strengths. However, we also have a number of challenges and opportunities that warrant a planning process. One of the biggest challenges in the near future is the current financial situation.

Last fall I addressed the College noting that 2008-2009 was the third consecutive year that there were no budget cuts. I went on to explain that the College continues to struggle with deep cuts made in years prior to 2006 – cuts that have never been restored. In spite of this, the College has hired new faculty and academic staff at competitive salaries, matched or increased salaries of staff with competing offers and covered raises for promotion and equity raises for faculty and academic staff. We have been able to fund some new initiatives and special one-time projects and events. In addition, the College has been committed to delivering the same number of seats in critical gateway courses that we have in years past and has continued to fund travel, adding an international and service component to our travel policy.

This is what I said last fall. As we all know, things are a bit different today than they were in August 2008.

The UW System is facing the largest budget cuts for the 2009-2011 biennium than it has in recent years – a total of \$179 million for the UW System. I will try to explain what this means for the College.

Based on the UW Oshkosh “rainy day fund” – a fund that that many in COLS have helped build – and the proposed UW System tuition increase, the College has been asked to prepare three budgets scenarios: 1.9%, 2.5% and 3.8% cuts, with the 2.5% cut being the most

likely. For the College a 2.5% cut is approximately \$500,000 of our \$19.7 million 2008-09 budget.

If the College offers the same number of course offerings (as I am committed to doing) and funds department S&E budgets at the same level as last year, we are about \$34,000 in the red. We have a bit of a challenge.

Despite these staggering numbers, I believe the College can get by for one year with a 2.5% base budget cut. The leadership of the College including chairs, program Directors and my staff have been working on possible measures for meeting expenses in the coming years. These possibilities include leaving some vacant positions unfilled, scaling back on faculty recruitment, minimizing computer and equipment purchases, depending on carry over funds from this year, utilizing reserve funds and reviewing curricular programs and courses that are “under enrolled.”

I feel fairly confident, that the College can operate fairly close to “business as usual” with a 2.5% reduction for the 2009-2010 academic year. I am not so confident this will be the case for 2010-2011. This is one reason why planning now is crucial. Working to develop a clear set of goals and priorities will allow us to maintain our core mission and values while we decide what can be put on hold until the financial situation improves.

While the budget news is disheartening, something I learned recently is even more distressing. Of new students entering in Fall 2008, 19.4% (351 of 1813) finished the Fall 2008 semester with a GPA below 2.0 in their first semester in college. The number increases to 58.5% (31 of 53) for African American Students.

From 2003-2007 the average was about 12%. I give you this statistic since the academic profile of incoming students (including high school rank, high school GPA and ACT scores) has remained relatively unchanged for the past 5 years.

As the incoming student almost entirely enrolls in courses offered by COLS, this is a huge issue that I am asking you to address as part of a formal College planning process. A first semester GPA below 2.0 is an indicator of whether or not a student will return to college the following semester or year.

Some students will fail. But many who shouldn't do. We can bellyache and say, “it's the student's job to learn” or “they're not prepared to do college work.” Or we can spend some time addressing this issue and plan ways to address it. It doesn't matter how good the financial situation gets if we can't attract and retain students.

I am a first generation college student and I won't tell you my first semester GPA. But I will tell you that after struggling a bit I did well. However, I benefitted from a faculty member who nurtured and cared about me. We need to think about ways to engage students. While some of our students come across as ones who don't care much about their own success, most of our students do care and want to succeed. They just don't know how. We need to challenge and nurture students and we need to find ways to set up situations to help them succeed without compromising quality and rigor or practicing grade inflation.

While planning, let's throw all the issues on the table – workload, class size, student preparation, admission standards. However, let's take some of the responsibility for poor student performance and figure out ways we can change that. We can also figure out how and if we as a College want to participate in a First Year Experience for students – one which helps acclimate students to higher education and helps them answer questions that many have. Questions such as, “Why am I here?” “Why am I willing to invest four years of my time (or more) and a great deal of money in seeking a college degree?” How do I want to be different at the end of my time in college?”

We need to help our students understand our goals for them. In addition to helping them reach their career goals we want our students to study broadly, to consider their place in a diverse democratic society and world community, to have a greater appreciation for the fine and performing arts, and to develop their ethical and moral sensibility. Students need to hear that it is our goal in COLS that all students develop the skills and knowledge to succeed professionally, to participate in communities and to enhance their whole-life experience.

We can learn from publications like the AAC&U's report *High-Impact Educational Practices* by George Kuh which “speaks directly to what is arguably our most important national challenge in higher education: helping America's extraordinarily diverse students reap the full benefits of their studies in college.” Kuh's report draws on new research and examines higher educational practices such as first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, service learning and undergraduate research. According to Carol Geary Schneider, president of AAC&U, “Kuh tells us what works. Now it is up to us to make use of this emerging evidence.” While the College has strong curriculum and programs, I hope we clearly articulate our commitment to providing a strong Liberal Education for our students. Let's discuss ways to move forward and implement and the work of LERT.

Part of our planning process should be a serious discussion of teaching and learning, noting that the discussion of teaching and student learning is not a policy discussion. Outcomes that are clearly articulated and understood by faculty, students and administrators can be used to enhance teaching and learning and assist us in the solving the problem of teaching.

We all juggle the demands of our professional and personal lives. In general, morale is low and the workload is high. College goals and priorities will aide us in setting expectations for faculty and staff, and will help us to determine the proper balance of activities for faculty and staff. These expectations may vary across the College, but all can support the College mission. In addition, our reward systems should reflect our College mission and priorities. For example, if the College Curriculum Modification Policy gets challenged for any reason we should be able to defend and support it based on clearly stated goals of the College. Planning will help us protect what is important to us.

Planning can help us identify and support professional development activities that support the work of faculty and staff around teaching and learning, professional, creative, and scholarly work, and university, professional and community service. I would value a thoughtful

discussion on implementing a College professional development program – around such topics as teaching, student learning, First Year Experience and other high impact practices, leadership, curriculum development – that complements University and UW System programs.

I suggest we spend some time thinking about technology. This is definitely an area where I will need your help. We should explore the appropriate use of technology including alternate course deliveries. Many of us feel that technology and current trends are transforming our traditional idea of higher education, and we are being asked to customize our delivery to the needs and schedule of the current student, whether it is for the resident student or the non-traditional student miles away. While supporting the College's commitment to excellence in teaching and learning, we should discuss opportunities and innovation in experiential pedagogies and technologies that enhance the teaching and learning process. The College needs a clear and direct statement about its vision in this area.

We need to also discuss topics such as program development – including programs that cut across the College and ones contained within departments – and our commitment to graduate education, the recent campus climate survey and issues surrounding diversity, and our current list of strategic actions that were developed in response to the University planning process several years ago (student/faculty research collaboration; international/ethnic studies, collaborative efforts with K-12 schools; Center for Aquatic Studies; and the Promotion of the Liberal Arts).

Beginning today and continuing through the 2009-10 academic year, the College of Letters and Science should discuss and identify key opportunities to strengthen our contributions to the University. These discussions should lead us to identify goals and initiatives that will define and guide the College in the work we do over the next several years, especially during this time of expanding expectations and waning resources. Our strategic plan can be a blueprint for the College to define in a significant way how we will respond and react to change. The goals and strategies outlined in the plan will guide the College leadership in its decision-making and resource allocation, and will establish a framework for departments to prioritize goals. The COLS Faculty Committee and I hope that the College faculty and staff will consider investing time in a planning process.

I have outlined some of my ideas, but my ideas are not necessarily my priorities. Rather, my priorities are the mission and goals that are shaped by the faculty, staff and students of the College. I look forward to the opportunity to lead the College in developing goals and achieving our objectives. I can't, and won't, do it alone.

I am **not** asking if you want to go to the “dump” with me. I don't think we need to go to the “dump.” However, if we do, I need your help to pack the car. Thank you.