

**State of the College Report**  
*New College of Florida*  
**Gordon E. Michalson, Jr., President**  
**September, 2008**

On the eve of its fiftieth anniversary, New College starts the academic year with full enrollment, an integrated planning process, and the imminent ground-breaking for a new academic building that promises to enhance the College's sense of intellectual community. Informing the entire range of campus activities is a pervasive sense of institutional purpose, driven by our explicitly student-centered approach to undergraduate education.

We have had another year of impressive student achievement, faculty productivity, and national recognition. The symbolic impact of graduating five Fulbright Scholars in 2008 – for a total of thirty Fulbrights over the past eight years – suggests a gratifying combination of academic excellence and international perspective. New College's prominent place in *Forbes* magazine's new approach to ranking the nation's best colleges and universities is noteworthy in part for the heavy emphasis that *Forbes* placed on actual student achievement and on student satisfaction with their professors. Indeed, in addition to their proven strengths as superb teachers, our faculty remain impressively productive in research, publication, and artistic activities, efforts recognized through such honors as a faculty Fulbright Fellowship and a Rome Prize.

These and numerous other forms of institutional recognition have one common feature – they are all indications of quality.

The challenge, of course, is to sustain and build on this quality. While we have a lot to celebrate, it has to be said that the wider setting for our planning efforts is problematic. It is by now clearly evident that the eddying effects of Florida's budgetary problems will consume a great deal of attention during the next two or three years. At the end of August, a top state economist indicated that the Governor and legislature will likely

face a \$3.5 billion shortfall for the 2009-10 fiscal year. Current estimates are that state revenues are unlikely to return to 2006-07 levels until 2010-11, constituting an unprecedented number of consecutive years of decline. In the absence of a more explicit planning process for all of higher education in Florida, these budgetary woes are likely to be compounded by political jockeying driven by independent sectors of self-interest rather than by a well-conceived comprehensive plan involving all sectors.

Given this uncertain and volatile climate, the College's clear sense of mission has perhaps never been so critical. *Our sense of mission is the best possible antidote to what could become an endless stream of distracting headlines generated by the state's budgetary woes.* Whatever difficulties may lie ahead, New College will do well so long as we remain focused on our central purpose. Our purpose is to provide the best possible liberal arts education to honors-quality students in a setting emphasizing active learning, close faculty mentoring, and the development of strong research skills and intellectual independence. New College's institutional vitality begins with our students and with student/faculty collaboration on serious matters of mutual interest. So long as we sustain a clear-headed awareness of this source of our vitality, New College will successfully weather the challenging period that lies ahead.

To this end, an excellent guide for our collective thinking is embedded in the title of our new strategic plan for the next decade: *Enhancing Student Learning*. This phrase implies no ambitions we cannot meet while it simultaneously reminds us of the reason the College is here. Although our overall goals for strategic enhancement may have to be tailored to the budgetary realities of the day, there is surely no reason to be confused about our direction.

Quite simply, our overall planning process, shaped in part by the upcoming process of reaffirmation of our accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, involves a self-conscious, integrated effort to enhance the New College educational experience. We continue to enhance connections between in-class and out-of-class learning through strengthened links between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. This

initiative includes the addition this year of two Associate Deans of Students who bring professional backgrounds relevant to our aspiration to educate the “whole” student and who will provide support that will reinforce our efforts to improve retention. Moreover, the motifs associated with our SACS-related Quality Enhancement Plan provide further guidance for enhancing student learning. The QEP will implement “Seminars in Critical Inquiry: An Introduction to Research Skills, Thinking, and Communicating at the College Level.” The faculty’s judgment is that the skills at issue here can always use further improvement within our student body, especially given the College’s thesis or senior project requirement. At the same time, our explicit concentration on these very skills – “research,” “thinking,” “communicating” – is a revealing reminder of what is most central to our style of undergraduate education.

The careful prioritizing required by a period of budgetary constraint is also the occasion for taking stock of gains recently made. An earlier planning process, triggered by the College’s sudden independence in 2001, resulted in a long list of recommended enhancements to the curriculum and to student life. These priorities reflected a range of strategic goals, including the continued internationalization of the curriculum and the enhancement of quantitative skills among our students. Progress to date on these desired enhancements includes:

- A new faculty position involving an African focus (Cultural Anthropology)
- A new faculty position in Developmental Economics (Latin American focus)
- A strengthening of offerings in East Asian Studies (two new faculty positions in Chinese Language and Culture)
- A new faculty position in Latin American History
- An additional instructional position in Spanish Language
- An additional faculty position in German Language and Literature
- An additional faculty position in Classics
- A new faculty position in Applied Mathematics
- A new faculty position in Computational Science

The creation of a Quantitative Resource Center with its own director, as  
a parallel to the successful Writing Resource Center  
A fourth faculty position in Sociology, with a quantitative emphasis  
A senior faculty position in Ecology  
An Associate Dean of Students for Residential Life  
An Associate Dean of Students for Student Support Services  
Support staff in Environmental Studies, Gender Studies, and academic  
computing  
Regular adjunct instruction in Theater and in Choral Music

Today's sobering budgetary climate surely jeopardizes additional progress in strengthening our core activities at the same rate as in recent years. While our new Academic Master Plan provides important guidance for the consideration of long-range goals, there remain fundamental concerns about the ways we finally arrive at curricular decisions and prioritize additional faculty lines. The inevitable slowing down of our current progress, created by a decline in revenue, perhaps provides an opportune moment to pause while we examine, debate, and fine-tune the procedures by which we govern ourselves and make these determinations. It is probably true that actual decisions on such matters are inevitably controversial no matter what the procedure, though of course nothing could be more natural in a college setting than disagreements about the curriculum. In any case, it's apparent that the College continues to experience a certain tension between discipline-based divisional priorities for new faculty lines, and college wide-based priorities that cut across traditional disciplinary lines and often hold the promise of responding to new ways of envisioning the liberal arts curriculum.

My own view is that this tension is in fact a healthy one, for I have never seen a bad recommendation for a new faculty line emerge from division-based planning. At the same time, it is in keeping with New College's best traditions to attempt to think beyond and across divisional priorities. Our collective response to this tension will go a long way toward answering the question of how we replicate the sense of shared purpose that the original generation of New College faculty enjoyed. We need to cultivate this sense of

shared purpose in a way that is relevant to the realities of the twenty-first century rather than an exercise in nostalgia. My sense is that activities associated with the College's celebration of its fiftieth anniversary will provide a particularly fitting setting for reflection on this pressing issue, as we discover fresh ways to connect past and present.

With respect to the College's wider institutional affiliations and our relationship with the Sarasota/Manatee community, the past year has been one of significant engagement. In particular, New College has taken advantage of collaborative opportunities that enhance student learning and faculty networking, thereby offsetting some of the disadvantages of New College's small size. The Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges has recently committed to upgrading its services to member institutions in ways that should increase faculty enrichment opportunities, such as the very positive experiences our faculty have enjoyed at COPLAC's summer faculty workshops. COPLAC also plans to generate fresh opportunities for student exchanges based especially on areas of study that might make certain campuses particularly attractive to students with specialized interests, such as Environmental Studies or Urban Studies.

At their annual meeting this past June at Southern Oregon University, COPLAC institutions devoted themselves to the topic of promoting sustainable practices on campus, in keeping with the spirit of the Presidents Climate Commitment to which most COPLAC institutions, including New College, are signatories. As Vice President John Martin and I discovered at this meeting, there are some great ideas at our sister institutions waiting to be stolen, and New College should itself become known as a place that promotes practices worth imitating. Indeed, sharing "best practices" in this crucial matter of shrinking the institutional carbon footprint is not simply sound practice in itself, but it has beneficial budgetary and even curricular implications for years to come. Sustainability's simple premise – the notion that we meet present-day needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs – is relevant to every decision we make about new construction, renovation, utilities usage, and our collective impact on land, water, and air. Our recent collaboration with the County of Sarasota in mounting a well-attended symposium on renewable energy – an effort ably overseen by General Counsel Steve

Pfeiffer – is symptomatic of the way sustainable practices form a natural bridge to the potential partners around us.

In a timely development, New College has recently been invited to join a select group of liberal arts colleges that will assess over a period of years the qualitative outcomes of liberal arts education. The project is under the sponsorship of The Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College which, in turn, has secured generous funding for the effort from some major foundations. This undertaking will help us address the increasing national demand for assessment of institutional effectiveness in ways that are appropriate to the very nuanced and complex case associated with the liberal arts mission. We are also in our first year of affiliation with the Consortium for Faculty Development at Liberal Arts Colleges. The mission of this Consortium is to increase racial, cultural and ethnic diversity within faculties at liberal arts colleges by placing pre- and post-doctoral candidates from underrepresented populations on liberal arts campuses as a way of testing out their vocational aspirations and, in the meantime, diversifying the home campus. This successful program is housed at DePauw University where it is administered by – fortuitously – Economics professor Raymonda Burgman, a New College alumna who is also on our Alumnae/i Board. With her direct assistance, New College became the first public institution in the Consortium. We are very pleased to have as our first postdoctoral Fellow here this year Professor David Gray, who has recently completed his doctoral work in philosophy at Harvard and whose teaching schedule includes philosophy and race.

Locally, the highly successful New Music/New College program, under the supervision of Professor of Music Stephen Miles, is – almost unbelievably – now in its tenth year. With a full five program schedule, reinforced by a growing collaboration with the Florida West Coast Symphony, New Music/New College has become a natural bridge-builder to the community as well as an excellent extension of our music program for our students.

With momentum generated out of the Provost's office, we have recently developed a long-desired collaborative arrangement with our neighbors at USF Sarasota/Manatee that

will provide a certification program in Education for our students interested in careers in teaching at the K-12 level. Our wider community connections remain strengthened, not simply through the normal venues for community service pursued by our students, faculty, and staff, but by the third year of our involvement with VISTA volunteers through Americorps and Florida Campus Compact. For the first time, New College will host two volunteers, building on the success of the previous two years and taking full advantage of strong student interest in volunteer activities focused on specific projects.

Faculty and staff members from a range of campus offices continue their work with the local YMCA Achievers program and associated tutoring programs. Chief among these is the PUSH SUCCESS Program intended to promote options in health-related careers for young people coming from challenging backgrounds. The teachers in this program, Biology Professors Sandra Gilchrist and Elzie McCord, have been recognized in the recent past for this and similar services to the community by the Sarasota branch of the NAACP. This year, our local NAACP branch will also recognize our long-serving Associate Director of Admissions (and New College alumna), Sonia Wu, for her outstanding efforts to make a college education a reality for young people of every background.

Our local involvements find their appropriate counterpoint in our persistent, steady efforts to internationalize the curriculum, support student and faculty travel abroad, and provide a venue for discussion and debate of issues of international significance. Our base funding for an International Studies Center is now in place, awaiting a contribution from a donor with a global perspective. The proposed Center is also a likely ultimate destination for the Helen Fagin Holocaust Collection, which was dedicated last January and has emerged from the life and career of one of Sarasota's most remarkable residents. Over time, this collection will enable the College to develop its presence as a source of Holocaust education and genocide studies. In addition, the International Studies Center could and should become a natural magnet for the large number of area residents retired from distinguished careers in the State Department, the UN, the World Bank, and various NGOs and other agencies devoted to sane and civilized practices on a global scale. The

mentoring and career advice such people could provide to our students would be a natural and welcome extension of our educational mission.

With the announcement by Joan Pelland, our long-serving Dean of the Jane Bancroft Cook Library, that this will be her last year prior to retirement, we have good reason to pause to reflect on the dedication of those who have stayed the course. Always a symbolic center of campus life, Cook Library will assume even more importance in the period ahead as it acquires a new next-door neighbor in the form of a 35,000 square foot classroom and office building – the first purpose-built classroom building in the College’s history. The siting of this building should, among other things, create an appealing pedestrian plaza shared with Cook Library, a place that will increase opportunities for informal interactions of all segments of the campus population on a daily basis. With the creative and energetic involvement of the design firm of Moule and Polyzoides – the very firm that oversaw our earlier Campus Master Plan process – this Trail-front building promises to be an iconic presence reflecting our campus personality in a bold and highly visible way. Though underwritten with state funds, the building itself will be named after the donor who understands the special opportunity this project provides to deepen our sense of intellectual community and enhance the College’s visibility.

It will not go unnoticed that private fund raising will increase in importance as New College seeks to underwrite its ambitions in the years ahead. We are well positioned in this regard, thanks to the legacy and continued commitment of the New College Foundation and the affiliated New College Library Association and the New College Alumnae/i Association. Having overseen the transition of the Foundation to a more integrated relationship with the College, Foundation President John Cranor has departed to undertake fresh challenges – though, as a charter class member, he is never far from the campus action. John has left a reorganized Foundation and energized Board that has a clear sense of its own mission in relation to the College’s needs. All of us are grateful, not only to John, but also to Jim Harman for stepping into the Foundation Presidency on an interim basis as we complete the search for the permanent President. We all owe an additional debt of gratitude to Dr. Vicki Pearthree Raeburn, yet another graduate of the

College, who has ably served as Chair of the Foundation Board through a period of transition, never an easy task. My thanks go as well to Bill Rosenberg, who nears the completion of his successful term as President of the Alumnae/i Association with an enviable record of increased alumnae/i involvement, including alum giving.

Finally, the College's own Board of Trustees has seen more than its fair share of transitions in recent months. Bob Johnson's departure from his duties as Chair – duties performed with outstanding dedication and effectiveness since the day New College became independent in 2001– was followed not long after by his departure from the Board itself. Bob remains engaged with campus life through his seat on the Foundation Board and through his welcome connections in the political arena. The transition to a new Board chair has been uncommonly smooth with Walter “Mickey” Presha stepping up from his position as Vice Chair, and Elaine Keating assuming the Vice Chair's position. We have also lost Warren Hudson from our Board, as Warren made a realistic assessment of his own time commitments during a period when the large preparatory school he leads enters its own strategic planning phase. The College community is deeply in debt to all of these busy people, who serve in these roles entirely on a volunteer basis. We are grateful as well to our newest board member, Colonel John Saputo, whose outstanding career as an officer in the U.S. Marines is matched only by his success in the business world.

I reserve particularly special thanks for two member of New College's Board of Trustees for their personal generosity. Retired Major General Ray Mason and his wife Margaret have exemplified the meaning of personal commitment to a worthy cause through a series of major gifts, most recently, a \$1 million dollar gift eligible for a state match and directed chiefly to scholarships. Ray's deep and abiding interest in truly “educating” our young people – and his willingness to support that cause – is as profound as it is welcome.

More recently still, Board member Bob Peterson and his wife Lee have designated a charitable remainder trust to the College, with a current value of \$2.1 million. In recognition of this act of extraordinary generosity, we will be re-naming the

uninterestingly named “W” residence hall the “Lee and Bob Peterson” hall, with a dedication ceremony this fall – an altogether fitting result, as Bob privately confirmed his generous intentions at the close of a meeting of the Board’s Student Affairs Committee this summer. As in the case of the Masons, the Petersons have many significant and worthy involvements and charitable interests. It is an uncommon honor that New College is among them.

I conclude, as always, by extending my warm thanks to: our students, for their vitality, openness, and mutually supportive spirit; the New College faculty, for their dedication, professionalism, and capacity for sustained engagement come hell or high water; and our administrative and support staff, for their institutional loyalty and their appreciation of our educational mission. Particular thanks to the senior staff – Sam Savin, John Martin, Steve Pfeiffer, Wendy Bashant, Kathy Killion, Joan Pelland, Suzanne Janney, and Jake Hartvigsen, as well as to Shelley Wilbur in my office – for their collective wisdom, support, and good humor, as well as for their extraordinary work ethic. With the recent conclusion of her six years of dedicated service as Chair of the Division of Natural Sciences, Professor Sandra Gilchrist deserves a special note of thanks.

Finally, my thanks to Board Chair Mickey Presha and to the other members of our Board, all of whom approach their governance task with an appealing combination of deep support, a genuine concern for our students, and a provocative spirit of challenge. It remains a privilege to serve as the President of this special institution.