

## **Provost's Report to the Faculty August 2017**

This year's report will cover eight topics of importance for each of you as faculty members, and for the University as a whole. Some of these items will play out over the next few months and will be completed by this time next summer. Other of these issues will be with us for some time to come, even as we make progress in addressing them over the next few months. That is, even as some major efforts will be coming to a point of focus this coming year, such as our work to prepare for and host the peer team from the Higher Learning Commission as part of our regular re-affirmation of accreditation process, other projects and activities will just be getting started, such as our new Strategic Plan, and the process to complete and implement that plan.

As in years past, I am deeply honored to work with each of you. The faculty of Valpo is certainly the heart of the institution and we rely on you in so many ways, both inside and outside of the classroom. As higher education continues to morph and change, the role of the faculty member is certainly changing, as well. In many ways, what each of you do today is so different from what was expected of faculty members when I started work as a professor, and some of you have seen even more change than have I. Thank you for all that you do. Thank you for your creativity, your wisdom, and your insight. Thank you for your compassion and concern for our students, for each other, for the world. Thank you for being at Valpo.

### **Calendar**

The Calendar Task Force provided two excellent products from the work that it did last academic year. First, they helped to develop a process by which our academic calendar will be reviewed on a regular basis for effectiveness and relevance to our mission and purpose. This academic calendar review process also allows any member of the University community to submit to the review process a proposal for the alteration of our current academic calendar. This process was submitted to the appropriate shared governance process and was adopted last year for use by the University going forward.

The second product of the task force was an outstanding report on various models for the academic calendar. This report addressed the following academic calendar models: our current model with some small, but potentially significant, changes; a May-Term model, featuring two semesters and a 3-4 week term in late April and May; a January-Term, or J-Term, model featuring two semesters and a 4 week term in January; a Three-Semester model, in which the year is divided into three equally long semesters. The Three Semester model allows for an "all-in" approach, in which the University would go to a fully-year-round model, with full class offerings during all three semesters. A Three-Semester system could also be undertaken in a "light" form, in which we continue using the Fall and Spring Semesters for much of our teaching, and the Summer Term would continue to be a lighter term in regard to course offerings. Of course, the Three-Semester model would allow for a range of approaches between these two extremes.

The Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) received the final report of the Calendar Task Force and spent a large part of its retreat last May reviewing the work of the task force and exploring the various models for an academic calendar. The SPC had a robust and wide-ranging discussion, and concluded by asking that a smaller group of the SPC put together a more detailed description of a calendar model for the SPC to review and consider this fall. Based on the work of the SPC in the coming weeks, a proposal may go forward from the SPC to the process for considering changes to the academic calendar. If a formal proposal for potentially changing our academic calendar is submitted to this review process, this proposed model will be shared widely with the campus community for appropriate input and review. The process that was adopted last year ensures that all members of the campus community will have ample opportunity to provide input about any proposal to change the academic calendar.

I would like to thank the members of the Calendar Task Force for their good work last year. Their deliberations and thoughtfulness have provided us with a process to help ensure that our academic calendar is timely and relevant, and they have provided extensive material to guide our discussions about calendar models going forward.

### **OER and Valparaiso University**

OER, or Open Educational Resources, have been getting a lot of attention recently. OER refers to a wide range of materials published in an open source format that allows authors to share what they have written directly with their intended audience. While OER is a wide-ranging term, for the context of this discussion, I am primarily concerned with OER that can be used as the assigned and optional texts for courses being taught at Valpo. The benefit of OER is clear: by adopting and using OER for our classes whenever possible, we can significantly reduce the cost of higher education to our students. That is, the texts that our students would use for their classes would be free, or very inexpensive. OER also provide other advantages, which you can likely identify.

Of course, there are also challenges associated with the use of OER in courses at Valpo and at any university or college. How do you ensure the quality of the text? How do you ensure that the text will be available for the students when they need it? Who provides the quality control both for the content of the texts and the format/presentation of the texts? Answers have been provided to these concerns, and others, but we clearly need to fully understand the answers as we evaluate the viability of OER for Valpo at this time.

So, I would like to initiate a conversation about OER this academic year. We will likely start the conversation in the Provost's Council and then expand the conversation to a wider group of faculty and staff. Clearly, as we move forward with this conversation, your input is going to be essential for us to fully explore this concept and its possible implementation at Valpo. Please be assured that no one, me included, has decided anything about the widespread adoption of OER at Valpo for use in our courses. We need to have a robust and wide-ranging discussion before any such decision could be made. But, I would very much like to initiate this conversation. The high cost of higher education is on my mind daily. While I have no doubt that the investment in higher education is a great value for our students, I would like to do whatever we can to reduce

the cost for our students and their families. Of course, any cost reduction must not occur at an associated cost of a reduction in quality. Hence, this discussion is important for our campus. If you are interested in being a part of this discussion, please let Rick Gillman and me know. When the time is right, we will likely be in contact with you. Thank you.

## **Law School**

The Law School has certainly been on everybody's mind of late. We continue to be under the public censure of the American Bar Association, ABA, and concerns continue about the financial sustainability of the Law School. I want to provide a short update with regard to both of these issues.

This past April, we received notification from the Committee for Accreditation of the Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar of the ABA that the Committee was recommending to the Council of the same Section that we be found in compliance with Standard 501a of the Standards for Accreditation of the ABA. The Council, which receives the recommendation of the Committee, has final authority regarding the standing of a law school with respect to the Standards for Accreditation of the ABA. As you may remember, last year we were found to be out of compliance with two Standards for Accreditation. Standard 501a requires that the law school have admissions policies in keeping with the expectations of the ABA and our own mission and purpose. Standard 501b requires that the law school not admit any student that does not have a reasonable opportunity to graduate from our law school, pass the Bar Exam, and achieve meaningful legal employment.

So, the recommendation from the Committee to find us in compliance with Standard 501a was certainly a step in the right direction. And, even better, the Council agreed with the Committee's recommendation, and we have been found to be in compliance with Standard 501a. Unfortunately, the Committee recommended and the Council agreed that we are not in compliance with Standard 501b. In order to demonstrate that we are in compliance with Standard 501b, we have been asked to provide the Committee for Accreditation with some key data about our current 1L and 2L students by November 15, 2017. Based on the approach taken in selecting the members of our most recent classes, we are confident that the data that we are to provide to the ABA will be in keeping with what they desire to see from us. If all goes well with this data, there is a clear path for us to come off of public censure and to be found in good standing with the ABA. Dean Lyon and her team in the law school are carefully collecting and organizing the required data in order to clearly address the concerns of the ABA. We look forward to moving forward with this process.

The other concern is related to the long-term financial sustainability of the law school. While a lot of people at Valpo have been spending a lot of time addressing this question, I am not yet in a position to share any details of that work publically. However, I can assure you that a clear decision about the sustainability of the law school will be made by the end of this calendar year. How do I know with such certainty that such a decision is forthcoming? Because all of us at the University are working with the Board of Directors to ensure that we meet this deadline. That is, the Board of Directors is seeking to reach clarity about this question by the end of this calendar

year, and we will do all in our power in order to ensure that we meet that goal. A timely resolution of this decision-making process is essential.

### **Building Access Policy**

As most of you are aware, we are in the process of implementing a new Academic Building Access Policy. This new University policy has been approved by the President's Council and is being shared with the campus community. The reality is that the University has gone much too long without such a policy. Most universities have implemented policies such as these decades ago. The primary concern of such a policy is the safety of our students, faculty, staff, and guests. While we cannot absolutely guarantee the safety of our campus community and guests, we can take prudent and appropriate steps to seek to safeguard everybody on our campus.

This new University policy applies only to academic, classroom, and laboratory buildings. Hence, special buildings on campus, such as the Chapel and Helge Center, the Library, the ARC, and the Harre Union will have their own unique access policy based on the unique missions of those buildings. The new University policy is seeking to address all of those buildings on campus which house classrooms and laboratories. For many of you, the adoption of this new policy likely will not have a significant impact on your day-to-day patterns and work. For some of you, this new policy will have a noticeable impact on some long-term approaches that have been used on this campus.

Throughout the process of the development, vetting, and implementation of this new policy, all involved have sought input from individuals across the University. Within Academic Affairs, the deans have been consulted regarding the nature of the new policy, as well as a number of individual faculty and staff members. The goal has been to minimize the impact on our work as much as possible, while still achieving the safety outcomes that are the motivation for this policy. That is, all involved are seeking to minimize the impact on critical teaching and learning activities, while achieving key safety outcomes.

While input has been sought in order to address as many concerns as possible before implementing this new policy, we realize that it is virtually impossible to think of every possible issue that could arise when a new policy such as this is implemented. In fact, it could well be that certain concerns will only arise when the policy has been implemented and folks have an opportunity to actually work within it. For this reason, all involved with the administration of this policy fully realize that the policy may need to be adapted and adjusted as we move forward. That is, this policy is not written in stone and all involved with the oversight of this policy understand the need for flexibility and thoughtfulness as the policy is implemented. If you have questions or concerns about some aspect of the policy and/or its implementation, please contact the dean of your college or school. While the dean may not be able to answer your question directly, she/he will be able to get your concern to the right person, facilitating a resolution of your concern as soon as possible. I fully expect that it will take several months to a year to work out any bugs in the new policy.

Thank you for your patience as we seek to implement this new policy. I deeply appreciate your flexibility and understanding as we work through issues related to this policy. If this policy were related to anything but the basic safety of our students, faculty, staff, and guests, I could quickly be convinced that all of this effort is not worth the outcome. However, we have no greater responsibility than to ensure a safe and secure environment in which to work, to teach, and to learn, to the extent possible. This policy is an important step in that regard.

### **Higher Learning Commission Visit**

The big day is almost here. The day for which we have been preparing is only a few weeks away. On November 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, we will host a team of four individuals who are the peer reviewers for the Higher Learning Commission, or HLC. The visit represents the culmination of our regular 10-year re-affirmation of accreditation cycle. Interestingly, this visit represents our first visit under the current HLC model for accreditation. Under this current model, we are under the Open Pathway to Accreditation. Within the Open Pathway, the University undergoes a comprehensive review, typically without a campus visit, during year four of the accreditation cycle. During the next few years, the University identifies and implements a Quality Initiative focused around a key need or opportunity on its campus. At Valpo, our Quality Initiative is based around the creation of a pool of professional academic advisors who have helped, in a very positive way, to change the academic advising model in many colleges and departments. Finally, during year 10, the University submits an Assurance Argument that clearly indicates the manner in which the University meets five key criteria for accreditation. Without using the formal language of the HLC, the five criteria are basically related to the following topics: 1) mission; 2) integrity; 3) teaching and learning inputs; 4) teaching and learning outputs; 5) finances and institutional effectiveness.

The Assurance Argument is submitted electronically and is strictly limited with regard to the length of the argument and the nature of attachments, illustrations, and supplements. In addition to the Assurance Argument, the University must demonstrate compliance with a wide range of government expectations and regulations. After carefully reading the materials that we have provided, the peer-review team comes to campus and meets with a wide cross-section of faculty, staff, students, members of the Board of Directors, and alumni. It is a detailed and exhaustive process.

In order to ensure that we are ready for the visit this November, specific steps to prepare for the completion of our Assurance Argument and the HLC visit were started just over three years ago. A Re-Affirmation of Accreditation Committee was created, and individuals were assigned to each of the five criteria for accreditation. A smaller working group was tasked with pulling together the materials with regard to government compliance. In order to ensure a well-organized and clear Assurance Argument, a single person has pulled together the work of the members of the committee, and created our Assurance Argument. This work has been undertaken by Sarah DeMaris, and we deeply appreciate her outstanding contribution. While Sarah officially retired at the end of last academic year, she has agreed to stay on until her work with the Assurance Argument and the entire re-affirmation of accreditation process is complete.

At this time, the Assurance Argument is mostly complete, and we will “lock it” and submit it to the HLC by the end of September.

During the months of September and October, Sarah will be making a number of presentations around campus in order to fully inform our campus community members of key items of which they should be aware when the visit-team is on campus. The team of peer-reviewers will take part in a number of scheduled meetings, and many of you will be invited to take part in those meetings. However, it is also quite likely that the peer reviewers will stop folks at random as they move around campus and start asking questions. A key aspect of the sessions that Sarah will host will be to provide background information to members of our campus community. Of course, being completely honest with our visitors is essential. At the same time, we want to do all that we can to help folks to feel comfortable as the peer-reviewer visit approaches.

If you have any questions as we all prepare for this important campus visit, please feel free to reach out to Sarah, Rick Gillman, Greg Stinson, or me. We will seek to address your questions as best we can. We have been carefully preparing for this visit for over three years, and we have taken thoughtful steps to ensure that we will have a successful visit and review. Those of us directly involved with this process deeply appreciate the amazing contributions of each and every one of you who help to make Valpo the strong University that it is. Thank you.

### **Faculty Ombudsperson**

After having been here for some time, a key need has made itself clear to me. This need has manifested itself in a number of venues, and was clearly presented to me by several faculty members last spring. This need is related to ensuring that any faculty member who seeks to resolve some issue of disagreement or concern by means of processes and procedures in the Faculty Handbook is able to clearly understand these processes and procedures, and to clearly understand how best to follow up regarding her or his concern. The Faculty Handbook can be a daunting document, and the challenge of fully understanding the Faculty Handbook is only heightened when one is experiencing a stressful situation that leads one to that document.

It is therefore clear that we need to ensure that all faculty members have access to a resource to help in understanding the Faculty Handbook and its application in various situations. A means of seeking to address this need can be addressed with the creation of the position of Faculty Ombudsperson. This position likely will be a part-time position and will be held by a faculty member. Rick Gillman and I will be seeking to pin down details of this position by working with the Faculty Senate and other faculty members during the coming months. While many aspects of this position are still to be determined, a few essential functions are as follows. The Faculty Ombudsperson is a completely confidential resource for any faculty member. That is, a faculty member can fully share any and all concerns with the Faculty Ombudsperson, and the Ombudsperson will maintain confidentiality, within the constraints of the law and regulations, and the safety of all members of our campus community. The Faculty Ombudsperson will fully understand the processes and procedures of the Faculty Handbook, and will inform a faculty member about the correct entry point into a relevant process in order to address the concern of

the faculty member. The Faculty Ombudsperson will assist a faculty member in conversations with administrators or the chairs of key committees, seeking to safeguard the faculty member and advocate for the faculty member. The Faculty Ombudsperson can help to achieve an informal resolution of an issue, in keeping with the desires of the faculty member seeking assistance. The Faculty Ombudsperson will provide an annual report regarding issues that have been addressed during the course of the year, protecting the confidentiality of faculty members, as appropriate. This annual report will help to detect any trends or patterns that may be of concern and that need to be addressed in a general manner.

As noted before, there are many details of the position that still need to be resolved. Rick Gillman and I will seek to receive appropriate input as we move the discussions about this position forward. If you have any comments or questions about this process and position, please let Rick and me know. Your input is greatly appreciated.

### **Center for the Sciences: Chemistry and Biochemistry, the Neils Science Center Renovation, and the LeBien Annex B Renovation**

As you can all see, we have a new building on campus as of June. Please do stop by and take a look around when you have the opportunity. The focus of this building is clearly on research and teaching laboratories, and so most of the space in the new building is dedicated to teaching and research laboratories. There is actually only one dedicated classroom in the entire building, and it is on the first floor on the east side of the building. So, given the specialized nature of much of the space in the building, you certainly shouldn't be surprised if you are not assigned to teach in this new building. The new building also has a number of spaces that are dedicated to informal student use, either in the lounge areas on the north and south ends of each floor, or in the rooms dedicated to student collaboration. We look forward to seeing how the various members of our campus community come to use this outstanding new space on campus. We are pleased that the project has come in on time and on budget. It took a lot of work from a lot of people, both members of the University, faculty, staff, and students, and those professionals who worked to design, build, and furnish the structure, in order to achieve this strong outcome.

With the completion of the new science building, your faculty colleagues in the Chemistry Department and several members of the Biology Department have moved from Neils Science Center into the new building. This move, and the addition of teaching and research laboratories in the new building, has freed up space in the Neils Science Center and allowed us to move forward with renovations in that building. Renovation work in Neils started in June, with some abatement work related to the existing structure. This renovation work will continue until the end of this calendar year, and, if all goes as planned, Neils should be ready for full occupancy and use by the Spring Semester. Even now, we will continue to use much of Neils during the Fall Semester as renovations are ongoing. While some of the renovation work is dedicated to updating some offices and other spaces, the lion's share of the work is centered on laboratories and teaching spaces. Key changes include the removal of many outdated and unacceptable fume hoods and the installation of about eight updated and appropriate fume hoods, and renovations in many laboratory spaces. Also, a fully equipped cadaver laboratory will be added to the building, which will greatly help our Anatomy and Physiology, and related, courses. Initially, the cadaver

laboratory will have the capacity for four cadavers, and infrastructure will be provided to allow for an expansion to eight cadavers. We are blessed that the Neils Science Center is very sound structurally so that the funds for the renovation could be focused on changes and improvements that directly impact our programs for teaching and learning. While there will certainly be some challenges for the occupants of Neils this fall, faculty, students, and staff, we are confident that the result in late December will be worth the inconvenience. I certainly look forward to seeing this project completed, and benefitting our campus community.

Finally, an extensive renovation has been completed in the former wound care facility associated with the old Porter Hospital. This building is now being referred to as LeBien Annex B and will house the Physician Assistant Program starting this fall. This newly renovated space now contains offices, classroom space, and laboratory space for the Physician Assistant Program. We are looking toward a visit to campus from the accrediting body for Physician Assistant Programs. The visit from the evaluation team will occur at the beginning of October, and the visit is a key step toward initial accreditation of the Physician Assistant Program. We appreciate the good work of Joe Zaweski and his entire Physician Assistant team as this program moves forward.

### **Strategic Plan**

As you are all aware, during the past academic year the entire University community was deeply involved in a process leading to the development and adoption of a new Strategic Plan for the University. President Heckler led this process and throughout the process a focus was on getting as much input as possible from as many individuals as possible. A key intended outcome is a Strategic Plan that is simpler than the previous version of our Strategic Plan, and this outcome has been achieved. Additionally, another intended outcome was to create a Strategic Plan that is much more “bottom up” than previous Strategic Plans, thus ensuring that we obtain much stronger buy in from the campus community than had been achieved in the past.

A key opportunity to provide “bottom up” input into the Strategic Plan will be provided to our campus community over the course of the next few months. President Heckler will be providing additional background and details regarding the process that we will follow in providing this final component of input into the Strategic Plan, so I will leave the detailed discussion of the upcoming process to President Heckler. At this point, I do want to encourage each and every one of you to take advantage of this opportunity to provide input to our Strategic Plan. By investing in the process over the next few months, we can ensure that we have a Strategic Plan that is meaningful for every member of the campus community, and that every unit on campus will be able to contribute key actions to help to move our Strategic Plan forward. As you have the opportunity to review the materials provided by President Heckler, please do not hesitate to contact members of the Strategic Planning Committee with questions or feedback. Each of the deans, the provost, and the associate and assistant provosts are all members of the Strategic Planning Committee, so they provide a great avenue to provide input to this Committee.

I look forward to a robust process this fall that will lead to a strong, meaningful Strategic Plan that will help to move Valpo to our strongest possible position moving forward. Here at

Valpo, we do so many things very well. And yet, we know that there are many opportunities to do things even better. The new Strategic Plan can effectively help us to focus our work and improve our outcomes.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report to the faculty. I know how valuable your time is, and so reading a document such as this is no small investment for each of you. Do let me know if you have any questions that I could help to address. Also, if you have any suggestions regarding how I can make this report more helpful or better in any way, please do let me know. I would like this report to the faculty to be as relevant and effective as possible. I am deeply honored to work with all of you. I appreciate your commitment to our students and our mission. I look forward to working with you this coming year and beyond. Again, thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

Mark L. Biermann  
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs