QUALITY OF EDUCATION/Academics

INTRODUCTION
A culture of academic excellence and academic integrity is critical to the success of Bismarck State College and honoring the values expressed in our vision and mission statements. Our mission states that we are an innovative community college that offers “high quality education [and] workforce training.” Frances Young, Edward Cadbury Professor of Theology in the University of Birmingham (England) states that “education which involves simply the passing on of facts and mechanical rote-learning misses the indispensable quality of excellence.” Our general education requirements for the degree programs ensure that students have more than “mechanical rote-learning.” This focus on “liberal arts” as well as technical skills has been part of BSC’s history from its creation as a junior college and will continue to be an integral part of the school.

Excellence in education requires consistent attention and work. It requires that we stay abreast of the latest innovations in education and the needs and abilities of an ever-changing student body. Although one school cannot be everything for everybody, we can ensure that what we do offer is of the highest quality and that a graduate from Bismarck State College is seen as well-prepared for and engaged with their future educational or career goals.

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE DATA-GATHERING
We learned many interesting things from the various data-gathering sessions that occurred in September and October of 2011. One of the more surprising ideas that came out of some student focus groups was a negative attitude toward online education. However, other student groups want BSC to provide more online course offerings due to the flexibility they offer. While online education is an integral part of BSC’s future, we should balance that growth with adequate provisions for those who prefer traditional classes. On the other hand, most students seem to be in favor of adopting e-textbooks.

During the strategic planning input sessions, employers indicated a strong preference to hire BSC graduates with specific technical skills plus the ability to solve problems, communicate effectively, and work on teams. Over and over, and from a variety of different focus groups, the need for improved skills in oral and written communication was identified. People recognize the value of a well-rounded education, including courses in the arts and humanities. Along these lines, suggestions were made that BSC develop stronger connections and collaborative arrangements with arts and humanities groups and with local schools. Providing more courses in arts and humanities fields was suggested. A few comments came up suggesting BSC offer more foreign language options to better prepare students for an increasingly global workplace. The importance of developing internships was mentioned by numerous focus groups. Moderate class sizes and faculty-student relationships need to be retained as they are a definite draw for prospective students.

BSC has put a number of steps in place to create an environment and atmosphere that promotes academic excellence and academic integrity. We’ve taken many specific steps (improved academic
assessment, better student advising, increased focus on student success, and an amplified focus on academic honesty) in order to best fulfill our mission and goals. The Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) is how BSC maintains its regional accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission, part of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA). Through AQIP, BSC follows a rigorous program of identifying needs, goal setting, effective action, and regular updates and feedback. This cycle helps us focus the college on quality and effectiveness.

Academic assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It is also a key indicator of institutional effectiveness and a vehicle for improvement. Program assessment is used to determine if competencies outlined for courses match the program learning outcomes. All programs at BSC are required to participate in program assessment. Through thoughtful study of departments and programs, we can assess needs and guide the future direction of the college. Faculty Senate and its three standing committees (Academic Standards, Student and Campus Relations, and Grade Appeals) also work to ensure academic excellence and academic integrity.

**NATIONAL TRENDS – ONLINE EDUCATION**

National trends show that online education will have a large impact on every college and university, no matter the size. As for the question of quality, one source called it a “disruptive innovation,” comparing it to the cellphone. It suggests that online education, like the cellphone, began with low quality but has improved over time. The same could be said of online education at BSC. Another concern found nationally is the lack of standardized training for online instructors. BSC requires online instructors to take an e-certification course before teaching online and has added more staff to assist faculty to deliver a better online product. Even though BSC is doing a lot to support the online courses, many students seem to still have a more favorable view of the traditional model. They find value in the college experience, the community of learning, and the energy found in the classroom.

**NATIONAL TRENDS: ELECTRONIC TEXTBOOKS**

More and more, colleges are considering adopting electronic textbooks. Although evidence suggests that students and consumers in general are not ready to give up print as an information source, e-textbooks and e-readers are becoming increasingly common. A significantly lower cost for students is a major factor behind these decisions. Students are a key constituency, and their primary concern is the increasing costs of textbooks. Ease of access is also appreciated by students who can have access to content anytime, anywhere. As more K-12 students become comfortable with accessing and using content online, the use of e-content will become the norm.

**NATIONAL TRENDS: ADJUNCT/FULLTIME FACULTY**

Bismarck State College is currently following the national trend of utilizing large numbers of adjuncts. A survey by AFT indicates community colleges have increased their use of adjunct faculty by 22% over the past 10 years. Some of the concerns found nationally are quality related. With large numbers of adjunct faculty, it is hard to develop a cohesive curriculum, not to mention delivering it consistently. One study suggested that teaching techniques that adjuncts use are less time-consuming and then
thought of as less effective. Another quality concern is the access students have to part-time faculty. Adjuncts also have access issues. They often don’t have the type of support that full-time faculty do. As a community college, BSC will continue to rely on large numbers of adjuncts. BSC adjuncts are accommodated in many ways. They are often assigned a mentor within their discipline, provided with a laptop, share an office with other adjunct faculty, and have access to support services.

**National Trends: Academic Dishonesty**

Academic dishonesty is a growing issue in academia. Students have ready access to internet sources such as Wikipedia and Answers.com; furthermore, they are increasingly less able (or willing) to assess the quality of the source and use the source in an honest and ethical manner. An April 2011 Pew Research Center survey of college presidents found that there has been a 55% increase in plagiarism over the last 10 years, with 89% of these educational leaders citing computers and the internet as a major factor. A study by Turnitin, a plagiarism-checking site, found that Wikipedia, Answers.com, and Yahoo! Answers continue to be the favorite sources of both secondary and post-secondary students. BSC subscribes to Turnitin, which allows faculty to identify and reduce instances of plagiarism by students. BSC has instituted a required academic honesty quiz in all online courses and is piloting a similar version in on-ground classes.

**National Trends: Disruptions in the Humanities**

According to a recent Associated Press article, humanities programs are being cut across the country. Humanities programs are often viewed as “more of an indulgence than a necessity” while emphasis is put on science, math, and fields that give students the best career prospects. Humanities studies peaked in the 1960s but began declining in the 1970s. In 1990, 212 liberal arts college were operating in the US; by 2009, only 137 were left. Often humanities courses are the first cut due to declining enrollments and a lack of defense of their worth to society. Some of this may be due to a push by the National Governors Associate to align higher education priorities with labor markets and economic development and away from an “emphasis on broad liberal arts education.”

**National Trends: Common Core Standards**

An issue that will affect Higher Education is the change in K-12 academic standards. The Common Core State Standards Initiative was developed in conjunction with a range of educators, content experts, researchers, national organizations, and community groups, with feedback from teachers, parents, states, business leaders, and content area experts. Students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas; this need to conduct research and to produce and consume media is embedded in every aspect of today’s curriculum and can be found throughout the Standards. This interdisciplinary approach to literacy comes from extensive research establishing the need for college and career ready students to be proficient in reading complex informational text. The major difference in the new Standards is the emphasis on informational text rather than the traditional literary texts. A vast majority of the states, including North Dakota, have adopted the Standards. On a related point, an article by Robert J. Sternberg in the *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development* suggests that excellence in education can be achieved by focusing on The Three Rs
(reading, writing, arithmetic) and the Other Three Rs (reasoning, resilience, and responsibility). Application of knowledge and skills across disciplines, and through a multitude of modalities, can only serve to benefit our students and better prepare them for our global society.

**STRATEGIC THEMES: SHORT-TERM GOALS – 1-2 YEARS**

BSC would like to ensure the quality of the instruction and course content is of the highest caliber. Faculty development is an ongoing and essential process. BSC would like to strengthen its faculty development opportunities so that our instructors continue to engage students and enhance the learning process.

BSC is in the process of reviewing Academic Assessment with General Education goals, and aligning these processes with our Essential Learning Objectives. Faculty involvement and input is critical to a meaningful outcome. The Assessment Committee and the General Education Committee will continue to collect and refine the input and will bring the information back to the faculty for further refining.

BSC faculty who teach in the online environment developed and adopted a pre-course requirement designed to strengthen the Academic Honesty Policy. Students are now required to read the current policy on academic honestly and take a test requiring a specified accuracy in order to move on with the online class. Statistics show that the instances of plagiarism and cheating fall dramatically when students are required to acknowledge that they have read and understand the college’s governing policy in this regard. BSC is testing the program for on-ground classes.

BSC continues to explore new options for online course delivery and engagement. This work will help further engage online students and create an improved course experience. The linking of the assignment/essay dropbox and Turnitin in our online campus courses will make it easier for instructors to ensure academic honesty. The future introduction of e-textbooks could also greatly improve the online experience as well as provide great benefits for the traditional classrooms. A move towards strongly encouraging (or requiring) student laptops in class, rather than being constrained by fixed computer labs, is being explored and may prove to be beneficial for the student learning experience as well as the instructional delivery experience.

**STRATEGIC THEMES: LONG-TERM GOALS – 3-5 YEARS**

As part of academic excellence, the student success center should be in alignment with academic programs. To enhance student learning, BSC should also address competency-based learning across all programs. Competencies may include a combination of skills, abilities and knowledge needed to perform a specific task.

Assessment is needed to ensure that students are able to learn, practice and apply the competencies. Additional data is also needed to assess student learning. The Title III grant will enable BSC to capture relevant data and use the information more effectively during the assessment process. Employer feedback regarding competencies and the skill-level of BSC graduates entering the workforce is also
needed in the overall program assessment. Standardized rubrics should also be considered to assess essential learning outcomes.

Based on feedback received from the data-gathering, an opportunity exists to increase collaboration between BSC and arts and humanities groups located within the community. It was also recognized that there is a need for additional space to hold arts, humanities, and educational events within our community. BSC should consider the possibility of a collaborative facility to house performing and visual arts, communications, and the library. Such a facility could showcase BSC talent and provide students with state-of-the art classrooms and performance space. In addition, the space would be shared with community arts and humanities organizations.