CHARTING WHITMAN'S FUTURE: PATHWAYS FOR ADVANCING STUDENT LEARNING

GEORGE BRIDGES SEPTEMBER 7, 2006

Good Afternoon. Thank you for attending.

I want to use this opportunity together for two purposes. First, I want to review the work we undertook and completed last year along with the challenges immediately before us in the year ahead. Second, I want to highlight a wonderful opportunity that emerged from our recent retreat with the Whitman Trustees. This opportunity is about the future of our college and establishing a plan for Whitman in 2020 or even 2030.

Addressing the Present

When I first stepped on the campus as President a little over 13 months ago, I pledged to listen and learn from you. And over the past year I have met with virtually every faculty and staff member – I may have missed a few – and listened to your issues and concerns. I witnessed remarkable commitment by each of you to our students and to the College's mission. As I have shared with some of you, Whitman is better – far, far better in the quality of its programs and its people than I thought it would be. And I knew it to be quite good from the beginning.

That stated, the more I listened to the concerns and felt needs expressed across our departments, the more they seemed to be cumulatively staggering. All were and are compelling; all seemed necessary then and now.

In 2004, the faculty initiated an important assessment of many of the resource needs of the college, <u>Building on Excellence</u>. Completed in the spring of 2005, this assessment offers a plan for supporting Whitman's current academic programs and departments through 2009. At the heart of the document are a series of conclusions and recommendations that can be summarized as follows:

• A five-year plan for transforming Whitman's academic programs by strengthening existing programs and building on traditional strengths of the college by adding faculty and staff positions.

- Retaining critical aspects of faculty support, such as the current sabbatical program, while also increasing support for faculty scholarship and research.
- According priority to the needs of three particular curricular areas (Life Sciences, the Fine and Performing Arts, and Multicultural and International Studies) and to aspects of academic support services, and
- Making substantial improvements in academic facilities

The <u>Building on Excellence</u> document is important largely because it identifies many programmatic needs that should be addressed in the next two to three years, and certainly before we pursue new directions for the college.

Although we must plan the future of Whitman, equally important is solving the challenges of the present. This past year we tackled many of our very important programmatic needs and staffing concerns. Here's what we accomplished administratively in 2005-2006. These accomplishments are the product of very hard work by everyone here, including some of our students:

- We raised \$10 million in gifts from alumni, foundations and donors for a transition year with a new president unknown to Whitman alumni, this is just short of astonishing.
- Made significant progress on increasing diversity of the faculty and staff
- Completed and opened the new fitness center on time and on budget.
- Made important progress on the upcoming accreditation,
- Conducted major external reviews of SSRA and the Development office and completed a template for the review of academic programs and departments.
- 2006-07 Budget
 - 3 tenure line conversions of faculty sabbatical replacement positions
 - 10.5 new support staff positions across the campus, (a new librarian, a permanent technician for BBMB, a staff position in the Dean's office to coordinate speakers, visitors and other work currently taken on by faculty, a director of the fitness center, an assistant director of academic resources, a senior development

officer, a writer for the office of communications, a part-time position for the counseling center)

- Almost \$80,000 (over two years) in new permanent ASID support
- Nearly \$300,000 in permanent operating budget increases for departments and programs across the campus
- Six (6) new smart classrooms
- A new GIS lab
- \$200,000 in improvements to our technology services and preparation for a wholly new phone system.
- The first half of an important makeover of the Whitman website that will be completed this coming year.

These accomplishments are impressive and important, particularly because they emerged from a new budget process that reflected ideas and suggestions from a broad base of students, faculty and staff.

Despite their importance, however, our work on many pressing needs is incomplete. Among the unmet needs identified in the <u>Building on Excellence</u> document are demands for new faculty lines in a number of areas. I hope that our final budget for 2007-2008 will yield, among many items, at least one new tenure track faculty line, additional sabbatical replacement conversions, continuing improvements in the diversity of our faculty, staff and students, additional smart classrooms, support for innovation in teaching, and salary raises that exceed cost of living increases.

I cannot promise that we will achieve all of these. But I pledge to work very hard with the college's leadership this year to address as many of these and other exigencies of the college as the budget allows.

How might each of us help? Staff members, I urge each of you to work actively on the budget with your budget officers. Faculty members, I urge you to work actively with your division chairs and our interim dean. Finally, all of us must recognize that Whitman will always have many more needs than our budget can address in any given year. Successive years of budget allocations will be needed to address the most pressing of these needs.

Charting the Future

One aspect of my position as President is to work with the Trustees and the campus community in shaping and planning Whitman's future. A priority as we plan the future must be to ensure that future Whitman students experience an even higher level of learning than that experienced by students now.

The task of shaping Whitman's future is particularly challenging at this moment because higher education in the U.S. is witnessing a period of unprecedented change. As developments in technology and in knowledge about how people learn generate new approaches to teaching and learning, the students who will be attending college in the coming decades will bring some new and different academic and developmental needs. Competition among colleges and universities for the most talented faculty, staff and students has increased to a point where many schools are thoroughly re-examining how they recruit and retain their most talent people. Finally, the costs of college have escalated to the level where an education at selective liberal arts institutions is beyond the reach of the majority of American families.

As we think about these challenges and effects they may have upon the college, it is easy to lose sight of our mission and focus primarily on preserving our current programs and on reinforcing their foundations of support. But there is no ambiguity in Whitman's mission – our focus now and in the future must be the students and ensuring that they receive an education that is both strong in the basic disciplines and that is coupled with living and other learning experiences that align with and are informed by the academic goals of the College.

In the presidential installation address, I urged us to make three pledges to our students, their families and to one another as we confront the transformation underway in higher education.

I asked us to:

- 1. Retain our unique and singular focus on liberal education, immersing students in diverse fields, traditions, disciplines and academic experiences
- 2. Retain the primacy of relationships between students, faculty and staff while also pursuing new opportunities and support for collaborative scholarly work.
- 3. Make Whitman more accessible to persons who are academically capable but who may lack the economic or personal supports needed for success in college.

I also spoke this past year with hundreds of students, asking them about their experiences, what they liked about the college and what they would change about the college. Just recently we asked a few students to describe what aspects of their learning here was and is exceptional (please see Exhibit 1).

How do we as a college community build upon these types of experiences, creating a future for Whitman that also adapts to changes underway in higher education?

At least three important issues about the future needs of the College emerge from the <u>Building on Excellence</u> document, the agenda for the college articulated by the Trustees in the presidential search, and my conversations with faculty, staff and students over the past academic year:

- 1. How do we strengthen our basic disciplines and existing programs for students while also creating new opportunities, approaches and spaces for learning and development?
- 2. How do we continue to improve upon the quality of Whitman people, their accomplishments and their contributions to the campus community?
- 3. What financial resources will we need to achieve our aspirations and to secure Whitman's future?

These issues suggest important themes for planning and shaping Whitman's future (see Exhibit 2). The first theme, extraordinary academic and living experiences, builds directly upon the current work and mission of the college, concentrating on new pedagogies and new arrangements for living that will supplement and reinforce the exceptional opportunities for learning already at Whitman. At the heart of this theme is the idea that Whitman undergraduates should have academic experiences which prepare them for positions of leadership in a rapidly changing society and world. These experiences should supplement the College's unique historical approach of providing undergraduate education in a setting that remains personal, demanding and supportive.

Because learning in residential living programs too often is isolated from the academic programs of colleges, we must also seek at Whitman a closer integration of student living and learning, ensuring that our residential living programs are guided by and supportive of the college's academic goals and programs.

A second theme for Whitman's future recognizes the importance of Whitman people and the continuing need to recruit and retain the most talented faculty, students and staff. Given the very competitive nature of higher education, we

must continue to pursue persons of national stature who will help advance the College's mission. And because we also seek to retain those we recruit, Whitman will need to invest even more heavily in their teaching, learning, and creative work. One approach may be to encourage and support greater innovation and experimentation in teaching and learning by Whitman faculty and staff. In doing so, we would not only increase support to many members of our community and the likelihood of retaining them but also create a campus that is more dynamic and responsive to changes in our disciplines, in the composition of our student body and in issues faced in the larger society.

A third theme calls for a more solid foundation of financial and administrative support for the college. Increasing Whitman's endowment and its support for students, faculty and facilities is critical. As higher education shifts from teacher-centered instruction to a learner-centered approach, college costs will continue to rise above and beyond the costs of living. And although tuition increases will continue to absorb some of the rising costs, a diminishing number of students will have the financial capacity to afford a Whitman education. As the college seeks to build a learning community that includes students from different backgrounds and life experiences, an increasing share of Whitman undergraduates will require significant financial aid and support to cover their expenses.

What might we envision for Whitman under these themes? Some examples are as follows (see Exhibit 3):

- A campus community wherein every student would routinely live, interact and learn with (and from) persons from substantially different backgrounds, cultural perspectives, orientations and life experiences
- A substantially larger pool of endowed professorships and support for scholarship and teaching to recruit and retain the most capable faculty
- A culture of and support for innovation and experimentation with new forms of pedagogy, and
- A substantially larger endowed pool of scholarships to recruit and support the most capable students from all backgrounds, not simply those for whom college is affordable and expected.

These are only a few of the possibilities that we might pursue. The campus community and its leadership – that is, our academic divisions, departments, staff programs, students and administrators – must shape the ideas and initiatives that form Whitman's future.

We must begin by discussing our aspirations for Whitman. Four questions will guide our initial discussions (see Exhibit 4), the questions address Whitman's future and what the college will need not only to sustain the exceptional experiences students now have but also to create new types of experiences and programs that we believe will improve College and will meet the learning needs of future students. The questions are:

- What extraordinary learning experiences should Whitman offer its students a decade or more from now?
- What will be needed to recruit and retain the finest faculty, students and staff?
- How will we create a campus culture that promotes greater innovation and creativity?
- What types and amounts of financial resources will be needed to provide a lasting foundation of support for the college?

As we discuss these questions, I urge us to look beyond our immediate programmatic needs and foreground our discussions in both the future and the past. We must seize this opportunity to think about possibilities for Whitman we may not have imagined, never losing sight of the demanding, supportive education in the basic disciplines sought for students when the college was founded.

Exhibit 1 – Exceptional Learning Experiences at Whitman *Student Voices:*

"... a conversation with my adviser steered me to a fellowship program that paid for graduate school ... after receiving a master's degree in public administration at Columbia University, I joined the State Department"

"it is the sum of my conversations over the ensuing three years at Whitman that has left the biggest imprint on me.... while (my adviser) discussed the importance of academics, he stressed the significance of taking time to ... remember the things that really matter ... I left Whitman with the big picture, even beyond the theories."

"It was one of those life-changing moments when I realized the full meaning of education and the power it gives me ... (My professor's) project allowed me to go beyond the classroom and into the community. It brought out my passion for advocacy, which continues to guide my life."

"I am the first woman from Whitman to earn a Rhodes Scholarship. Creating my own major in political philosophy was a learning experience that spanned my four years at Whitman. It became a tool for navigating between theoretical concerns and urgent political problems."

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Exhibit 2 – Charting Our Future *Elements of a Vision:*

- Extraordinary academic and living experiences for Whitman undergraduates that prepare them for positions of leadership in the society and world.
- A national reputation based upon and reflecting the exceptional quality of Whitman faculty, staff, students and programs.
- □ A foundation of financial and administrative support that will sustain institutional quality and growth, foster creativity and innovation, and ensure access to Whitman programs and experiences for capable persons from all backgrounds.

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Exhibit 3 — Charting Our Future *Envision:*

- New approaches, opportunities and support for students to participate in international and community-based experiences focused on critical global problems and issues,
- A campus community wherein every student would routinely live, interact and learn with (and from) persons from substantially different backgrounds, cultural perspectives, orientations and life experiences,
- Transformed learning spaces on campus that are compatible with student-centered, instruction,
- Living environments and co-curricular programs that are informed by and supportive of the academic goals and programs of the college,
- Significantly more support for and the expectation that every student would have the opportunity to become actively involved in the scholarship, research, teaching development and other creative projects of faculty,
- □ A substantially larger pool of endowed professorships and support for scholarship and teaching to recruit and retain the most capable faculty,
- A culture of and support for innovation and experimentation with new forms of pedagogy,
- A substantially larger endowed pool of scholarships to recruit and support the most capable students from all backgrounds, not simply those for whom college is affordable and expected, and
- Facilities that promote exceptional learning experiences.

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Exhibit 4 – Charting Our Future *Next steps:*

- What extraordinary learning experiences should Whitman offer its students a decade or more from now?
- What will be needed to recruit and retain the finest faculty, students and staff?
- How will we create a campus culture that promotes greater innovation and creativity?
- □ What types and amounts of financial resources will be needed to provide a lasting foundation of support for the college?

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