Over the past three years, the Luther College community has engaged in thorough and substantive work reviewing Luther’s educational model and its position in the marketplace. Preparation for the presidential search, the examination of potential disruptors during the interim year, and discussions with college stakeholders have helped clarify what is needed to strengthen and enhance the distinctive model of education we offer at Luther.

Accompanying these conversations has been an in-depth examination of the college’s financial position by the Cabinet and Board of Regents through the assistance of two higher education research firms—the Austen Group and Credo. A study of the college’s key financial indicators shows that Luther is in a solid position, although reaching goals for enrollment and net tuition revenue remains essential to the on-going financial health of the college. We also studied whether the enrollment shortfall in 2014 reflected a fundamental market change or an unusual number of challenging environmental factors. We concluded that it was the latter and adopted appropriate initiatives. This year we rebounded and again attracted a class of typical size. Continued monitoring of the environment and the ability to respond nimbly will be important to sustain strong enrollments.

Our current enrollment results, coupled with the completion of one of the most successful years of fundraising in college history, indicate that Luther’s mission as a residential, liberal arts college of the church holds strong appeal. We don’t have to drastically change our educational model. Luther can be in the top tier of liberal arts colleges and the marketplace will support it. However, it will take diligence and a hard-eyed look at how best to use our resources and assets.

The work that has been done up to this point constitutes the preliminary steps in an environmental scan, giving us an initial understanding of what the urgent priorities are for the college over the next two years and how we might address them, particularly in light of meaningful budget deficits that are predicted due to lower overall enrollment and increasing costs in the next few years.

Beginning this fall, we will focus our energies on continuous improvement strategies and on identifying and eliminating gaps that prevent us from providing the best possible educational experience for our students. Many of these initiatives are already getting attention, for example the reinvigoration of the Career Center. We need to continue the momentum underway. Others were identified in the Sesquicentennial Strategic Plan (2008-12), by Task Group 150 (2011-13), and in discussions during the years of presidential transition, including listening posts on campus (2014-15).

These near-term priorities provide a path forward and will dovetail with the development of a comprehensive strategic plan. I look forward to working with the campus community as we move forward with this important work. It is a privilege to join with you as we live out Luther’s mission together and build on the college’s distinctive qualities and strengths.

Paula J. Carlson, Ph.D.
2016-18 PRIORITIES

From the voicing of the community’s hopes and concerns related to the four areas of Academic Excellence and Innovation, Stewardship and Sustainability, Campus Spaces and Places, and Community Values, Identity and Ethos, three priorities have emerged for our work in 2016-18. In many ways these priorities are a continuation and refinement of work already underway as a result of the Sesquicentennial Strategic Plan, Task Group 150 and community reflection.

I. Offer students a more fully integrated learning experience across their four years at Luther.

When Association of American Colleges & Universities president Carol Geary Schneider spoke at opening convocation for the 2015 spring semester, she lauded Luther’s curriculum for eliciting integrative work from students in years one and four. More such work could benefit students in years two and three.

The sophomore and junior years also represent an ideal time to help students better envision the purpose of their education and life beyond Luther. A comprehensive advising program, building on our robust first-year program, can help sophomore and junior students recognize their growth in knowledge, abilities and values as they integrate curricular, co-curricular, personal and career planning experiences. Up-to-date facilities designed to enhance this work signals to the world that we are serious about the development of whole persons.

Initiatives:

1. Assess the curriculum relative to integrative and applied learning in the sophomore and junior years.
2. Implement the HLC Quality Initiative project focused on helping students reflect on their learning.
3. Finalize the plan and launch the renovation of Main and the athletic facilities.
4. Implement the Career Center strategic plan.
5. Create new majors and minors to attract prospective students by linking courses and personnel in existing programs.

II. Develop a comprehensive plan for achieving and maintaining maximum fiscal strength.

Fully recognizing near-term financial realities, it is imperative that we more thoroughly understand all operational aspects of the college and how they are intertwined. We must develop strategies for ensuring stable revenue while preserving the academic profile of entering students and ensuring that their chances for success at Luther are maximized.

Initiatives:

1. Identify target workforce and program ratios and implement a plan to meet them.
2. Review criteria for awarding financial aid, and slow the growth in the discount rate while meeting overall enrollment goals.
3. Complete the work of the Benefits Study Group and implement the approved plan.
4. Target a first to second-year persistence rate of 86-88% and a 6-year graduation rate of 77-80%.
6. Achieve a sustainable $2 million Annual Fund by 2018, secure an annual average of $3 million in giving to the Luther College endowment, and achieve an alumni participation rate in the range of 25 to 27%.
III. Foster the well-being of those who study, live and work at Luther.

The occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation will allow us to reflect on our identity as a community of faith and learning where “students, faculty and staff are enlivened and transformed by encounters with one another.” Recognizing and developing the diverse talents of our people—who are Luther College—allows us to best fulfill our common vocation of preparing students “to serve with distinction for the common good.”

Initiatives:

1. Expand professional development opportunities for faculty and staff.
2. Hire and retain more faculty and staff from diverse backgrounds and enhance programming to foster inclusivity in the college community.
3. Increase programs, opportunities and resources to help students enhance their well-being.
4. Implement new practices to improve the sense of community on campus.
5. Commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

IV. Finalize a comprehensive strategic plan by 2018.