



NORTHEAST HIGHER EDUCATION DISTRICT

STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

2010 – 2015

- **Hibbing Community College**
- **Itasca Community College**
- **Mesabi Range Community & Technical College**
- **Rainy River Community College**
- **Vermilion Community College**

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the Planning Committee, I express our deepest gratitude to the Blandin Foundation for sharing their expertise with us in our facilitators, Matt Rezac and Becky LaPlant. It was their gentle guidance, their insight, experience, and their depth of commitment to organizational change that inspired us to think well beyond the status quo and to imagine a desired future that has been captured on paper in the form of an action plan for a President. Matt and Becky, your service has made a difference in our organization and we thank you sincerely and genuinely for your investment in change.

Northeast Higher Education District

Strategic Action Plan

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Preamble

Responding to a Sense of Urgency

The Northeast Higher Education District finds itself in troubled times, with a struggling state economy, the state's budget in deficit and state support for higher education dwindling. Funding for the District colleges relies more heavily now on tuition rather than appropriation, a reality that is much different than a decade ago. The Higher Learning Commission, the regional accrediting body, has sounded an alarm in communicating with three of the District institutions regarding their financial stability as depicted by their financial ratios. Regional demographics point to population decline, especially in age groups that reflect traditional student populations for community colleges. The economy of the Iron Range continues to be impacted by fluctuations in the global and national economies, especially in the mining sector, a major driver of prosperity in the region.

This heightened sense of urgency frames the planning process undertaken by District constituents and stakeholders in 2009, to "create a new reality" for the Northeast Higher Education District. As President, I believe I am fortunate to be in a position to create positive change in these turbulent times. Together, we have an opportunity to re-invent programs, services, and to recommit to the unique alignment of the District to meet the ever-changing landscape of our state, our region, our communities, our colleges and the changing needs of our students and partners. I feel a tremendous obligation to understand the factors and conditions that drive the sense of urgency and translate threats and weaknesses into strengths, opportunities and innovations that position our colleges for sustainability and viability in light of changing environments. Hence the essence and purpose of our strategic planning effort.

Value of the District/Benefits to Region

Now, more than ever before, the value of the District alignment, an alignment that positions our colleges as regional higher education providers, should be leveraged for viability and sustainability of higher education within the region. Imagine for a moment, the change-making ability of an alliance of five, independently accredited institutions of higher education working together to serve a region comprised of 13,000 square miles of rural, economically challenged geography. At the same time, imagine the higher education system positioned at the center of transformational change within the region, prompted by public and private leaders coming together and calling for the “linking and leveraging of assets and resources” to increase capacity for innovation, collaboration and flexibility through durable relationships in a stronger, regional alignment. (Prosperity Networks – Linking Resources to Transform the Northland, a “strategic doing project” funded by a regional innovation grant.) We don’t have to imagine such a system, we created it at the Northeast Higher Education District in 1999.

Entities throughout the state and nation are looking at regionalism as a means to deal with the crisis of diminishing resources and revenue streams. Municipalities, school districts, non-profit organizations, workforce investment boards, economic development agencies and higher education institutions are all looking for ways to more closely and intentionally collaborate and share services. In many ways, the NHED structure was “ahead of its time” in embracing regionalism while maintaining autonomy and independence of its five colleges. Research indicates that it is vital in this new landscape to think regionally and differently about working together, not only for the vitality of the assets within a region but for competitive advantage for the region. No individual entity has the adequate resources to drive prosperity unless we rely upon the strength of alliances that “link and leverage” resources, talent, and creative thinking.

I believe that our forward-thinking model that emphasizes regionalism and alignment of resources, was created to better serve the communities and residents of northeast Minnesota, a value-add that is embedded in our mission and vision statements. The District model turns the creative tension and competition that is inherent in a funding formula based upon FYE generation, into an alliance of institutions committed to creating opportunities and economies of scale that strengthen our small, rural colleges and maintains our ability to deliver access and opportunity to higher education, the founding tenets that created community colleges across our nation.

In my heart and in my mind, I realize that the true value of the District lies in our ability to operationalize our mission and vision. We must demonstrate that a regional structure, one that preserves college autonomy but also aligns programs and services to provide quality higher education and better prepare residents for learning, employment, citizenship and life actually enhances student access and learning options throughout the region. The 2010 – 2015 action plan will serve as impetus to affirm these bold statements.

Demonstrating Interdependence

The Northeast Higher Education district was founded in 1999 to create a regional structure that aligned five independently accredited, two-year colleges under a District umbrella. The creation of the District was framed by underlying tenets that supported the new model for governance, one unlike any other in higher education in Minnesota. These founding principles included:

- A realization that the five colleges were too small as stand-alone institutions yet very strong and competitive as a collection of colleges.
- A new model would create great opportunity for sharing of resources, programs and services, without homogenizing the individual identities of the colleges (different institutions, different communities with rich histories of supporting higher education, different parts of the region). This notion of autonomy with interdependence was the fundamental principle that differentiates this model from others within the state.
- The model provided one, external, regionally focused President with Provosts in place at each of the colleges. It also provided a single voice to the Legislature and with Minnesota State Colleges and Universities.
- The model provided for a multi-college system allocation, approximately \$1M annually.
- The model was intended to reduce competition by creating a strong, regional alignment with one President to maintain collaboration at the center of the enterprise.
- The model provided academic mission independence while promoting regionalism and honoring the individual communities.
- Most importantly, the model created a structure in which colleges could make the decisions that impacted them, and yet, take full advantage of a “system” that created efficiencies as cost savings measures.

Since 1999, we’ve worked to implement this unique approach to governance and attempted to define the term **interdependence** by sharing a number of functions and services to take full advantage of an alignment that was much different from the former Arrowhead Community College Region. Specifically, District colleges came together to share human resource functions under the leadership of one director, share institutional research and grant writing services, management of a regional, federally funded TRIO program, and the Northeast Service Unit, created to share accounting and financial management services.

Recently, the District has expanded its focus on sharing and collaboration with the proposed creation of interdependent service organizations in information technology (IT), residential life and business services, a proposed activity that would maximize economies of scale and capitalize on efficiencies under the District umbrella.

Sharing of services is not the only way the District model has brought value and efficiency to the organization. District-wide instructional management efforts have attempted to improve NHED colleges’ position “outside the band” in the allocation framework. The sharing of courses and programs has focused on maximizing UFT faculty loads, provided for coverage of sabbatical replacements and produced the first-ever, shared program development activities (leading to the development of an Industrial Technology – Mining Emphasis program, Energy Technical Specialist, and Traditional Power Generation Specialist. Soon, a re-designed Industrial Technology core curriculum shared by all five colleges will be offered, thanks to funding provided by the Iron Range Higher Education Committee and Iron Range Resources.

Examples of intense collaboration across and between the colleges will continue to expand as directed by the strategic actions included in this planning document. The focus of my work as President over the next five years will be to create “electric synergy” between the five colleges and make real the word *interdependence* for the benefit of our students and the people of our colleges.

The Vision for the Future

“When I look back, I want to know that I have made a difference in the region by positively impacting the lives of our learners and the prosperity of our communities.”

“Leading in the midst of crisis” means looking at ourselves and our organization through different lenses. It means honoring the past, our values and our commitments that have served as the foundation of our existence over time, and changing our reality to meet the ever-changing needs of new landscapes and new environments.

Despite the current economic and funding challenges faced by the nation, the state, the region and the colleges of the Northeast Higher Education District, the goal of my Presidency is to maintain viability and sustainability for five, independently accredited institutions that serve a diverse and disadvantaged region of the state. To accomplish this, I must work with my constituency to identify specific strategies to work better, closer and more efficiently as five colleges that are **interdependent**, who have the capability, thanks to regional alignment, to share services, programming and opportunities while collectively addressing the needs and aspirations of a region that depends on education for competitive advantage.

There will be ever-mounting pressure to restructure higher education within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities because of the realities of the fiscal environment. The Office of the President will endeavor to make the case for access and opportunity (including that all important sense of place that is so vital in rural areas of America) for those who choose to live in rural, geographically isolated communities and create an organization structure that focuses on quality education, student service, responsiveness, effectiveness, efficiency and collaboration.

Innovation and creative thinking will be at the heart of this organization and leaders from all levels of the organization will be called upon to drive change, to innovate for competitive advantage, create opportunities for collaboration and to value the importance of working together for the common good. Our region and our citizens will depend upon us to create a future that ensures success for learners and prosperity for communities.

To that end, the 2010 – 2015 Strategic Action Plan, developed by constituents who have a vested interest in the success of our colleges and the District alignment, will serve as a roadmap, a guide that provides directions that will position the District to weather the uncertainty of the times while focusing foremost on educational quality and service to students.

Northeast Higher Education District Vision

The NHED will enhance student access and learning options throughout the region and will focus on each member college's connection to the community.

Northeast Higher Education District Mission

The NHED will provide quality higher education to the communities throughout northeastern Minnesota by developing a regional structure that will preserve college autonomy, but will also align programs and services to better prepare residents for learning, employment, citizenship, and life.

The above vision and mission were articulated at the founding of NHED in 1999, and continue to provide NHED's overarching impetus. Strategic goals were formulated at that time, and updated during the period of Presidential transition in 2007. These goals highlighted four common themes:

1. Improving student access
2. Aligning with key regional partners
3. Developing and maintaining strong ties between colleges and their home communities
4. Identifying efficiencies across the District while maintaining educational excellence

These themes are still applicable to NHED's strategic course. However, shifting circumstances are creating fundamentally new challenges and opportunities. It is critical that the District responds decisively and with urgency. Within this context, the District's 2009 strategic planning process sought to identify the primary barriers to NHED's progress and frame a new set of strategies that address the barriers at their core. The resulting strategic action plan will guide the President's action through 2015.

Strategy 1: Affirm and Strengthen District Alliance

- Demonstrate that the NHED model of interdependent, autonomous institutions produces quality educational outcomes for the region
- Champion and promote cross-college communication to increase a shared understanding of the organization and deepen the ability of students, staff and communities to leverage District relationships
- Align resources and priorities that drive cross-college improvements and increased efficiencies
- Advocate for NHED learners, communities and institutions in regional economic development and other policy-setting deliberations

Strategy 2: Strengthen the Quality of District Programs

- Accelerate cultures of academic and service excellence through continuous quality improvement of NHED's academic and support programs
- Advance efforts to market and recruit students to NHED colleges and sustain their commitment to the region after graduation
- Actively listen and respond to current and emerging needs of regional employers
- Develop and advance strategies for ongoing external financial support, including college foundation fundraising.
- Share and implement the District's promising practices to ensure student engagement and success

Strategy 3: Expand Public/Private Partnerships

- Develop and execute a coordinated, cross-college plan to support appropriate regional, state, national and international public/private partnerships
- Engage P-16 partners in developing a more integrated education system for Northeast Minnesota
- Position the District colleges to be the "providers of choice" for regional business/industry seeking ongoing training opportunities
- Promote mutual accountability among NHED colleges, communities and employers in the region

Strategy 4: Innovate for a Changing World

- Expand advanced education offerings that meet the needs of NHED learners and support regional economic development opportunities
- Share resources to capitalize on economies of scale using the principle of "interdependent service organizations"
- Target emerging technologies and optimize utilization and coordination across NHED
- Advance technology-based communication

