Commission on Diversity at St. Lawrence University
Purpose and Plan

Foreground and Background:

“The St. Lawrence Promise: A Strategic Map” was formulated in the circumstances of the university’s two-year response to the global economic recession that began in 2008. At the time, ideas for both thrift and innovation were abundantly expressed in reports from two campus task groups. This background informed the “map-making” that was largely inspired by the priority of ensuring the financial security and sustainability of St. Lawrence University in a rapidly shifting and competitive marketplace. The first coordinates of the map focus on academic strength and vitality, modest enrollment growth, alumni engagement, governance modifications, and a new comprehensive facilities master plan. The strategic map was adopted by the university in action taken at the October 2011 meeting of the Board of Trustees.

Implicit in the effort and substance of St. Lawrence’s strategic cartography from the very beginning was the intention of incorporating flexibility to accommodate new routes and added maps as things move ahead. This habit of regular review creates the opportunity for fresh tracings over the original map; for allowing insertions as fold-out leaves of an atlas. “The St. Lawrence Promise” has successfully lived up to its title after a year of launching over a dozen university initiatives; measurable advances have been recorded within each of the main goals and the continuing progress in these areas has readily established a highly ambitious agenda.

The pioneering mission and identity of St. Lawrence as a beacon of heterogeneous promise invites a fresh reexamination once every generation; the university’s tradition of broad-minded values is deeply rooted in its 19th century founders who were generally committed to progressive impulses. Translated most plainly from the landscapes of its own heritage into today’s environment, diversity at St. Lawrence needs a new strategic map. Arguably, nothing could be more strategic or more anchored to St. Lawrence’s founding purpose than a renewed commitment to a campus setting and program that reflects a 21st century world’s multiple dimensions. And further, the circumstances and complexity of differentness that are today a vivid and vital presence at St. Lawrence insist that the most essential questions ought to be thoughtfully posed to those who will live and work in that widely diverse world of the coming decades.

Presuppositions and Precedents:

If difficult and inspiring conversations about diversity do not happen for students in the formative years of college, then it is improbable they will ever recover an equivalent deepening moment later in life. In other words, if certain matters about race, religion, gender, sexuality, physical and mental challenges, nationality, culture, identity, and class are not explored on a college campus, then where else and when better will they plausibly get consideration once active career responsibilities begin? In-depth consideration of these matters should not be arbitrary or left to happenstance.
In the spring of 1973, the university’s president, Frank P. Piskor, appointed a Presidential Commission on Coeducation at St. Lawrence. Given St. Lawrence’s founding commitment to coeducation since 1856 and the major demographic and cultural sea change in higher education of the early 1970s that saw numerous private single-sex institutions open their doors to both men and women together, St. Lawrence faced unprecedented risks: a) of losing its particular niche and reputation as a coed college; and b) of not being adequate in program, personnel, campus culture, and curriculum for the competitive task of sustaining a viable tradition of strong coeducation. Fifteen months after the commission was appointed, a highly detailed report was published with in-depth findings developed from intensive institutional self-scrutiny, comparative data, and a list of 127 recommendations.

This historic screed (October 1974) helped to reshape to great effect every dimension of St. Lawrence’s mission of excellence as a coeducational liberal arts college. The development of athletic teams for women, the recruitment of women to the faculty and the administration, the appointment of the first woman as university president, the election of more women to alumni leadership and the Board of Trustees, the establishment of a gender studies program, and the eventual innovation of a first-year program are all milestones that are traceable to the recommendations drawn up by the Commission on Coeducation. It is this model that gives warrant to an equivalent discussion at St. Lawrence about diversity, one that must be comprehensive in scope and conducted at the total-university level, not just on campus; it is also a discussion that alumni, trustees, parents, and friends will share.

**Organization and Expectations:**

When St. Lawrence in 2012 attained record diversity ratios in its community membership, the question about representation, while remaining paramount and undeviating as a challenge, was now accompanied by a new question as increasing numbers of international students and U.S. students of color enter the university: What’s next? What is the new threshold beyond representation and tolerance? In being changed “demographically,” how must the university change? It is also an unambiguous question hanging over the nation, most recently in the presidential election that was decided along lines of racial and ethnic difference, also in pending court cases testing the constitutionality of affirmative action programs, and in policy debates about immigration reform.

No large or controversial incident on the St. Lawrence campus has prompted this desire to explore and map the territory of diversity at a liberal arts university. We are mindful, nevertheless, that in the last decade on campuses across America there have been disturbing episodes ranging from ignorant insensitivity to blatant bigotry, the subtle to the criminal, which could potentially occur anywhere. Rather, St. Lawrence has that rare, prevenient opportunity to “get ahead” of itself and others in order to think hard, plan wisely, and make adjustments within that learning “experimental station” that is a campus democratic society.

The Commission on Diversity at St. Lawrence will be expected to study carefully the history and current situation of the university’s campus climate, measuring the many vital signs of diversity, whether strong or faint. Research questions will not be prescribed, but ought to include the following:
1. Why is St. Lawrence a good choice for students (or why not?) from previously under-served populations? How does St. Lawrence measure against its peers? Where are the best bridges in place? Where are the remaining gaps?

2. In addition to understanding the power and experience of race and color, are the discussions at St. Lawrence about faith, gender, sexuality, social class, and the issues of special needs, such as physical and mental challenges, more than mere acknowledgment of diversity taxonomy? What needs to be said or done in better and broader terms?

3. What are the prevailing and beneath-the-surface attitudes about diversity within the larger St. Lawrence community, particularly how they are different among the variety of constituents (e.g., does the world view of current students differ significantly from that of alumni)? What are the problematic perceptions among the stake-holders? Are the experiences of living on campus qualitatively better now than in the past? What’s it like to live in the Canton community as a person of color working at St. Lawrence? What are the residual “soft” prejudices?

4. In examining our pedagogical tropes and strategies, are we teaching and advising students in ways that foster a more genuine, thorough, and complex understanding of the pluralistically mixed society they will navigate? As the philosopher John Hick used to say, if you know only one, then you know none, not even your own. How does a St. Lawrence education ensure against that self-limiting outcome?

5. What kinds of curricular activity are missing from the St. Lawrence program—either in essentials or desirables? How short do we fall in developing courses that view human, social, economic, historic, or environmental conditions in the widest possible pluralistic scope? While St. Lawrence will introduce new graduation requirements in the fall of 2013, including a general category of diversity (foreign language study will be one option to meet this criterion), where in our learning environment should thoughtful conversations about diversity, inclusivity, equity, and pluralism be located?

6. What is our reputation for recruiting students, faculty, and staff who are otherwise under-represented in our population? What goals and resources need to be identified, clarified, and implemented to make us better at recruiting and supporting individuals once they are on campus? Further, do our university communications and marketing properly reflect St.
Lawrence’s commitment to building a diverse community? Do our messages reach diverse audiences and adequately portray the campus experience?

7. How will the future alumni body expect to stay connected with St. Lawrence? What will it take to ensure that future? Will certain traditions help or hinder? What should the university expect in the challenge to sustain strong lines of loyalty?

8. Most importantly, as a liberal arts college, how will we study and teach with “liberality” the subject of living together? Or in the terms of a recent national inter-faith conference, of living “better together?”

**General Charge and Scope:**

The Commission on Diversity at St. Lawrence will be appointed by the president with representatives chosen from trustees, alumni, faculty, staff, students, and the community. The commission shall number approximately 25 members. It shall begin organizing its work in a February 2013 meeting on campus and continue by conference calls with regular frequency. One of the commission’s first activities will be to meet with a consulting scholar of diversity for keynote and workshop sessions; from these initial discussions, an agenda and project schedule will be outlined. The commission will hold at least one working retreat at Canaras in the summer of 2013. The commission will invite wide and inclusive participation within the community, paying particular attention to the academic program as a core theme of the project. In addition, the many dimensions of student life and alumni engagement will be fully integrated into the new map.

Among the numerous expected outcomes of the commission’s study, it will surely form a fresh narrative of discovery; we will learn more about St. Lawrence and escape the trap of anecdotes or insufficient data, though the university has considerable depth in its records and survey results covering two decades. In addition, the actual activity of the commission will widen the lines of discussion, putting more topics “in bounds,” thus, beginning a new campus conversation. There is also a peer or national leadership role that St. Lawrence ought to play in this project, conceivably developing a model for structured institutional discourse at other places.

Further, the commission will prepare a report with findings and recommendations that will be submitted to the president by February 1, 2014.