

**A Report to the Vermont Higher Education Council
to assess continuing approval and certification of degree-granting authority
to the Northeastern Baptist College**

1 May 2023

SECTION I

Preface

The Northeastern Baptist College (NEBC) of Bennington, Vermont, was approved for three-year degree-granting authority in April, 2014, by the Vermont Agency of Education (Agency). Authority was conferred following a recommendation by the Vermont Higher Education Council (VHEC). Both the VHEC's recommendation and Agency approval include the condition that annual reports were to be submitted to the Agency detailing financial statements and enrollment projections as well as a summary report of the College's progress toward ongoing development of operating policies and procedures. The annual reports were to "document a maturing collegiate institution." Those annual reports were submitted to the Agency as stipulated.

As the three-year degree-granting authority reached its expiration and NEBC continued its commitment to uphold the authority it has been granted, the College initiated the renewal process. A comprehensive institutional self-study was submitted to the Agency on September 28, 2017, and a VHEC Recertification Review Team (Team) assembled to carry out a site visit to NEBC 10-11 January 2018.

A meeting was held on 12 February 2018 of the VHEC Certification Committee (VHEC) and hosted the Chair of the Team and President Ballard of NEBC. That meeting resulted in a recommendation to the Agency to allow NEBC to continue in operations for 2 years with several conditions. NEBC requested a hearing and asked the Agency to recommend to the Vermont Board of Education (Board) that NEBC be granted an additional four years, rather than two years to continue operations. The Agency and the Board, due to a number of issues confronting their operations, never formally responded. NEBC was told verbally by representatives of the Agency to continue in operation and to provide annual reports as they had been doing reporting on their progress. NEBC faithfully provided those annual reports. Over the course of the years since, NEBC has worked hard and made significant progress on all these issues of concern addressed by the 2018 Team.

Through mutual contact the Agency and NEBC decided to commence a new recertification process. That resulted in a new self-study dated 22 February 2023. This self-study put special attention on each of the concerns addressed by the 2018 Team and clarified the progress made in each.

The Agency appointed a new Team consisting of Norwich University President Emeritus Richard Schneider (chair), Professor William Clements, Norwich University, Mr. Jon MacClaren, Retired Landmark College CFO and Executive VP, and Dr. Craig Marcus, Dean of Students and Director of Student Engagement, Landmark College. A site visit was held at NEBC on Monday 1 May 2023 which resulted in this report.

Throughout the preparations and site visit the Team was warmly welcomed and served by the NEBC staff. Particular thanks are extended to President Mark Ballard and Vice President of Readiness and Professor of Christian Education Lorrie Francis. Both they and senior staff members answered our questions, provided requested guidance and materials and attended graciously to our needs.

Introduction

The Northeastern Baptist College was founded and located very intentionally by College President Mark Ballard. *Forming the Framework for the Future*—a document that contains the College’s twenty-eight-year strategic plan—outlines the roots of the college in President Ballard’s calling to carry out God’s work in a part of the country that the president and founders believe needs the spiritual renewal that a successful Baptist College can provide.

Planning began in earnest in late 2009 with the first seven years (Phase 1 of the strategic plan) spanning 2010-2017. The College takes understandable pride in realizing its goals of approval by the Agency granted in 2014, putting in place a board of trustees, enrolling its first cohort of students –enrollment is now at 8 graduate students, 28 undergraduate, 12 early scholars program (dual enrolled high school students), and 8 non degree seeking students--, graduating its first class of students (2) hiring staff and faculty members, and securing and renovating facilities for its library, residential housing, office space and classrooms.

NEBC’s vision and plan are ambitious and long-term. The College intends to see its enrollment increase nearly tenfold to 500 students who will be enrolled in current programs and new programs, as well as recently launched graduate programs. Other aspirations are to build upon Vermont state approval to earn national accreditation with Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS), establish an endowed work-study program, create a thriving downtown campus, and design a revenue stream to ensure financial stability. As the College holds to a philosophy of carrying no debt, the financial goals are especially brave. However, in light of their success over the last 10 years including a worldwide pandemic, the Team feels they are building the infrastructure in a logical way as funds become available to be successful.

The visiting team members appreciated how gracious and forthcoming they were received by all members of NEBC community. This culture of generosity characterized our visit throughout our stay. NEBC is clearly a college that believes in and shares its mission and purpose. Our team noted a genuine joyful spirit and happy environment throughout the College.

Part 1 –Evaluation of Standards

Purpose, Philosophy, and Objectives

The purpose, philosophy, and objectives of NEBC are clear and consistent. As a faith-based institution NEBC is guided by several statements that speak to its reasons for being. The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 serves the college as “a summary of the foundational beliefs upon which the college has been built.” The guiding purpose of the college is to “impact the United States and the world through providing an academically sound, biblically strong, and practically relevant” education. President Ballard is able to speak eloquently about the ways this impact would be demonstrated. Everyone clearly has a heart for New England and the College takes pride in preparing the next generations of leaders to bring the Gospel to the people of New England.

A recurring theme is that students will be trained to have the “mind of a scholar, the heart of a shepherd, and the perseverance of a soldier”. The strategies to reach those goals are classroom teaching and learning, mentoring opportunities, and ministry service. Much work has gone into stating the objectives that accompany the purpose and mission. Signage was displayed in many locations in the building which clearly state their Mission, Purpose, Vision and Values. Everyone with whom we spoke referenced the institutional mission. It was very clear to the Team that the mission drives every decision and activity at NEBC.

The original Strategic Plan was built with a 28-year time line. While the end goals remain the same as it did for the 2018 Team visit, NEBC has improved their Current Strategic Plan, which began in 2021 and now runs on a five-year cycle. The plan did suffer some delay in implementation due to COVID. The sense of everyone we spoke with, and especially the Trustees, felt that while they always remained focused on the long terms goals that things are really moving forward now and they are making good progress on their strategic objectives.

NEBC is clearly in a stronger position in most aspects than it was when the VHEC Team visited in 2018. The Agency confirmed that in the 9 years since the institution was created, they have never received a complaint from any student, parent, faculty, or staff member concerning this institution. They are rightfully proud of their graduates that are living their values and mission with their life’s work.

Strength

The purpose, philosophy, and objectives of NEBC are clearly stated, widely shared, and principled; they drive the practices and policies of the college in all its expressions.

Concern

The original 28-year strategic plan had a very long-time horizon, so NEBC adopted a 5 year time horizon for planning. To be a living document, its objectives need to be regularly revisited, measured, and adjusted as necessary and timely. An institutional fundraising plan has been approved to raise \$30M, which will provide the resources to fund the first phase of the strategic plan. The first phase goal is set at \$5M. That goal rest squarely on the shoulders of the President. Much is riding on his personal efforts and success. It is suggested that each year the Strategic Plan and progress of the fundraising plan be updated based on accomplishments and or

setbacks and republished for all to understand. The next strategic planning process will begin in 2024

Educational Program

The undergraduate educational program remains similar to that reviewed in 2018 and continues to be deeply rooted in the mission, values, and institutional learning outcomes of NEBC. The Mind of a Scholar, Heart of a Shepard, and Perseverance of a Soldier themes provide a foundational framework upon which the curriculum is built. It is noteworthy that the Board of Trustees revised the institutional objectives from thirteen to four to better facilitate communication and assessment. The objectives are clearly articulated and were launched in the spring 2023 semester. A review of syllabi from the spring term indicates adoption of the revised learning objectives consistent with institutional mission. A comprehensive catalog provides clear articulation of program structures, course descriptions, and academic policies. The revised objectives will appear the 2023-2024 catalog.

Degrees are offered on a conventional academic calendar at three levels: associate, bachelor, and master, the latter added in fall 2022. The Associate in General Studies degree is built around general education and bachelor's degree concentration requirements to facilitate seamless enrollment at the bachelor's level for those students seeking the higher degree, and as a potential transfer degree although to date students have not typically done so. The structure is also compatible with the Early Scholars enrollment program functioning for several years, primarily with the Grace Christian School as the main source of dual enrollment students. Academic requirements for the Early Scholars (dual credit) program remain consistent with those for all students and faculty report elevated performance among these students. The substantive domains at the bachelor's level remained clearly anchored in the NEBC mission and are in four areas: Biblical Studies, Business Administration, Christian Counseling, and Christian Education. Current undergraduate enrollment is twenty-eight students with an additional twelve in the Early Scholars program and eight non-degree students.

The undergraduate academic programs are consistent with accepted standards with associate degrees comprised of 61-65 credit hours and bachelor's degrees 121-130 credit hours using the Carnegie definition of the credit hour. Program objectives, goals and requirements are clearly stated in the catalog and academic policies are typical for degrees at this level. General education comprises not less than 20 credit hours at the associate's level and forty credit hours at the bachelor's level. General education offerings are heavily weighted toward humanities courses with mathematical and scientific offerings at the lower division level given the focus of the institution and no discernable social sciences courses; the institution recognizes the need for greater breadth and has begun to introduce additional courses (e.g., Art, Media and Western Culture, spring 2023). Expanding the breadth and depth of general education would move offerings beyond what is minimally sufficient, as noted in the 2018 review and affirmed as the current case. The 2022-2025 strategic plan has several academic program initiatives at its center including further enhancement of library services and recognition of the need to expand general education resources beyond Biblical holdings, expanding digital database capabilities, and adding requisite library staff.

Assessment was noted as a concern in the 2018 report and the institution recently developed a comprehensive assessment plan that includes strategies and timelines for student, faculty, and program assessment. The plan has not fully launched but elements of it exist in current practice including course evaluation, annual oral exams, juried assessment of student artifacts, annual faculty evaluation, and five-year program review cycle. Faculty development is underway to incorporate the new institutional learning objectives into courses for both class and program assessments, although the assessment development program is in its early implementation phases. Program assessment remains less developed in practice than student assessment. While this activity is nascent the faculty report it should provide a roadmap and framework for continued student and program assessment, coupled with larger institutional assessment. Faculty appear cognizant of plans to move forward on assessment although the effort for the 2022-2025 plan is in its initial stages.

A substantive change in academic programming is addition of three master's level programs in Biblical studies (Applied Theology, Advanced Applied Theology, and Biblical Exegesis in Old or New Testament); all are thirty-six credit hour programs. Master's degrees are structured to accommodate adult students from the region and delivered primarily with qualified and experienced professional practice faculty in a mixed low residency-independent study format typical of adult education.

The NECB strategic plan 2022-2025 includes implementation of master's programs as a logical extension of mission; the graduate programs launched as a pilot program during the 2022-2023 academic year with one student enrolled in fall 2022 and eight in spring 2023. An additional fifteen enrollments are planned for fall 2023 with five new applications already in place, suggesting NEBC will achieve or surpass the fall enrollment goal. The programs are consistent with institutional mission and current faculty are qualified to deliver the curriculum along with adjunct faculty. It is likely that enrollment growth beyond the initial enrollment projections will require additional faculty with qualifications to teach and develop curriculum at the master's level. Access to professionally qualified adjunct faculty from among the Christian college network of which NEBC is part is likely to yield sufficient qualified adjunct faculty to teach under the low residency program model. Experience to date in supporting the program has been positive and library support is sufficient to meet current and projected enrollment. The institution may need to consider faculty and staffing challenges should enrollments significantly expand beyond the 15-20 projected for academic year 2023-2024.

Scale will continue to be the central issue for NEBC should projected enrollments materialize, amplified by addition of the master's programs and additional demands for faculty and, equally important, academic support. The establishment of a Writing Center was an important addition, although it has not been consistently staffed it is effectively functioning and regularly used by students at the time of the site visit. The library remains an essential element of the academic experience and is housed in the Hogue Center with several special collections and holdings focused on Biblical studies and theology. The addition of some 18,000 volumes from a school that recently closed is underway to enhance physical holdings and the facility is well maintained with additional classrooms recently added and unique special collections.

Access to journals and academic databases is through electronic resources, primarily through consortia agreement with the Vermont Online Library and two common providers: EBSCO Industries and Gale Resources. The Online Portal to Holdings and Information Resources (OPHIR) supports academic programs with plans to update the resources in the next 3-5 years. The need to expand and add two specific resources (ATLA and ERIC) is recognized in the recent strategic analysis, particularly with addition of the master's programs. The sufficiency to support graduate programs may require further review and potential addition of new services and access to research and publications as enrollment grows. Library use is regularly monitored and an active, engaged, and inclusive advisory group (NATHANAEL) that meets 2-3 times annually drove several improvements. The current librarian is in an acting role with plans underway to name her the permanent librarian upon completion of a master's degree in library science next year.

The college is working on an agreement with Truett-McConnell University in Cleveland, GA for both a teach-out plan as well as student records retention should closure become necessary. It is planned that the agreement will be signed by 31 May 2023 and will be periodically reviewed to assure its capability should conditions change at either institution.

The 2018 report noted some concern about the Gender Enrollment Policy and doctrinally limiting the office of pastor to men. Discussion with NEBC academic leadership indicated that women who are in the bachelor's Biblical Studies program are able to take the general Biblical Studies degree and have access to most existing courses in the program, including some from the church planting or pastoral ministry specializations but not those specifically designed as field studies and planning to set up a church. Consistent with the NEBC mission and church doctrine women are not able to fully complete a church planting or pastoral ministry specialization but are not otherwise disadvantaged in their studies or in earning the Biblical Studies degree.

Strengths

1. A focused and mission-driven education program with clear learning outcomes and a values-based foundation widely embraced by all segments of the institution.
2. Strong and visible commitment to the educational program and NEBC by all constituents, especially faculty and students. Commitment to Christian education and developing students to serve the Christian community in many roles is a visible asset of the NEBC.
3. Staff in student support functions are also highly committed to student success, especially the library and Writing Center. Continued improvements in library holdings, electronic resources, and facilities is commendable. The faculty report that the writing center is also a valuable resource and is increasingly used by students.
4. Development of an initial assessment plan as part of strategic planning efforts through 2025 was an important milestone with greater levels of student assessment and faculty training taking place.

Concerns

1. The ability of the institution to support enrollment growth will remain a concern, particularly with the addition of master's programs. Although mitigated by great interest in teaching at

NEBC from among the Christian college networks aligned with NEBC significant growth beyond that forecasted for the next two to three years at both the undergraduate and graduate levels could strain the ability to deliver its programs.

2. A strategic assessment plan has been created to further assessment already underway at the faculty and student learning levels. Continued development of the assessment program and demonstrable implementation at the program level will strengthen practices in this area as well as provide feedback on the academic program. Demonstration that assessment results are regularly incorporated into academic program improvement and development of potential innovative programs.
3. Breadth and depth of general education offerings remains a concern and is recognized by the institution as warranting the addition of upper-level courses when enrollment permits, especially to provide more balance in related library resources. The 2018 report described general education as “minimally sufficient” and while development of a few new courses has occurred the program remains similar with an emphasis on humanities and lower division STEM courses; there is a notable absence of social sciences.
4. Enrollment growth in the master’s programs is meeting projections for the first two years and is likely to continue to grow. Additional electronic and staffing resources in the library and other academic support functions may be necessary to support graduate faculty and students but difficult to realize under the current tuition revenue model in the absence of sustained giving and fund raising.

III. Students and Student Services

OVERVIEW

Information in this section was supported by a one-hour virtual meeting with Tony Levesque, Director of Student Services. A one-hour meeting with 12 students currently enrolled and a separate one-hour meeting with six alumni was conducted to understand the College from the student or recent student’s perspective. All staff members, students, and alumni were very cooperative and forthcoming with their perceptions of the student life area. The commitment to the mission of the institution came through in every session. The student meeting provided a wide range of students. Of the 12 attendees, 10 currently reside in campus housing, three were currently married, and three are currently enrolled in a master’s program.

Housing currently consists of one residence hall that has 17 rooms each with double occupancy, resulting in a capacity of 34 students. A total of 20 students currently reside in on-campus housing. There is a common space shared by all students at the Residence Hall that includes a kitchen and space for activities. NEBC has plans to build nine new apartment buildings (duplexes) for flexible housing, four are under construction and one building is complete. An existing staff member and their family currently reside in one of the two units in the finished apartment building. Each new unit of housing will provide beds for 4 students, or can be used to house a family.

Student Services hold a weekly meeting with students, in addition to a weekly devotional session for students. A retreat is hosted each semester and there is at least one major event per month

with other activities throughout the week. Smaller activities take place around the residence hall, with larger events taking place at the library. All students are invited and welcome to participate in activities, whether they are residential or non-residential.

The admissions policies and application process are consistent with the purpose and mission of NEBC. Students are fully in support of and understand what is asked of them upon enrolling at the College. Staff articulated that their usual recruitment strategies through religious gatherings, conferences, and referrals essentially disappeared during COVID as in-person gatherings ceased to exist. Now that these in-person functions have returned, the staff anticipates the number to continue to increase, anticipating nine students to graduate with a bachelor's degree in 2023.

There are not any established retention objectives, but the College strives to retain every student that enrolls. Every student meets with the Director of Student Services upon enrollment. Additionally, if a student decided to depart NEBC, the Director of Student Services will meet with the student to better understand the reasons leading to their desire to depart the college. This information will inform the College of adjustments to avoid future attrition.

Student Services seems to be adequately staffed for the number of enrolled students. The anticipated growth of the student body in the future may place pressure on staffing. The NEBC student services staff members are aware of this eventuality, and they will be part of the planning process as the current strategic and tactical goals are reviewed and refined.

STRENGTHS

The faculty, staff, and students all fully believe in the NEBC mission. Everyone seems to clearly understand the purpose and mission of the College and fully supports it. Students, faculty, and staff indicated that the students who are not retained and persist through NEBC is a result of either unwilling to fully commit to the mission, unwilling to participate in the work provided by work-study, or lack the necessary family support that results in leaving the College. As NEBC continues to grow student retention data will continue to become clearer as to the commitment to the mission.

The relationship between NEBC students and the faculty and staff are impressive. The sense is that this is one supportive unit all brought together by their commitment to the NEBC mission and their faith. Faculty and staff are regularly willing to go out of their way to support students, regularly checking in on them regarding both academic and personal matters. Instances of this include giving one another rides between the residence hall and main campus, picking up donated vegetables and other food and bringing them to campus for all to share, cooking and eating together, and socializing around the campus community.

Students seem to be satisfied with the existing living accommodations, expressing that their only desire is the installation of air conditioning in Jehovah Jireh Hall (residence hall). The supervision of the residence hall seems more than adequate between RAs and professional staff, as even the President lives on-site. There is a large common space where students gather for activities and share a kitchen, often sharing what each other has prepared to eat.

Housing continues to improve at NEBC with the construction of nine new apartment buildings (duplexes). While only one new structure is currently eligible for occupancy (one family currently resides there and the occupants are both staff members and students. Four additional buildings have made significant progress toward completion. The new housing is designed for flexible housing, however, most of the enrolled students are of traditional age (18-22) and are not currently married. Each unit can house up to four individual students instead of families, which is something for consideration. Unless there is a direct role for a live-on staff member, students should be given priority to existing bed space.

The Student Handbook is well-developed and clearly outlines the rules and policies of the college. One aspect that could use some clarity around the inclusion of service animals on campus and emotional support animals in the residential communities.

A strength highlighted by NEBC alumni is the existing academic rigor of the programs. A few alumni are currently enrolled in graduate programs at another institution and expressed that the classes were not as difficult as they anticipated, feeling more than prepared for the challenges of a graduate program. Students expressed that they had received feedback from their professors that they were excelling with their reading and writing as compared to peers in their classes. They felt this reinforced that NEBC faculty held students to a high standard and they were able to have significant growth as an individual and scholar from their time at NEBC.

The 2018 review highlighted the evolution of the Student Government Association (SGA) as a way for NEBC to engage with and receive feedback from students. While SGA was operational before COVID, the organization is operating in a limited capacity with RAs appointed to SGA leadership. However, the students did not seem to feel the need that having a fully operating SGA was necessary, due to the close relationship the students currently have with the faculty, staff, and administration of the college. The appointed RAs were essentially in the role of approving funding for events.

The 2018 report identified transportation from the residence hall to the main campus as a minor concern for students. When discussed with the students, many were not aware that there was a bus they could take to get to campus. However, a few indicated this information was shared during Orientation. Many students had a personal vehicle, but there is a group text message between students to communicate with transportation and other needs. Students expressed that faculty and staff, or even the President, who also resides at Jehovah Jireh Hall (residence hall), will provide rides to and from the main campus. Therefore, transportation was not a concern for the students.

CONCERNS

Although there is no specific counseling office, students know where to find spiritual and mental health counseling as needed. There is a Shepard Group comprised of student peers who are separated by gender and led by some staff that effectively functions as a counseling group. Additionally, students expressed confidence in seeking support from just about anyone involved with the NEBC community for their spiritual, emotional, and psychological needs. While the Director of Student Services indicated the official counselors on campus are the Director of

Student Services and the Director of Christian Counseling, there is concern regarding the confidentiality of conversations when it comes to formal counseling. The Director of Student Services said that if a student expressed challenges with their identity, this would be addressed through the conduct process. To limit potential issues down the road, clarification on whom students can approach to have a confidential conversation and how to ensure their conversation remains confidential should be addressed.

Currently, the Vice President/Dean of Students role is vacant, with President Ballard taking on some of the responsibilities of the Dean. While this may be effective for the current size of NEBC, this structure may create a conflict of interest in the appeal process for Judicial Procedures, as outlined in the Student Handbook. The President and his cabinet are the individual(s) to whom a student would submit an appeal. Although President Ballard did indicate that the Vice President/Dean of Student role will be filled by an internal candidate, clarification or an alternative solution to this, such as being handled by a designee, may limit any potential conflicts of interest.

Students and staff expressed limitations on student programming and the ability to organize student organizations, intramurals, and other activities because of having a small enrollment. Even with an enrollment of 50 (spring 2023), there can be enough students with common interests that can participate in activities together. Projecting an enrollment of 73 for the fall of 2023 there should be an opportunity to being to develop this aspect of Student Services.

NEBC employs a strong work-study program that the students are in support of, providing an opportunity to work off their education. Although there is a public walk-in facility in proximity to the residence hall, given the nature of some of the work the students support (e.g., climbing up on ladders for maintenance), clarification of insurance coverage for students would be beneficial.

Academic Affairs and the Registrar expressed confidence in the ability to increase enrollment was limitless. As the enrollment increases the culture and closeness of relationships between students and employees will evolve as the ratio of students to staff increases. As NEBC continues to grow, the viability of admitting all applicants will need to be considered with the impact of existing available resources, especially those afforded by Student Services. This includes but is not limited to the number of available beds, the number of available work-study jobs, and class size (the current average is seven), which may require some additional staff support for Student Services.

Faculty and Staff

The institution is committed to providing academically qualified faculty who are committed to the institutional mission. Instruction is delivered by fifteen full-time faculty of which 60% are terminally degreed with an additional 20% enrolled in doctoral programs. Adjunct faculty vary in number but typically involve instructors in general education, or in the new master's programs. Over 80% of the course load is taught by full-time faculty, including the senior administration

who also teach one or two courses per year. Adjunct faculty are supported by the Registrar and regular program faculty and are included in academic activities of the NEBC. Staffing is sufficient under current and projected enrollments for the next few years to deliver curriculum at the undergraduate and graduate level.

A comprehensive employee handbook is notably prefaced by articulation of the institutional mission and values. Institutional policies and procedures are clearly defined and accessible in the handbook, which also delineates staff and faculty policies separately. The handbook is updated annually and is accessible to all faculty and staff. Faculty policies include academic unit structure, a statement on academic freedom consistent with the Baptist faith, academic responsibilities, rank structure, faculty evaluation, and promotion policy and procedures. Growth of faculty consistent with enrollment growth plans may require additional policies at some point (e.g., faculty governance) or more depth in existing policies (e.g., detail on faculty rank requirements) although the institution does not award tenure. Faculty development meetings are held prior to each semester for the purpose of ongoing improvement; additional sessions have been held and are scheduled to further develop assessment capabilities, and those more specific to the new institutional learning objectives.

Eighteen faculty and academic staff met with the review team to discuss their experience and role in the institution. The primary responsibility of faculty is in teaching and mentoring students both in their area of expertise and often in general education courses given a comparatively small enrollment. The size of the faculty has remained constant since the last review and while COVID delayed enrollment growth plans it did not result in significant loss of faculty. There are sufficient faculty in qualifications, expertise, and experience to deliver the academic program. The typical teaching load for faculty is 3-4 courses per term and 7-8 students per course although some are as large as fifteen students, allowing for personal involvement. Faculty report strong personal connections with students as well as alumni. The team also met with six alumni who confirmed ongoing relationships with faculty as they launch their careers and noted that many alumni continue to view faculty and staff as a resource, both academically and as part of a spiritual community. Faculty and staff clearly support the mission of the institution, student development, and furthering the work of their graduates.

The 2022-2025 strategic plan recognizes the need to expand faculty and staff to provide a more robust student experience and learning environment. Enrollment will drive both need and ability to add qualified faculty and support staff, although the institution has set an ambitious goal of increasing these numbers by 50% over 2021 levels as noted in the strategic plan. Office space, administrative support and other resource demands may need to be addressed should enrollment grow beyond its current size. The impact of the master's programs and demand for faculty has yet to be fully realized but there are ample adjunct faculty from a strong national network of Christian schools and among existing full-time faculty to support the master's programs. Faculty and academic staff also felt that present facilities were adequate to support the planned enrollment growth during this current strategic planning period.

The institution has developed an organizational structure that may support enrollment growth with three of four vice-president level positions currently filled, led by an experienced Senior Vice President and Dean of Academics. The Vice President-Dean of Students is currently vacant

as are other director or office leadership positions, many planned to be filled upon enrollment growth. While there are numerous vacancies in the larger organizational structure the NEBC is effectively meeting the functional requirements needed to carry out the educational program and college mission; several employees are graduates of the institution. The current labor market and location of NEBC may adversely impact the ability to fulfill some roles as noted in the SWOT analysis of the self-study, although leadership feels the attractiveness of the mission and network among Christian colleges and in the regional faith community will provide access to qualified and dedicated personnel.

Strengths

Dedicated faculty and staff committed to the mission of the institution and in improving instructional capability. Alumni report that they were well prepared by their faculty and curriculum for graduate work at other institutions.

Qualified full-time and adjunct faculty, including a network of faculty from among the Christian college and faith community who desire to teach in the master's programs.

Concerns

Faculty recruitment and retention may become a challenge as the NEBC attains enrollment beyond the more immediate projections. The effort to address employee compensation appears to be mitigating recruitment and retention concerns although it is dependent on the ability of the President and NEBC to generate donations and revenue. A notable number of vacancies in the organization will need to be filled should enrollment grow beyond that projected for the next two years.

Standard VI - Facilities and Equipment

NEBC facilities include the Main Campus Building, The Hogue Center, the Jehovah Jireh Residence Hall, and some newly built flexible student housing located on Convent Avenue, all located in Bennington, Vermont. None of these building locations are contiguous.

The evaluation team was welcomed by employees of NEBC including Vice President for Institutional Readiness Lorrie Francis and provided a full tour of the following two buildings.

The Main Campus Building at 104 Kocher Drive includes two floors of a former hotel leased from the Grace Christian School (GCS) which is an established private pre-K-12 school. NEBC is responsible for the maintenance and improvements to these two floors and no regular rent payment is made to GCS. The two floors which NEBC occupies include classroom space, faculty office space, administrative office space, meeting rooms, a chapel, a mail room, lounges, restrooms, and The Well which is a café staffed by NEBC Work Study students primarily enrolled in the business administration program. All these facilities are well-maintained and well-appointed. All facilities are fully accessible. Faculty report that the classrooms include all the furniture and technology required to support their teaching needs.

The Hogue Center is a leased 10,000 square foot former restaurant located at 114 W. Main Street. This building includes the Hogue Library, classrooms, the Hebrews Café, and restrooms. There is also a collection of rare books on shelves in a recreated Pastor's office. This building is fully accessible and well-maintained and well-appointed. The library and classrooms and other rooms include all the furniture and technology required.

NEBC employee and student Tyler Ballard drove the evaluation team by the following two building sites and informed the team of the use and layout of the buildings. The evaluation team did not tour these buildings.

Jehovah Jireh Hall is a former motel located at 250 Main Street which is now a residence hall owned by NEBC. Students and employees of the College including the President and his family live in this facility. The student rooms are typical of a motel with two students in a room, each room with their own bathroom. There is a common room available to students which includes stoves and refrigerators and a dining area. Students report they enjoy living in the residence hall and enjoy making meals together. These students report that the residence hall is well-maintained and comfortable though a couple students wished for air-conditioning.

Nine duplex apartment buildings are either under construction or planned to be built on Convent Avenue. One duplex building is completed and occupied by married students who are also employees of the College. The expectation is that the four buildings currently under construction will be completed over the next several years. Much of the construction work is being completed by visitors to Bennington on week-long missions from Southern Baptist churches. Work Study students also work on this building construction.

NEBC Director of Facilities Ed Lucas reported in a meeting that the College has adequate resources to maintain College facilities with the help of facilities staff including Work Study students. Construction projects are completed as financial resources allow.

Strengths

The evaluation team visited the facilities of NEBC on a day when classes were not in session. This said, the current College facilities in fully renovated spaces appear to fully support the instructional and student life operation of the College. There is capacity available to support increased enrollment.

All facilities visited were well-maintained and well-appointed with furniture and equipment.

Construction work is completed by local contractors, NEBC Work Study students, and mission volunteers under the supervision of NEBC employees.

Concerns

The four locations of NEBC facilities in Bennington, Vermont are not contiguous. Students report that this is not a problem as they carpool or walk to College buildings. None of the students the evaluation team met say they use the local bus system to get to College buildings. A

potential student without a car might not enroll at NEBC due to the distance between College buildings with the perception it might be difficult to commute between College locations.

Standard VII – Organization and Governance

The responsibilities of the board, the president and administrators as well as faculty, staff and students seem well understood by the NEBC community. Relevant materials—by-laws for board members, job descriptions, handbooks, and code of conduct-- are written and easily locatable to the visiting team. Board meetings are regularly held and minutes are recorded and were available. NEBC is going through an orderly transition of its Board Chairman this spring. A leadership continuity plan is in place and already preapproved by the Board in the event the President is not able to perform his duties.

The by-laws state that the board will be comprised of between five and twenty-four members. Presently there are 12 members of the Board. We had the opportunity to speak to 6 members including the present seated chair and new chairman elect. Board members, like all members of the NEBC staff, faculty, and student body must adhere to the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* and are a self-perpetuating board recruited through networks and primarily by the president and board chair. Board members come are comprised of pastors, businessmen, and/or educators. Some board members travel from well outside New England to attend meetings. Board members are obligated to cover their own travel costs. Through conversations during the site visit, it became clear that the Board is totally committed to the Mission of NEBC and that is what drives them to participate and support the institution.

Responsibilities of the Board are spelled out and include evaluation of the president, decisions regarding acquisition of property, promotion of faculty to the rank of full professor and approval of degree programs.

An updated and orderly organization chart was provided to the visiting team. Key positions at the vice president level are occupied and a search is presently underway of a VP for Admissions. Staffing is modest with several individuals carrying out multiple roles. This is not inconsistent with what one would expect of a reasonably young college with small student numbers. Several administrators teach as part of their duties. No one seems to be teaching beyond a reasonable load and these ranks are augmented by others in the faculty role as discussed in Section Four of this report.

Strengths

The College has developed procedures and handbooks to guide its operations. By-laws, agenda, and minutes of the Board meeting are on file and current. Members represent leadership in the ministry, Baptist education, and business management.

The board and president know their responsibilities as do members of the executive team.

Concerns

There is an extraordinarily great reliance on the president as not only the College's leader but also the chief—and only—development officer at an institution that relies almost exclusively on gifts as its driving revenue source.

The board and president aspire to a larger and more diverse board, and they have made good progress in this area electing two women and an African American male since the last visit in 2018.

Standard VIII – Financial Resources

Financial Resources

NEBC provided financial materials and information to the evaluation team required to fully understand the financial operation of the College. In addition, an evaluation team member met with Vice President of Administration David King and Director of Business Operations Beth Jones. These meetings were productive and informative.

Unlike more traditional liberal arts colleges located in the Northeast with a small enrollment, the cash revenue used to operate NEBC does not come from payments of net tuition. NEBC depends on donations from individuals and churches to fund operations of the College. During Fiscal Year 2022, more than 80% of unrestricted expenses were funded by unrestricted donations. Students enrolled at NEBC have the opportunity to complete their degree without cash payment of tuition.

NEBC has made the decision to operate within a budget based on cash donations and the small amount of other cash revenue the College receives. The College has no bank or other long-term debt, nor does the College use credit cards to pay expenses. The evaluation team had extensive discussions regarding unpaid salaries (Accrued Compensation) owed to employees of the College. NEBC leadership acknowledged employees have not been paid their full salaries. The College President, Vice President of Administration, and members of the Board of Trustees all agreed that the payment of back pay to current and former employees of the College is a priority. The balance of Accrued Compensation (unpaid salaries) as of June 30, 2022 was \$3,215,161.

The day-to-day accounting records at NEBC are maintained by a cash method. Invoices for goods and services are added to accounting records when a check or online payment is made. Similarly, payroll and payroll taxes are recorded in the accounting records on a cash basis. A separate Excel worksheet is used to document back pay owed to employees. The NEBC accounting team relies on outside auditors to convert the day-to-day cash-based accounting records to an accrued Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) format used to complete audited financial statements and IRS tax filings. Management Letters provided by outside auditors identify numerous material weaknesses and deficiencies in current accounting practices.

Audited financial statements through Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2022 have been produced and College leadership states Form 990's have been filed as required by the Internal Revenue Service.

Strengths

NEBC continues to operate within its financial means focused on the institution's mission. The College has no bank or long-term debt. Payments for goods and services and salaries and wages including payroll taxes and payments for employee benefits are made using the cash available to the College.

Concerns

The majority of donations to the College come from a few individuals and churches. The President of the College is the chief fundraiser and it is unclear whether College leadership has the ability to maintain fundraising goals in the absence of the President.

NEBC continues to record revenue and expense using a cash method of accounting. Outside auditors have repeatedly identified this as an issue along with issues of internal control and the opportunity for potential fraud due to a small staff (two members) and therefore a lack of separation of duties. To mitigate such potential abuse, the President and Board Chair regularly review process, expense reimbursements, and other reports. The annual audit process of accounting records is complicated by these issues and practices. These practices and issues delay the completion of audited financial statements, which are now up to date. Since 2018 the filing of the annual IRS Form 990 has been on time. The IRS could review the non-profit status of the College if Form 990 filings were filed late. A revocation of NEBC's 501(c)(3) status could greatly affect the fundraising activity so important to the operation of the College. The day-to-day use of cash accounting also means that any interim financial reports provided to the NEBC Board of Trustees are not accurate.

Without bank debt or the use of U.S. Department of Education Title IV financial aid programs, NEBC is not required to provide financial reports and materials to any organization other than the College's Board of Trustees and executive leadership. These individuals already have a fiduciary responsibility to manage the financial operation of NEBC but no outside organizational scrutiny exists.

Suggestion

Employees of NEBC continue to devote their efforts to the mission of the College. Some of these employees do not receive their full salaries. NEBC leadership should investigate whether those employees who can manage their personal finances of continuing to work for the College without pay could be considered volunteers providing In-Kind Services to the College. This change in status for these people would not contribute to an increase in the Accrued

Compensation balance (unpaid salaries) the College carries on its balance sheet (Statement of Financial Position).

IX. Publications and Advertising

The evaluation team did not meet with any NEBC Admissions employee during the May 1st site visit. The Director of Admission position is currently vacant and NEBC leadership is actively working to fill this position. Therefore, this evaluation of Publications and Advertising will concentrate on printed materials and links to web-based promotional materials and resources. These publications include the Academic Catalog, Student Handbook, Employee Handbook and Assessment Plan, Admission brochures, a document which supports a major fund-raising campaign, and other documents.

NEBC's mission and purpose is accurately presented in all publications both in printed form and on-line. The materials accurately describe the organization's current admission requirements, academic program requirements, faculty biographies, expectations of students and administrative procedures and policies helpful to potential students who are making the decision whether to apply for admission.

Likewise, NEBC documents which are used to support fund-raising activities clearly and accurately present the College's mission and how donated funds support the operation of the College.

The evaluation team did not see any information in these materials which seemed to be outdated or inaccurate other than some minor issues with the accuracy of the Table of Contents in the Academic Catalog.

NEBC relies on brochures and other mailings as well as attendance at college fairs to reach potential students. Examples of these brochures were provided to the evaluation team. Newly designed brochures are in production.

The Northeastern Baptist Press (NEBP) is a component of NEBC that exists to publish books that align with NEBC's mission and purpose. According to NEBP's website, NEBP has published 17 books written by 12 different authors.

Strengths

All publications provided are clear and well-written and provide extensive and accurate information. The design and layout of printed publications is well-organized.

Concerns

The documents provided might benefit from additional graphic design which would encourage reader interest. (Especially, the documents which provide more extensive information.)

There was no indication that NEBC is able to provide prospective or enrolled students with an alternative to access information contained in their printed materials other than reading standard written brochures or web-based printed materials.

It is important to confirm tables of contents and indexes are accurate after revisions and updates are made to documents.

X. Evaluation and Planning

OVERVIEW

NEBC has developed several evaluation and planning documents to aid in guiding the institution. This includes an assessment plan and a strategic plan for NEBC. The assessment plan is designed for all aspects of the college including institutional assessment, academic and student assessment, and administrative assessment, which also outlines an annual timeline for the college to follow.

The current strategic plan began in 2009 and has a target completion date of 2037 but is reinforced by an interim three-year strategic plan that was implemented in 2022 and scheduled to conclude by 2025. Unlike the initial plan, this interim three-year plan involved the use of working groups and followed specific key components: staying true to the mission/vision; incorporating internal assessments from students, faculty, staff, and trustees; incorporating external assessments from alumni, admissions, and professional associations; synthesis and planning by department heads; executive team finalization; trustee approval; a feedback mechanism to begin a new cycle.

In terms of teaching, learning, and student services there is some ongoing evaluation of programs. Students who met with the evaluation team members indicated there are emails sent out at least on an annual basis to collect feedback from their perspective. In addition, students feel confident in expressing concerns with any member of the faculty and staff, including the President. The students feel heard and believe their concerns are being acted upon.

STRENGTHS

The vision and leadership provided by the President are related to NEBC's success. The mission of NEBC impacts the overall environment and day-to-day life of the institution.

The development of a shorter interim strategic plan (2022-2025) allows the college to focus on shorter-term goals and allowed for the reevaluation to address issues and concerns that were not anticipated while allowing the college to continue striving toward future goals.

NEBC is utilizing tools to assess student learning. An example of this is the capstone course and the oral exam that takes place during the conclusion of a student's graduating semester. The oral exam requires a student to demonstrate knowledge over the course of the four years, across all their courses, and not just upper-level (300/400) courses related to a student's respective major.

Formal assessment tools have been developed to aid in academic development. End-of-semester course evaluation that includes 20 single-response answers on a four-point Likert scale, and five open-ended questions allowing the student to provide additional detail. Additionally, a written communication rubric and a critical thinking rubric have been developed to aid in the evaluation of student performance. NEBC sends out a mid-semester survey to students and faculty and staff to ensure there is a common understanding of the mission of NEBC. Focus groups have been utilized to also obtain regular student feedback.

NEBC continues to rely on working groups to help develop the institution and share in President Ballard's vision to support the institution in realizing its full potential.

A comprehensive faculty evaluation process has been implemented to evaluate mastery of subject content, effectiveness in teaching, scholarly activity, institutional service, church and community service, and personal development. Expectations are specified in the faculty manual and there is separate training each semester for faculty on evaluation.

CONCERNS

At the program level, the institution needs to establish assessment strategies. The institution believes some of this has been completed with the development of learning objectives for each course, but they are not mapped to course assignments. This is scheduled for the Faculty workshop planned May 16, 2023 with the 4 new institutional goals.

A regular report highlighting the progress of the objectives identified in the strategic plan would allow for ongoing assessment to determine progress. This would also allow the college to reevaluate institutional proprieties, as major changes impact NEBC. The institution will be impacted by changes in finances and enrollment, especially as it relates to inflation impacting the cost for materials, goods, and services.

The feasibility of achieving the outlined fundraising goals.

SECTION II

Evaluation of Strengths, Concerns and Suggestions

For ease of reading and presentation, strengths and concerns have been embedded throughout Section I of this report within standard areas.

We will use Section II to highlight those strengths, concerns, and suggestions that rise to greatest prominence to the visiting team and add summative strengths, concerns, and suggestions as well.

Strengths

NEBC's Mission drives everything at the College. Everyone is supportive and believes in the importance of the Mission. The Mission is relevant and a noble one. It is befitting of an Institution of Higher Learning.

The Faculty are well qualified and committed to their students and their success. The staff, several who are NEBC graduates are learning on the job or have had relevant experience and are deeply committed to the Mission. The Faculty are well qualified and experienced to launch and lead the new Graduate programs.

Coherent academic program design and clear articulation of learning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional level are well-presented in the college's academic catalog, syllabi, and other publications. A great deal of work in the academic and curricular areas has been undertaken since the 2018 visit.

There is formal and informal support for students' learning beyond the classroom via Shepherd groups, ministry practicum assignments, and work-study responsibilities.

The faculty, staff and student commitment to the NEBC mission is impressive. Everyone seems to clearly understand the mission and works to support it. From a student retention perspective, this understanding and commitment will likely become more evident as the graduation data is produced in future years. From a faculty/staff perspective, the understanding and commitment to the mission is already evident in terms of the willingness to forego portions of their salary. The Team was struck by the genuine great spirit of the NEBC community and its joyful outlook.

Academic assistance is provided through several venues. A writing center now exists to help students with their writing issues. The Director of Student Life works with the students who need assistance managing their time. Students on academic probation have mandatory meetings with the Director of Student Life.

The college has achieved a largely sufficient level of qualified staffing to support its goals and mission. Administrators report receiving multiple applications for recently advertised faculty positions.

Faculty and staff exhibit a strong dedication to the mission of the college, particularly the goal of providing a debt-free education and training individuals with potential to serve in ministry, Christian education, and Christian counseling roles in New England.

The current campus has adequate space for instructional, religious, and student activities. Construction is underway for new resident faculties on Convert Avenue. It includes nine building with two units each. It will house up to 72 students (4 single students per unit or mixed use for married students). Completion is expected in 2024. Two units are already completed and occupied and are very attractive. The current lease for the Main Campus has no set monthly lease payment. As mentioned above, the College does provide various financial support to Grace Christian School for a portion of utility costs and various capital improvements on the property. The Hogue Center long term lease also has no set monthly payment but the college is expected to pay all operating costs and property taxes. They have made significant and beautiful renovations to many parts of the Center. This building when finished is a significant resource to them.

The College has developed procedures and handbooks to guide its operations. By-laws, agenda, and minutes of the Board meeting are on file and current. Members represent leadership in the ministry, Baptist education, and business management. The board and president know their responsibilities as do members of the executive team. Each one we spoke to was driven by their Mission.

The college has no bank, bond, private or credit card debt. Management is committed to growing the campus within the availability of the funds it receives.

Admissions policies, financial aid practices, and student records policies have all been developed, documented, and are reliably followed.

Concerns

Assessment: A strategic assessment plan has been created to further assessment already underway at the faculty and student learning levels. Continued development of the assessment program and demonstrable implementation at the program level will strengthen practices in this area as well as provide feedback on the academic program. Demonstration that assessment results are regularly incorporated into academic program improvement and development of potential innovative programs would strengthen assessment efforts.

General Education (2018): Breadth and depth of general education offerings remains a concern and is recognized by the institution as warranting the addition of upper-level courses when enrollment permits, especially to provide more balance in related library resources. The 2018 report described general education as “minimally sufficient” and while development of a few new courses has occurred the program remains similar with an emphasis on humanities and lower division STEM courses; there is a notable absence of social sciences.

Master’s and Growth: The ability of the institution to support enrollment growth will remain a concern, particularly with the addition of master’s programs. Although mitigated by great interest in teaching at NEBC from among the Christian college networks aligned with NEBC, significant growth beyond that forecasted for the next two to three years at both the undergraduate and graduate levels could strain the ability to deliver its programs.

Thus far, the college has successfully hired qualified faculty for its degree programs despite its inability to provide full compensation; the college’s projected enrollment growth may outpace the its ability to find sufficient mission-oriented faculty who also are appropriately qualified.

The college clearly states its nondiscrimination policies in the Academic Catalog and Student Handbook: “The institution does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national and ethnic origin, physical handicap, or sex...”. However, the college has instituted a “Gender and Course Enrollment Policy” (pp. 31-32 of the 2017-2018 Academic Catalog) stating that female students are excluded from several (three) courses pertaining to the office of the pastor in the Biblical Studies degree. The college has identified elective course alternatives for female students pursuing that degree.

There is an extraordinarily great reliance on the president as not only the College's leader but also the chief—and only—development officer at an institution that relies almost exclusively on gifts as its driving revenue source.

Beth Jones was promoted to business manager and does assist in the accounting process. The most recent audit suggests that a third person be added for additional internal controls. Until that position is funded the President and Chairman of the Board will provide additional screening. This is not ideal, but appears to be working.

Beginning with the founding of NEBC, employees have not been paid their full salaries. Current and former employees are owed accumulated back pay in excess of \$3M million. The associated payroll taxes have not been paid. This action was well known to all employees and is written into their contracts, and is common in church related fields. This action will also impact the effected employee's retirement benefits.

NEBC employees record day-to-day revenues and expenses and additions to capital assets using a cash method of accounting. This information is then adjusted by outside auditors during the audit process and audited financial statements therefore present accurate accrued Statements of Financial Position, Statements of Activity and Cash Flow. Therefore, those responsible for financial oversight of NEBC do not receive accurate interim financial information.

The NEBC teach out plan has existed as an oral agreement, primarily with Truett-McConnell University as a sister Christian university. A signed agreement memorializing this understanding is presently in development and should be completed when NEBC comes before the VHEC Committee on Certification on June 23.

Fund raising goals are extremely ambitious and are not being met. Because gifts are the largest (almost exclusive) source of revenue, this is a significant concern.

NEBC has a near-complete reliance on the president for leadership and revenue generation. It is difficult to imagine the college continuing operations should the president be unable to carry out his duties.

NOTHING FOLLOW-----