President’s 2030 Vision

- Core Service Growth
- Accessibility
- Systems Change Prominence
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

As the Stern Center prepares to enter a new decade, the Board Chair has invited me to deliver recommendations for our 2030 Vision. It is my great privilege to do so after 35 years at the helm of this extraordinary organization. The Stern Center’s growth over that time has been remarkable not only in terms of increased service delivery and revenue generation but also in terms of professional vision, quality, and reputation.

Stern Center leadership has been prescient in seizing opportunities that align with its professional strengths and address emerging educational trends while scrupulously monitoring fiscal health and growth. The Stern Center is perfectly positioned for even greater success given the opportunities it has earned as a learning leader.

2.0 REFLECTIONS

In order to look forward, it is timely to reflect on what has characterized the Stern Center’s success. Future leaders will benefit from this perspective. Examples of Stern Center key discoveries and accomplishments are included in Appendix A.

3.0 OUR FUTURE

In 2017, the Board approved a Bold Transformation for the Stern Center to capitalize on our success and assure that our experience and expertise extend further (Appendix B). This plan addressed continued growth in our highly regarded core services of evaluations, instruction, professional learning program, and social learning/communication service. In addition, the plan outlined innovative systems change models for schools through the Cynthia K. Hoehl Institute for Excellence to bring the brain science of learning to classrooms in Vermont and beyond. For almost half a century, myriad research studies have demonstrated that reading instruction is most effective when teachers use a structured literacy approach. However, research has failed to translate into teaching practices. Philosophical divides and myths about what constitutes effective literacy instruction persist, creating inequity in literacy achievement among children.

Professionals at the Stern Center have been teaching children how to read successfully throughout its 35 years. It is now our responsibility to share that knowledge with teachers everywhere to assure equity in literacy. Systems change is essential. Seizing this transformative opportunity allows us to envision the Stern Center’s future with confidence and clarity.

4.0 ACTUALIZE THE “SCIENTIFIC CENTER OF LEARNING” CONCEPT

We can actualize a “Scientific Center of Learning” concept through a combined focus on core services and systems change that will establish the Stern Center as an unparalleled educational resource. In order to do so, we will need to equip the organization by enhancing technology, research/publications, and communications/marketing. All these areas are important to positioning the organization for prominence.

Facilitating remote access to our core services as well as our professional learning programs will require expanding our technology infrastructure. We will invest in an audit of our
technological needs and enable the organization to become a hub for state-of-the-art virtual learning. While it is hard to predict how technology will evolve, now is the time to envision how to extend the Stern Center’s reach in order to serve greater numbers of learners.

One of the greatest opportunities the Stern Center has is to elevate recognition of its caliber by increasing international awareness of our instructional models of efficacy. Increasing our research program internally as well as through external partnerships will be powerful. There are innumerable Stern Center programs and products that are worthy of replication and would elevate our reputation as a leader, including the Woodside project and its impact on juvenile rehabilitation as well as our coaching/mentorship models. There are myriad other single-subject designs and demonstrations of professional learning outcomes. Although our current staff has revenue expectations and budgets which have precluded time to publish, establishing research and publication as priorities will be important.

The Communications and Marketing department plays a key role in ensuring that the Stern Center is recognized as an international resource for learning. Improving the Stern Center’s website and growing our social media presence will be critical. A vibrant expanded website will include:

- a network of best practices
- ideas for classroom implementation
- video exchanges
- teacher hot lines
- new products
- best apps
- commentaries about available resources
- webinars with visiting scholars

The Board and staff need to determine how much out of state business to pursue. The quality of our evaluations, instruction and social learning/communications services is distinct, and our prices are competitive. Making our services available to more students from New England, upstate NY and NYC can drive accessibility as well as revenue, but begs the inevitable question of how big we should become.

5.0 CORE SERVICES

Just as the organization evolves to meet the needs of general education, its prestigious core services for those who learn differently can grow exponentially. We must invest in an audit of our technological needs and equip the organization to become a state-of-the-art virtual environment. While hard to think what technological advances might yield over the next ten years, now is the time to dream how to extend the Stern Center remotely to reach more learners. We will take fullest advantage of available technology to advance core services while maintaining the highest level of personal interaction.
Evaluations

Our evaluation program is robust with specializations in reading disorders, neuropsychology, psychology, autism spectrum disorders, social learning and behavior/attention. In terms of technological advances, we have been administering assessments using iPads for several years. We could conceivably develop in-house criterion-reference tests to document decoding/spelling skills. This addition could complement standardized norm-referenced tests that we use and establish our knowledge and authority in the field. One can only imagine what advances neuroimaging and supplemental digital practices may bring to the diagnostic process. Online consultations and record reviews will become service offerings. Stern Center providers of evaluation services believe our face to face delivery is optimal which invites a broader conversation about our geographic marketing base for evaluations were growth desired.

Instruction

Academic instruction is poised for growth via our eLearning platform. Significantly increasing online enrollment annually is likely. We will combine instruction with professional learning more intentionally to serve as a model for best practices to better serve teachers and parents. Math-related instruction and professional learning opportunities represent areas of potential growth. Focus here would be rewarded. Similarly, gifted children present a market that is underserved and consideration should be given to enrichment programs.

Social Learning and Communication

While these instructional areas operate distinctly from Academic Instruction departmentally and in terms of service delivery, increased efforts to integrate them will be important. It is unusual for children to demonstrate needs in isolation, and our organization is unique in its ability to offer diverse and highly-skilled instructional opportunities across academic, social-emotional and speech/language domains. We will increase opportunities to demonstrate how these areas of learning overlap and intersect. Our ability to meet the needs of the “whole child” as well as the needs of parents and educators is a unique asset.

Professional Learning

Establishing the Cynthia K. Hoehl Institute for Learning has increased professional learning opportunities for both the Stern Center and the educators with whom we partner. As we develop the technology for remote applications from coursework to coaching for application, we will also build the brand for the Cynthia K. Hoehl Institute for Learning internationally as the hub for structured literacy and the resource for combined literacy/social emotional development at the Stern Center.

Building Blocks for Literacy is poised for global distribution as a research-proven early literacy professional learning program available online. Increasing the 1-credit course to 3 credits should begin immediately with strong marketing energy directed towards establishing its visibility worldwide. A robust line of Building Blocks products could follow such as the development of parent apps.
6.0 ACCESSIBILITY

The Stern Center is committed to increasing accessibility to core services across income levels. Growing both the Scholarship and Cynthia K. Hoehl Endowments will be important towards that end.

We need to champion educational equity by increasing opportunities for all students to receive evaluations, instruction and social learning/communication services affordably. Currently, concerns persist relative to the high cost of Stern Center services. While economical when compared to metropolitan areas like Boston or New York City, service costs are perceived as prohibitively high by most middle-class families. We should revisit use of a sliding scale, increasing the scholarship allocation and/or expanding the income distribution levels.

7.0 GROW THE TRANSFORMATION

Our decision to pursue transformative partnerships for change in literacy instruction with schools, institutions of higher education, and the state recognizes that 50 years of attempts to change literacy instruction in ways that ensure equity in opportunity to learn for all children have failed. As a change agent engaged in a process of evolution with partners, we now have the opportunity to build on our success and share it with educators.

The Stern Center will continue its commitment to extend to educators our 35 years of accumulated knowledge about how children learn. Systems change has been identified as one of the most challenging educational processes. Now is the time to seize the opportunity for change in how educators are prepared to teach literacy because declines in reading achievement data make the status quo unacceptable. This window of opportunity will grow as we publish and present data from the pilot projects and hone our coursework delivery and coaching design.

Because the Stern Center is unique in its comprehensive service delivery which combines expertise across language/literacy learning and social-emotional development, we need a robust plan for growth and integration. The first place to begin is within our systems change model. By FY21, social-emotional coursework and coaching modules for classroom instruction will be developed to augment literacy initiatives. This broader scope of systems change is consistent with vertical integration of effective instruction, school climate (personal safety) evaluation, parent involvement and inclusion.

8.0 EXTEND PARTNERSHIPS

The success of the Stern Center’s Systems Change initiatives hinges on partnerships with:
- state government agencies and leadership organizations, i.e., VPA, VSA, VEA, VSBA
- institutions of higher education
- major funders
- educational policy makers, e.g., the Vermont Legislature
- other national organizations engaged in similar activity
State government agencies and leadership organizations

In Vermont we have good relationships with the Governor, Agency of Education and state legislators. These will be nurtured. More work needs to be done with the Agency of Human Services, the Vermont Business Roundtable, the Vermont School Board Association, the Vermont Superintendents Association and the Vermont Education Association, among others. Along with such alliances comes the caution that educational leadership is often wary of “top down” directives. We need to think collaboratively in a state as small as ours to build mutual respect and preserve local educational ownership.

Higher education

Higher education collaborations will be critical for the Stern Center’s future. Until structured literacy becomes an essential component of undergraduate training curricula, we will be handicapped delivering sufficient professional learning to undo the present lack of teacher preparation in evidence-based reading instruction. Undergraduate training needs to be addressed, particularly at Vermont’s flagship higher education institution, the University of Vermont. New appointments at that university’s leadership level will need cultivation. Castleton University is a strong partner, and together we will be offering a structured reading concentration at the graduate level. In addition, we are exploring the feasibility of a pilot undergraduate project.

The Stern Center has many talented staff members who could offer undergraduate/graduate coursework in exchange for faculty appointments. Such partnerships would offer not only innovative curriculum design but also cost savings for both organizations. Other university affiliations are options worth exploring, such as Texas A & M, the University of Oregon and Florida State University.

Major grant funders

Partnerships with higher education and other like-minded learning innovators, both locally and nationally, will position the Stern Center for larger grant opportunities. Now is the time for us to consider a major collaboration with a national/global organization to help propel our opportunities for grants, publications and visibility.

We are already increasing communications with the Gates and Chan/Zuckerberg foundations. Nellie Mae, Jessie B. Cox, Annie E. Casey, the Freeman Foundation, McClure Foundation, and Emily Hall Tremaine are others that merit consideration and further cultivation. We must consider carefully whether to capture federal dollars through collaborative grant awards with other states/universities. Most advise that infrastructure demands would be prohibitive; however, an affiliation with a major university would reduce that burden.

Educational Policy Makers

Stern Center staff will be instrumental in legislative decision making. We have already weighed in on a bill to support the identification and treatment of dyslexia. Our position is that mere awareness of reading problems and the research-proven instructional methods to address them is insufficient. All developing readers, including those with dyslexia, require skilled instruction. Therefore, classroom teachers and the Special Educators who support them need adequate training in structured literacy. Extending professional learning in structured literacy
beyond elementary schools to middle and high schools will benefit learners and the Stern Center. Increased awareness of the number of adolescents who struggle to read makes training their teachers an imperative. We have begun developing online training modules to explicate the developmental progression of structured literacy beyond elementary school. While the benefits of ensuring that primary educators have the knowledge to ensure children can read proficiently by the end of third grade are clear, we must reinforce the belief that it is never too late to learn to read.

Similarly, we need to focus on workforce development. Literacy, including the development of writing skills essential to technical training programs, is essential. Partnerships with technical centers, community colleges, the Vermont Business Roundtable and the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC) should be pursued.

Another area of need in the workforce relates to the need for high-quality childcare. As childcare availability grows, so will the need for high-quality staff, particularly in early literacy. Task forces already exist to increase access to undergraduate degrees for early care and education providers. We should pursue partnerships with the Community College of Vermont and Castleton University to design an early childhood lab school. Models of play-based, evidence-driven, and literacy-rich curricula for nationwide replication are within our reach.

9.0 ORGANIZATIONAL ADVANCEMENT

Our organizational structure is a hybrid model in that we operate as both as a nonprofit agency and a business. To the former, we have endeavored to always honor and faithfully adhere to our mission to represent best educational practices for all kinds of learners. To the latter, we have been diligent in our fiscal responsibility through effective management of our budget across revenue and development. It is this combination of excellence across our commitment to the science of learning and our corporate consciousness of entrepreneurial business practices that is the hallmark of our reputation as an exemplary, well-run nonprofit organization. Auditors have reinforced our position of nonprofit strength in that we have no debt, have a healthy endowment, and own our own building.

An overarching goal will be to address the role of development in balancing the budget. Revenues from fundraising need to be directed to scholarship, research and advancement to move the organization toward even greater heights of equity and accomplishment.

10.0 STAFF INVESTMENT: THE STERN CENTER AS THE PLACE TO WORK

We have long recognized that programs are people, and ours are among the very best with a strong retention rate. We have minimal attrition with many staff remaining for the bulk of their careers. We have been able to compete favorably with schools for employees given our mission, work environment, flexibility in scheduling, and increases in both compensation and benefits packages. In the next decade, we should strive to advance work life at the Stern Center further. Given our hybrid nature which charges staff with revenue targets as well as high quality delivery, we should consider a nonprofit “sharing” of increases in net assets. Increased partnerships with universities will also afford us greater opportunities for subsidizing courses and degree programs. Staff will be encouraged to participate in research, grant development and product design.

Among the most formative events that will take place moving forward will be leadership transition. This will be a dynamic opportunity for the organization as new ideas emerge and
management styles embrace both the Stern Center’s assets and burgeoning national educational needs to take it to new heights. The Board will need to consider succession not only of the President but also key senior leaders. Selection of such important individuals should take into account not only professional attributes but also interpersonal strengths. The Stern Center has an exceptional culture characterized by accountability not only to its mission but also to its team and its stakeholders, including the population we serve and those who sustain us. In addition to maintaining and supporting the growth of personnel who deliver evaluations, instruction, professional learning and social learning/communications skills, we need the capacity to design the partnerships, deepen the neuroscience, and strengthen outreach communication/marketing as well as evaluation/research.

Recognizing that new leadership will add its own recommendations to this document, the Board will be selecting a successor who will need to be a visionary. In addition, strong interpersonal skills for networking will be essential. This individual will represent in print and in person the depth and breadth of the Stern Center’s stature and aspirations. A strong track record of leadership in the field of structured literacy or language learning will be an asset, as will administrative/management and development experience. Skills in business planning, development and execution will be essential. Appendix C describes the qualifications we seek in a new President.

11.0 SUMMARY

The Stern Center for Language and Learning deserves to be a key player across the educational landscape nationally and beyond. Through a combination of exemplary core service growth and transformational systems change innovation which shares its collective knowledge, the organization can improve educational outcomes for all kinds of learners. It has the power to impact school delivery models as special education referrals decrease and change teacher preparation programs to advance literacy and social emotional development. As we achieve increased synchrony across these areas, we will have arrived at the enviable intersection between the science and heart of learning. Over the next decade, we will have achieved the dream of this Vision by being the epitome of a worldwide educational resource.
12.0 APPENDIX A

- The Stern Center was founded in 1983 through the generosity of the Bernice and Milton Stern Foundation with a threefold mission: direct services through evaluations and instruction; professional learning; and research. One of our first learning experiences was that the students we were seeing were not only those with learning disabilities, but, more often than not, those who were “curriculum casualties”. These students needed Stern Center intervention because of insufficient instruction at school – hence, our professional learning programs intensified.

- In 1989, we conducted Vermont’s first professional learning symposium with a panel of experts to address the topic of phonological awareness, considered the scientific success story of the 20th century. Symposia continued for 15 years with nationally recognized speakers. In 2003, we began a partnership with the University of Vermont College of Medicine to deliver 9 years of annual lectures named in honor of Charles M. Poser, MD, a Stern Center champion and former Chair of the Department of Neurology. Physicians and other health related professionals addressed current medical-educational issues. Pediatricians benefitted from the Stern Center’s perspective on what they observed when children were stressed at school.

- TIME (Training in Instructional Methods of Efficacy) for Teachers – in 1995, the Stern Center developed one of the first professional learning programs anywhere to capture the state of the art in reading research after securing a Freeman Foundation grant which ultimately gave over one million dollars to delivery of TIME throughout VT. In 1997, we formed a partnership with Drs. Nancy Mather and Candace Bos from the University of Arizona to produce TIME-RIME (Reading Instructional Methods of Efficacy) and together won federal grants to continue development into a CD Rom version. Constantly updating this landmark course, we released the online version through MindPlay in 2018. It forms the knowledge base for our systems change efforts.

- Building Blocks for Literacy (BB) - to address a request from grantors to meet the needs of early care and education providers, we designed BB in 1997. Research conducted with children whose providers participated in BB showed that not only did children make greater gains but those in the lowest 20th percentile –our vulnerable youngsters, including
those in poverty, went from below to above at-risk levels. BB became both 12-hour and 6-hour workshops as well as an online version and 3-credit course. It is now available as a 1-credit online course.

- At the request of Vermont’s Commissioner of Education to reduce the number of middle and high school students with reading disabilities being sent to residential placements, the Stern Center developed learning disabilities labs in partnership with public schools. With funding from the Agency of Education, these offered school leadership and families the option of having students continue to be taught locally using structured literacy interventions provided by the Stern Center to public school personnel.

- Social Learning and Communication – this unique delivery of direct services and professional learning began in 2008 with Michelle Garcia Winner’s program Social Thinking and our newly created Camp Compass, a summer week-long intervention for youngsters struggling to navigate their social worlds. It then morphed into a medley of social thinking programs alongside continuing traditional speech language services. We will release our first publication through this department in 2020 through Corwin Publishers with funding from private donors: *Activities, Games and Lessons for Social Learning: A practical guide.*

- Partnerships thrived over the past 35 years, including with the University of Vermont Larner College of Medicine for three different training modules for medical students, residents and fellows through the Departments of Neurosciences, Pediatrics and Pediatric Psychiatry. We also offer conjoint scholarship awards to medical students who wrestle with learning issues in medical school. We partner with the Wilson Reading System and the Orton Gillingham Academy, establishing our own Orton Gillingham Institute in 2010.

- In 1996, the Smallwood Family established our Scholarship Endowment Fund. For the last 23 years, the Stern Center has been able to award approximately $165,000 from the interest on this account plus earnings from development.

- In 2008, through generous funding from the Hoehl Family Foundation, we established the Cynthia K. Hoehl Institute for Excellence to advance teacher education and offer scholarships to students seeking multi-hour instruction. The goal of the Institute is to serve as a learning laboratory for evidence based best practices. The reach of the Institute increased exponentially with the receipt of a two million dollar gift to its Endowment
from the Hoehl Family Foundation in 2015. The Cynthia K. Hoehl Institute is now the home of our Lead to Read initiative to promote instructional systems change in schools.

- eLearning services began in 2017 and have grown impressively by 150% since. Although we had a satellite site in the Upper Valley for 20 years, infrastructure demands and a paucity of qualified personnel in the area determined that use of technology would be as effective and more efficient than a physical presence. Our experience with eLearning can provide the basis for designing and growing a systems change intervention partnership among Stern, schools, higher education and state government to improve learning for all.
A BOLD TRANSFORMATIVE FUTURE FOR THE STERN CENTER
A Concept Paper presented to the Stern Center Board of Directors
April 20, 2017
Blanche Podhajski, President

Over the past 33 years since the Stern Center was founded, the science of learning has advanced exponentially. The development of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), which allows viewing of the brain noninvasively, has shown us how children learn. We can distinguish between the 60% of youngsters who learn to read easily and the 40% who struggle. Best of all, we know how to teach children to read successfully and thus can actually change brain activity. We can teach children how what they know – speech – maps to what they do not yet know – print.

The only scientifically based and research proven way to teach children to read is through structured literacy. Acquiring the foundational skills to read facilitates the acquisition of reading comprehension, written language and content learning. Now is the time to call a truce to the so-called reading wars of the 20th century by valuing contributions of science across student development. There is a science to reading, and it is our responsibility to assure its practice in schools.

We also have learned about the brain’s extraordinary growth during the first years of life, underscoring the importance of early childhood education. We know how to teach early care and education providers how to develop emergent literacy skills in preschool children through play based, developmentally appropriate activities. Our own research has shown that not only do children do better when their providers are taught research based best practices, but those children in the lowest 20th percentile – our vulnerable learners, including those in poverty, can improve from below to above at risk levels.

We have seen how the brain responds when we react emotionally, offering opportunities to teach children how to self-regulate and effectively interact socially. We can observe the impacts of trauma and poverty. And, we can close the opportunity gap through best practices in social emotional and literacy skill development.

Successful learning during school years is key to our success as a society. It impacts our ability to access higher education and hold a job. Research studies have documented how learning failure breeds social consequences such as incarceration, homelessness and emotional problems.
such as depression. We know that 74% of students who fail to read proficiently by the end of third grade continue to have difficulty in later grades and often become high school dropouts. Currently, less than 40% of U.S. school children score at or above proficient in reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The onus is upon us to use what we have learned over more than thirty years of brain science to change the trajectory of academic underachievement. We have the knowledge to teach for success. Equity and access are key across diverse populations, including children of poverty, students with learning disabilities, and those who are dual language learners.

The challenge of bringing research to practice in schools lies in the very nature of partnerships. Implementing the science in education has to be more than the one-way translation of knowledge of research into practice (Penuel et al, 2015). People need to want, not just be told, to collaborate. And collaborations don’t just happen: they need to be designed and curated (Abele, 2016). Researchers and practitioners need to engage in joint work, aiming for mutualism and reciprocity. Penuel and his colleagues offer a framework for collaboration which we will adapt modeling boundary crossing, navigating multiple cultural, professional and organizational differences.

It is this complement of advancing the science of learning within a framework for collaboration that can yield powerful outcomes for students. Toward this end, it is time for the Stern Center to balance its resources to enable systemic change with the needs of partners who share a commitment to the development of replicable delivery models, educational excellence, and equity grounded in science. Professional learning is a doorway through which we can engage partners in transformational change. Recent child outcome data following a four year longitudinal study conducted through our Cynthia K. Hoehl Institute for Excellence speaks to the powerful impact of robust professional learning.

Transformation will require the Stern Center to advance by increasing its reach to general education using technology and replicable delivery models. We need to extend our knowledge of implementation science and boldly declare our intention to be an active resource and force for assisting school districts to integrate learning systems that produce equity and excellence in learning outcomes for students. We need to design programs within schools, early education settings, and higher education that are scalable through implementation science.

We will begin by finding partners who will support the design and implementation of collaborations for change. We will begin in Vermont and gradually extend nationally and globally. Teams across the Stern Center and school partnerships will combine the knowledge of learning through science with systems change technology. Enabling effective collaborations will be a key as the implementation of the science. Both have been fraught with challenges. Our goal will be for this transformation to demonstrate that joint work that spans the boundaries for both
researchers and practitioners through shared thinking and funding can help close both achievement and opportunity gaps educationally. Studying the outcomes of such collaborations will be powerful. Our hope is that through mutualism in our resolve and practice rather than passive knowledge dissemination we can realize a meaningful growth process that supports change for the future of organizations and success of all learners.

The Stern Center’s Future: A Bold Transformation