

**REPORT OF A VISIT TO THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF HISTORY AND  
LEGAL STUDIES (ACHLS)**

**MARCH 23, 2011**

**Site Visit Conducted by:**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

At its March 12, 2009 meeting, the New Hampshire Postsecondary Education Commission (Commission) voted to approve the establishment of the American College of History and Legal Studies (ACHLS) and for it to offer the Bachelor of Arts in History and Legal Studies until June 30, 2013. This approval was with the understanding that annual reports would be required by December 31 of each year and in addition to providing general updates on progress related to Commission standards, the report would include specific updates on the following: enrollment; faculty hires (degrees/discipline(s); teaching assignments); audited financial reports; curriculum developments; library development; student support updates (ADA officer, “cultural” needs, etc.) personnel policy development; and updates on regional accreditation. Any new program or change in direction from issues addressed in the report would require a preliminary report to the Commission detailing curriculum, faculty resources, and other factors. Authority would expire at the end of any calendar year for which required report(s) are not received.

Another site visit would be made in spring 2011, based on information received in the start-up report and the Annual Report provided by December 31, 2010 as an exercise to assess the institution’s progress.

The idea of developing and supporting the creation of this upper division “senior” college originated with the Massachusetts School of Law. Degree-granting authority became effective on May 18, 2010 when SB 312 was signed into law, and ACHLS admitted its first class in August 2010.

The visiting team had an opportunity to review ACHLS’s 2010 annual report and during the visit spent time with senior administrators (founding dean, dean, and associate dean), recruitment personnel, faculty members, and students. In addition, following our meeting, the team had an opportunity to observe a history course that was being conducted. This visit was conducted on March 23, 2011, and what follows represents a progress report.

## **LOCATION AND FACILITY**

ACHLS is located at 1 Stiles Road in Salem, NH and enjoys easy access from I-93. The comfortable first floor space that the school occupies is more than adequate for its current and planned operations; it consists of two classrooms, office spaces, a common area for student computer use and group receptions, and three bathrooms, including one that meets ADA requirements. Signage and parking are more than adequate.

## **ADDITIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENTS**

Beyond securing physical space and completing renovations, ACHLS has demonstrated significant institution-building efforts. Specifically, ACHLS has constructed an informative and user-friendly presence on the web; produced written literature on the school and its program; entered into formal articulation agreements with 12 community colleges; developed a visible media presence through advertisements, feature stories, radio, and local-access TV programming; a personnel policy handbook is forthcoming; and NEASC contacts have been initiated. Given the relatively short timeframe between

legislative approval and the present, these are rather serious and significant accomplishments. The energy and attention factors deserve commendation.

## **OBSERVATIONS and IMPRESSIONS**

ACHLS is a unique upper division college that provides an accelerated pathway to law school for those who qualify and wish to enter the legal profession. As such, it occupies a particularly distinct niche, a niche that poses some thorny and difficult obstacles, especially in the recruitment of students. As a new institution it must introduce itself, but has the added burden of articulating its uniqueness to a naturally smaller universe of potential student -- those interested in history and legal studies and likely to have more life experience than the usual community college graduate. For the first year, a cohort of seven students entered; four remain. Student recruitment, from both financial and pedagogical perspectives, is a critical issue and ACHLS recognizes that. An ambitious community college visitation calendar is in place; three recruiters are now on staff; regular appearances on local-access TV have taken place and are scheduled; visiting days for community college professors have taken place on the campus of ACHLS special audiences (student clubs, veteran's groups, Massachusetts School of Law graduates, etc. have been targeted); a Google presence has been secured; and Dr. Michael Chesson, ACHLS Dean and history professor, conducts free lectures. These are ambitious efforts, and demonstrate a serious commitment to make ACHLS known and successful. On the issue of size and concerns that the small cohort might negatively impact peer learning, students did not see this as problematic. At the time of the visit, it was too early to determine what the matriculated student yield for 2012 might be, but administrators were encouraged by the level of activity to date.

Students felt that ACHLS had very high expectations (easily confirmed by the syllabi and the sheer amount of reading and writing required) and that the program was challenging, acknowledging that it was not a program for everybody and that many recent community college graduates might have difficulty with the intensity and expectations. All believed that they had changed dramatically, for the better, as a result of their participation in the program.

Student evaluations of faculty for the fall semester 2010 were uniformly excellent. Faculty and students appear to have a mutually respectful and friendly rapport. Students were open, thoughtful, respectful, and clear on their personal objectives. Presently, three are planning to go on to law school and one is wavering a bit between law school and history teaching.

Access to faculty, library services through the Massachusetts School of Law, and student services was not problematic for any of the students.

The Harkness/Socratic method of teaching adds to the school's uniqueness, and helps to foster rich classroom engagement, critical thinking and, at times, vigorous debate among students.

## **SOME SUGGESTIONS**

While the visiting team was very encouraged by ACHLS's recruitment strategy and outreach efforts, it is critical that the institution pay close attention to enhancing the capture rate through continuous contact, "decision" events involving faculty and administrators, and other appropriate activities. This focus may enable ACHLS reach its target cohort enrollment of 10-15 students.

Dr. Michael Chesson plays a central role in that he is the Dean of ACHLS and is the primary professor of history. It is never too early to think about succession planning. There is an indication that several people would be in a position to take over Dr. Chesson's responsibilities, if needed. Given the reality of personnel identification, some planning efforts that would include periodic meetings and increased integration activities seem appropriate.

Not much has been done with formal identification and assessment of student outcomes. Nevertheless, key outcomes are embedded in the course syllabi and in the institution's mission. In addition, it is clear that ACHLS is doing an excellent job helping students to become critical thinkers, effective communicators, and team players. These skills can also be measured, and the team encouraged attendance at a workshop designed to help colleges and universities improve their outcomes assessment programs.

### **A FINAL WORD**

It is the shared opinion of the team that ACHLS is indeed a unique institution, and there is a place for this innovative college in the landscape of higher education in New England. The pioneering vision of its founders, employees and students is alive and it is a shared hope that ACHLS will be able to locate and corner the specialized market that it aspires to reach.

ACHLS is in compliance with Commission requirements as stated in Pos 1000. The team has every confidence in the capacity of the institution to realize its plans. Further updates will be provided to the Commission upon receipt of required annual reports and a next site visit is to be scheduled spring of 2013, before current Postsecondary Education Commission approval expires.