DavidsonLearns End of Year Report 2019­­–2020

I. Introduction

The DavidsonLearns Academic Year 2019–2020 will be remembered as an extraordinary time of organizational growth and innovation suddenly interrupted by COVID-19, a biological storm of devastating consequences that threatened and complicated our lives, economy, and educational system at all levels.

Despite the abrupt curtailment of our Spring 2020 courses and special events, our academic year was filled with many impressive successes that helped us achieve major strategic planning goals and objectives. Our goal of continued, managed growth was achieved as we produced a record number of courses, memberships, and course enrollments. This growth was enhanced by the expansion of our Curriculum, Spotlight Events, Communication, Facility, and Technology teams. All these teams were staffed with volunteers who were specifically selected by BOD Committee Chairpersons for their proven knowledge and experience. These volunteers each demonstrated a special commitment to bring the highest level of quality to the learning experience of our members.

We are especially grateful to Pam Dykstra and Sandy Manly of the Curriculum Committee for their outstanding leadership in producing high quality, diverse, and relevant courses each academic season. We also deeply appreciate our exceptional volunteer instructors whose talent and support are a critical component of our remarkable academic success.

II. The Fall Academic Season 2019

The highlight of the Fall Academic Season was the implementation of our new DL registration system, designed to more efficiently enroll members and course participants. Kathy Pearce and her expert volunteers on the new Technology Committee researched online registration systems, made a selection, and carefully guided members through the initial process. The system worked well, with the few minor glitches recognized and resolved.

Members rapidly filled the 18 Fall courses and instruction began at eight facility sites located throughout the Davidson community. This number of classes starting simultaneously in a geographically dispersed manner was becoming increasingly difficult to manage and support. The BOD assigned Rich Heavener and Mike Booe to organize a new Facilities Committee whose purpose was to improve the processes and procedures required to support the growing number of courses and new sites during the Winter-Spring Academic Season 2020.

In addition to the growth of the DL curriculum, the number of Spotlight Events was increasing. Allyson Ray and her expanded Special Events Committee designed an exciting array of 12 live events and three virtual events, with topics that included history, theater, music, community focus, and politics. The goal of the Committee was to offer a wide variety of Spotlight Events with different venues, presentation styles, and a variable schedule to maximize member participation.

Meg Kimmel and her new Communication Committee continued to expand messaging for DavidsonLearns, building on a newly created brochure, first distributed over the 2019 summer break. They also developed signage to cross-promote the expanded courses and Spotlight Events, increasing awareness and encouraging attendance. BOD leaders participated in several presentations at area organizations to convey DL opportunities. After just six months, we saw significant increase in first-time members participating in both course and Spotlight events.

III. The Winter Academic season 2020

The Winter/Spring 2020 term promised to be the most dynamic in DavidsonLearns history with 22 course offerings and an enrollment of 456 students. Our base of volunteers continued to grow, most notably in the Facilities Committee filling the roles of site coordinators and classroom hosts. Our Communications committee produced new DavidsonLearns brochures, banners, promotional materials for Spotlight Events, Curriculum, and other public presentations.

Our Strategic Planning Committee began to look at long-term classroom needs in a manner that reflects the growing interest in DavidsonLearns.

By mid-March the Winter courses were concluding successfully and the Spring courses just beginning when the COVID-19 struck in North Carolina.

IV. The Spring Academic Season 2020

The arrival of COVID-19 in North Carolina in early March set off a cascading series of local and state directives that ultimately produced a stay-at-home isolation order. All community education activities were cancelled at all levels as public health priorities prevailed over normal life. On March 12 the Board of Directors conferred, and Executive Director Jake Jacobs cancelled the remaining Spring Academic Season, which consisted of seven courses and four live Spotlight Events. Notifications were immediately sent to our members and students, explaining the unique situation and emphasizing the importance of conforming to the public health disease prevention measures.

The Communications Committee had begun the process of developing a promotional video for DavidsonLearns, contracting with a local production agency and even capturing initial interviews and footage. Production was suspended on March 12, to resume when the coast is clear.

Yet, DavidsonLearns’ good work continued. Our organization has experienced tremendous growth since its inception in 2012, and its size and complexity now requires a more flexible structure, conforming to nonprofit best practices. Jake Jacobs, Kathy Pearce, and Mike Booe studied our current bylaws to discover areas for updating. The most substantial recommended change is the conversion of the corporation from a *member-driven* organization to a *board-driven* organization. The change would primarily eliminate member voting to elect directors, to amend bylaws, or decide other matters of corporate governance or organizational change.

With the suspension of the Spring term due to COVID-19, the Board of Directors formed a Contingency Planning Group to explore learning options should social distancing continue to be necessary. We are confident that we will return to in-person instruction in time, but for now we are considering other options. Anne Shandley is forming an Online Instructional Support Team to serve, should we need to go to online instruction for the Fall Academic Season of 2020. Currently, the Contingency Planning Group has developed four plans to be used, depending on evolving scenarios.

V. Conclusion

Like so many other worthwhile nonprofit organizations, we now find ourselves forced to navigate a course in uncertain times. While we are a relatively young and small organization, we have been highly successful in producing a high-quality adult education experience, confident that we are headed in the right direction to remain successful even in these difficult circumstances. We have a strong base of support from our dedicated volunteer faculty and scores of eager community learners. We have an incredible group of smart and experienced board of directors and committee chairs who, under the leadership of John Griffith, have crafted a realistic long-range strategic plan, providing us with a clear vision and mission. We will continue to pursue our current goals and objectives — knowing that these times and circumstances will require us to be nimble, flexible, and adaptable. These are our keys to survival and success!