



MINNESOTA STATE
Board of Trustees

AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

NAME: Academic and Student Affairs Committee

DATE: January 29, 2025

TITLE: Restructuring of Dakota County Technical College and Inver Hills Community College

Action

Review and Discussion

This item is required by policy

PRESENTERS

Satasha Green-Stephen, Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs

Michael Berndt, President, Dakota County Technical College and Inver Hills Community College

PURPOSE

Inver Hills Community College and Dakota County Technical College seek approval to pursue a merger, becoming one accredited institution with two unique locations. A merger would allow the institution to fully realize the benefits of their current collaborations and address the challenges of sharing students and employees across two separately accredited institutions.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Inver Hills Community College and Dakota County Technical College currently operate as independently accredited institutions. Beginning in 2012, the colleges began to more formally align departments and positions (CECT in FY2012; CFO in FY2013; Marketing in FY2014; and the CHRO, CIO, and Director of Operations in FY2015). The president of Inver Hills was made interim president of DCTC in FY2014 and the permanent president of both colleges in FY2015. Since this time, the colleges have continued to align employees; currently, 64 employees are aligned, constituting 28% of total staff and administration. Alignment has been a valuable strategy for maintaining core services during a long period of declining enrollment. Core areas of the colleges, however, continue to operate independently, including budgeting, academic programming, academic tutoring, student life, and accreditation.

In 2020, the colleges developed a joint 2021-2027 Strategic Plan, advancing collaboration as a cross-cutting strategy. Out of that planning process, the colleges developed mission statements with shared elements: *Discover, Learn, and Build a Better Future*. The colleges also developed a common vision (*At DCTC/Inver Hills, we aspire to create a transformational education for every student founded on belonging, learning, support, clear pathways, and community engagement*) and common values (*Student Centered, Equity Minded, Community Engaged*). The Strategic

Plan also encourages both colleges to collaborate in multiple ways:

- Reviewing policies and processes to promote equity and student success encourages us to learn from one another, developing one set of best practices (1.1).
- Developing inclusive teaching and support services encourages learning together and from one another (2.1, 2.5)
- Collaborating with external organizations to recruit students, provide workforce training, and build philanthropic relationships can be done more effectively and efficiently by leveraging community interest in both colleges (1.3, 2.2, 2.3).
- The colleges can enhance their students' experience by mapping how students might move among our many programs, and advising across the colleges, within a guided learning pathways framework (1.3, 2.4).

The effect of this collaboration has been annual savings of over \$3.7M*, greater efficiencies in our outreach efforts, and more students seeking to take classes at both institutions. In FY2024, 107 students were enrolled at both colleges.

We have reached a point, however, where our current approach of alignment only is proving unsustainable. Shared employees navigate two colleges with their own departmental organizations,

* Based on FY2023 salaries and benefits to cover current functions with separate staff (e.g., two Financial Aid directors, two CHROs, and so on).

technologies, data systems, policies, and procedures. Students using both colleges struggle to access the same services as their home college. Additionally, because we are separate colleges, we lose the true potential of our alignment—offering students the opportunity to navigate seamlessly across more than 100 transfer and career and technical programs, to select from a varied schedule of course offerings, and to access more services and co-curricular learning opportunities.

Consultative Process

To decide whether the colleges would stabilize alignment or seek approval for a merger, the administration developed a consultative process. To develop the process, administration met several times with administrators from Minnesota North, the Minnesota State college with the most recent experience with a merger (Minnesota North sought Board of Trustees approval to pursue a merger in 2020). A four-phase process was set up to structure our work; had the colleges sought to stabilize alignment, phase two would have reflected the development of a stabilization plan.

- Phase One (June-October 2024): Assess the Situation and Set Direction for Alignment or Merger. This phase has two major components.
 - *Decision*: Decide whether to pursue a merger or stabilize alignment.
 - *Metrics*: Develop metrics to evaluate the impact of alignment work.
- Phase Two (November-May 2025): Develop the Plan. This phase has four major components.
 - *Governance*: Define leadership and governance structure for the merger
 - *Support*: Define project management approach

- *Planning*: Develop a comprehensive set of plans for merging the two colleges. Continue the alignment work that does not require a formal merger.
- *Engagement*: Define approach to communications and stakeholder engagement
- Phase Three (August-May 2026): Secure formal approval from governing bodies.
 - *Implement the Merger Plan*: Launch merger plans and continue the work already underway.
 - *Change of Control Structure*: Apply for Change of Control Structure to the Higher Learning Commission.
 - *Name and Mission Approval*: Pursue provisional approval from the Board of Trustees to change our name and mission.
 - *Final Approval*: Seek final Board approval to merge the institutions.
- Phase Four (August-Dec 2026): Continue implementation and assessment.

To launch Phase One, administration presented at the fall development days to faculty and staff and shared a 16-page feasibility study to document the current state of our alignment and to identify where we could learn more about the challenges and opportunities of further alignment or merger. We engaged in many discussions among faculty, staff, students, union leadership, and community partners to get feedback on these potential directions. We established an all-employee Teams site where summaries of the stakeholder discussions and survey results were posted. We also solicited employee input through an anonymous survey. Based on the feedback, the president decided to pursue a merger, sharing with the colleges a vision for the merger on October 2:

Dakota County Technical College and Inver Hills Community College will pursue a bold new future as a comprehensive community and technical college. One college, two unique locations, offering the South Metro over 100 programs of study, robust and inclusive support services, and extensive business and community partnerships.

Together we will deliver our mission to provide education for employment, transfer and life-long growth and our vision to provide a transformational education for all students that emphasizes belonging, learning, support, clear pathways, and community engagement.

Merging the institutions will provide several benefits to students, community partners, and employees:

- Improved recruitment with more program options and expanded geographic footprint
- Clearer message to students and communities: one institution, two locations
- Improved student retention by offering more programs pathways
- Enhanced learning experience for students by providing access to leading-edge equipment and learning labs
- Some additional personnel and non-personnel savings
- Expanded course schedule to include both colleges' offerings
- More staff time for recruitment, retention, fundraising, grants
- Improvements in quality of work life for shared employees (e.g., same systems)
- Flexibility for programs to share facilities and resources; more capacity to expand high-demand programs
- Streamlined engagement with community partners, high schools, businesses

In Phase Two, the colleges will develop department and division merger plans and set in place the infrastructure to manage the merger; this includes the project management support, governance structure, and communication plans.

Important Considerations and Guiding Principles

The colleges are working through the shared governance process several principles that would inform the design of Phases Two and Three.

- Prioritize the Student Experience
- Value Employees
- Build a Unified, Inclusive Culture
- Commit to Open Communication and Collaboration
- Optimize Resources and Processes
- Adopt a Change Management Approach

If given permission to advance the merger process, the colleges would plan against a May 2026 target date for becoming one institution. Consistent, however, with a change management approach, we are building in the contingency of a May 2027 target, recognizing that part of the Phase Two planning is to account for several factors:

- Our assessment of institutional capacity
- Impact of other projects (e.g., Workday)
- System Office capacity to meet deadlines in their domain
- Federal, state and regional accreditation timelines

If given approval, we would begin discussions in earnest with the system office, the Higher Learning Commission, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, the U.S. Department of Education, and other agencies that may impact the timeline. At the end of Phase 2, we would be able to determine whether May 2026 is realistic.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Upon the recommendation of the Chancellor, the Academic and Student Affairs Committee recommends that the Board of Trustees support the intent of merging Dakota County Technical College and Inver Hills Community College into one accredited college (two campuses) and charges President Berndt with developing a comprehensive plan and timeline for such a merger and for securing institutional accreditation.