

Planning for a Post-COVID Direction
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March 2021

In 2020, just as the COVID pandemic was hitting with full force, we completed our strongest admissions year and the largest fundraising campaign in Denison's history, which helped push our endowment over \$1 billion. These successes are the result of efforts by our staff and faculty—in collaboration with board members and alumni—to achieve key goals of our 2015 strategic plan. As we turn to a new round of strategic planning, we need to build on that momentum while also recognizing the challenges we will face in a post-COVID world.

The key challenge in front of us is keeping the college healthy so that we can provide a life-shaping education for our students and a great work environment for our faculty and staff. Both are important and intertwined. A faculty member recently wrote to me, "Relationships with students keeps staff and faculty energized and is the key to our mission and financial stability. And relationships with colleagues are what make Denison a valued place to work and get everyone through the times when the demands are exhausting. Strategic planning should be about deepening student learning and making sure that we all still have a place to work where we can thrive and build connections with each other. To do that, we need to address the challenges of the moment."

In recognition of the fact that staff and faculty are the foundation of the university's work, we are on course to be able to grant salary increases over the next few weeks. We will be one of the very few private colleges providing salary increases this year. We will share more details in the coming weeks.

In more normal times, we would find ways to get people around tables to discuss challenges and opportunities. It is much harder to do this via Zoom, and it is even harder during a challenging pandemic semester. The good news is that a lot of important work is already happening across campus. But we also need space and time to share ideas about the future and the work we want to do together.

One of the positive outcomes of COVID has been closer working relationships between me, Kim Coplin, and a faculty leadership group that consists of the Chair of the Faculty, Chair-Elect, Former Chair, the Chair and Vice-Chair of AAC, and the Chair of UC. We are meeting weekly and will partner with this group to guide the process, which is outlined at the end of this letter. Our goal is to learn from the perspectives of our community and to identify ideas and places where we have energy and enthusiasm to address the issues laid out below along with others that will arise from the conversations.

As you prepare to engage with us in this work, I ask that you read and consider the following issues that are shaping my thinking about what lies ahead.

What are the current challenges facing higher education?

Higher education is being reshaped by the prolonged COVID health crisis. Across higher education, universities have reduced faculty and staff positions, cut academic departments, and frozen benefits of various kinds. The pandemic accelerated the use of technology, reshaping what teaching means and where and how students experience a college campus. This PBS series [Rethinking College](#) is worth watching.

While these trends are disconcerting, they are mostly not new. COVID has accelerated existing trends, which we saw coming and have been responding to for the last few years. Denison has more opportunities than challenges in front of us.

We are fortunate. Denison has long been a strong and healthy university anchored by a liberal arts curriculum, a talented and dedicated faculty and staff committed to our students, highly engaged alumni, and a large endowment. In 2015, we expanded upon these strengths and developed a [strategic plan](#) that responded to challenges and trends. We also used our financial strength to become one of the few universities to meet the full demonstrated financial aid need of students. [Princeton Review](#) recently named us the 10th Best College for Financial Aid.

The 2015 Strategic Plan created the momentum that has kept us healthy through the COVID crisis. For example, we are coming off five exceptionally strong consecutive admissions cycles.

Metric	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Applications	4,898	6,100	6,881	7,540	8,042	8,812	9,079	9,400*
Early Decision	231	246	241	377	506	589	602	661
Admission Rate	51%	48%	44%	37%	34%	29%	28%	28%*
Class size	611	632	640	617	654	625	605	615*

*Estimates at this point in time

Despite these successes, the external environment will get harder, especially as it relates to student recruitment. COVID will accelerate the trend of students looking for inexpensive options that are close to home and perceived as practical. A recent report by [Populace Insights](#) found that “Americans personally prioritize financial considerations, job prospects, applied instruction, and industry connections when making higher education decisions. *Meaning, considerations are influenced less by expectations of the higher education experience itself, and more by the outcomes made possible by it*” (p. 15).

Too often, liberal arts colleges are perceived by prospective families to be small, insular, expensive, lacking in academic and social options, and located in communities with few services or opportunities. These perceptions keep many prospective students from even visiting a liberal arts college. More families are forgoing a Midwest college tour in favor of the South where they can see mid-size and larger universities that have gained increasing popularity (e.g., Wake Forest, Vanderbilt, Elon, SMU, Tulane).

How do we respond to the challenges and opportunities of a post-COVID higher education landscape?

The power of what we do arises from immersing students in world-class academics and a great residential college experience while providing career exploration and guidance along the way that unlocks students’ potential to launch into lives quickly and successfully. Our path forward should focus on how we enhance this process and give students a directional roadmap to take advantage of it.



World-Class Academics: The academic experience at Denison forms the core of a student’s experience. It is why we exist, and it is where the life-shaping experience starts. We help students develop a set of attributes that allow them to understand the world around them as they learn to think critically, understand profoundly, and connect broadly. This includes attributes outlined by the historian William Cronon in his

piece [Only Connect](#), like the ability to write and communicate; work with numbers and data, weave disparate ideas into new ways of thinking, frame questions, solve puzzles and problems, connect with a broad range of people and ideas, and identify and follow a line of logic.

We approach teaching the attributes above in ways that create a way of being in the world. Liberal arts students experience the beauty and meaning of intellectual pursuits; rigorous scholarship, and sharp thinking; the thrill of knowledge for its own sake; and the impact of learning when standards are high and classmates are engaged with the course material and one another.

Liberal arts colleges also differ from many other forms of education in that we purposefully strike a balance between the individual and community. We want to provide students with the skills, values, habits, networks, and experiences to succeed in life. And we seek to instill in students a sense that we all should strive to live in ways that contribute beyond ourselves, recognizing and respecting that contributing will take many forms and be unique to each individual.

As we move forward, I would encourage us to focus on the following:

- Continue to recruit and support a diverse faculty of accomplished teachers, scholars, and artists, who are fully committed to working with undergraduates, exposing students to a wide range of views and perspectives, and creating room for students to learn to think for themselves.
- Support our long-standing academic programs to sustain the breadth and depth of our curriculum. As part of this work, make sure that departments with high numbers of majors and/or enrollments have faculty and spaces to do their work effectively. A lot of good work has continued on academic space planning. We need to finalize plans and start implementing them.
- Build on recent successes in refining current offerings through curricular revisions and developing new academic programs that are rooted in the liberal arts, depend upon our more traditional academic programs, and are also very attractive to prospective students. Our new academic programs are major drivers for student recruitment and are crucial to our current financial health.
- Build on strengths across the arts and the Eisner and Bryant art centers to emerge as a top college for arts-oriented students who aren't looking for a conservatory. Invest intentionally to support ideas and projects that keep the humanities strong at Denison.
- Continue to support the intellectual and professional work that sustains and energizes faculty and so often supports their teaching (e.g., PD accounts, RC Good fellowships, Bowens, DURFs, regular sabbaticals) and helps build an intellectual community across campus.
- Take advantage of the opportunities through the Center for Global Programs to ensure that a Denison experience is not bound by place.

Finally, we need to support faculty in continuously exploring pedagogy and teaching, especially the importance of varied pedagogies needed to meet the needs of a more diverse student community. Nothing is more important to the future of the college than the quality of teaching. We won't stay strong if the quality of teaching is not significantly better and more life-shaping than what students can find at lower-cost institutions. As part of this focus, we may want to invest more in the Center for Learning & Teaching to create space and support for faculty at various moments of their career to focus on teaching, mentoring, and our work with students.

A Great Residential Experience: Denison is also unique in being fully residential. We believe liberal learning extends across campus. Our campus is a design studio for students to practice and deepen the liberal arts as they participate in campus organizations and athletics, live in residential halls with peers from across the world, participate in and become patrons of the arts, and learn to build and sustain community. There is something powerful about living with high-achieving peers who are committed to the liberal arts, who want to do well in life, and who bring a wide range of views, perspectives, and life experiences to campus.

Our students have a unique opportunity to focus fully on their education with others who are doing the same. Students study together across campus, grapple with ideas over meals and long conversations with friends, and collaborate on projects during evenings and weekends. It is a special way of living for four years that leads to tremendous intellectual and personal growth.

I would encourage us to focus on:

- Continuing to recruit and support a diverse student community of highly motivated and engaged students who are looking for a fully residential liberal arts experience, excited to learn to live and to work across difference, and ready to be mentored and challenged by faculty and staff who want to help them unlock their potential to be the architect of their lives.
- Building on the diversity within our campus community to create a campus culture of equity, anti-racism, inclusion, and belonging where members of our community see it as their responsibility to create and sustain the values of our community and where every member knows they have the opportunity to contribute and to be successful. The Denison Forward plan is of critical importance.
- Ensuring that students have opportunities to pursue co-curricular activities at a high level. For example, more than 30% of our students come to Denison intending to play athletics. Many of our students are drawn to Denison because of a co-curricular passion and they will devote a lot of time to it. For those students, these activities are a core part of their educational experience.
- Helping students develop the emotional agility, resiliency, and life-habits they will need throughout their lives. This is not new but feels particularly important for this generation of students given the pace and challenges of modern life.
- Making sure students have a sufficient variety of social venues and outlets on campus as well as potentially increasing engagement with Columbus. Beneath all of this, we need to ensure that Denison gives our students social options. Granville is not a college town, especially compared to more traditional university towns like Ann Arbor; Madison; or Athens, Ohio. Post-COVID we need to make sure students have social venues and outlets on campus.

Students and alumni speak with great fondness about their residential experience. But more and more, students are gravitating to mid-size and larger campuses where they don't have to live on campus and where there are more local social options. At this moment in time, I would argue that our fully residential model is a strength of the college. We need to listen carefully to students and keep it that way.

Career Exploration as Life Launch: The power of our approach to career exploration comes from not reducing career preparation to merely finding a job. We approach career exploration from a liberal arts framework which we define as engaging in three questions: What kind of life do I want to live? How do careers allow people to be the architects of their lives? How do I use part of my time at Denison to develop the skills, values, habits, networks, and experiences to get started? Career exploration for Denison is about life-launching, helping students define the lives they want to lead, and then starting on that journey.

Often, this work starts in classrooms and in conversations with faculty. In classrooms, students' minds and imaginations are opened. It is our academic rigor that helps students develop a range of skills and attributes. Faculty (and staff) engage students in what are often life-shaping conversations about lives and career paths. The academic work sets the foundation for the work students then do with The Knowlton Center, Red Frame Lab, Lisska Center, and Launch Lab that helps them better articulate the knowledge and skills they have gained at Denison.

Consistent with [this recent report](#) from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, our work over the last few years has confirmed the centrality of liberal arts attributes to career launch. As the report states, "The growing importance of cognitive competencies has coincided with the growing demand for higher education." The report lists liberal arts attributes like teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and complex thinking as crucial work-place attributes. We are hearing the same from employers across a wide range of professions.

At the same time, liberal arts students often lack small but important profession-specific skills to be competitive for their first internship or job. Companies have largely phased out training programs. They expect new hires to show up on day one with the skills to add value. We have also learned that liberal arts students can struggle to find the “on-ramps.” Compared to a student coming from a pre-professional program where those on-ramps are part of the curriculum, it can be less clear how our students get from their academic major to the first job. This recent piece entitled [Good Jobs in Bad Times](#) by Jeff Selingo and Matt Sigelman is worth reading.

I would encourage us to focus on the following:

- Maintaining the academic rigor that helps students develop a range of skills and attributes.
- Continuing the long-standing tradition of faculty and staff engaging students in what are often life-shaping conversations with students about lives and career paths.
- Supporting the Knowlton Center, Red Frame Lab, Lisska Center, and Launch Lab in helping students better articulate the knowledge and skills they have acquired at Denison and developing a post-graduation game plan.

Establishing the Knowlton Center, Red Frame Lab, Lisska Center, and Launch Lab were major areas of focus the last few years. Each of these teams supports students in different ways through the career exploration, preparation, and launch process. The centers are also starting to connect with and support academic departments in important ways. Integrating their work and connecting it to academic departments in the right ways is important as we move forward.

A Footnote on career exploration as life launch: Career exploration is important for many reasons, but two are crucial for us to acknowledge. Unlike many other private colleges, 60% of our students receive need-based aid. Most often, these students don’t have family networks to rely on. They count on Denison and Denison alumni to help them launch. Second, our listed price is now over \$280,000 across four years, and the average student will pay more than \$152,000. Students and families won’t pay that kind of tuition unless they believe it will be life-shaping. This starts with the academics and co-curricular experiences that take place during college, and it includes success post-college. This is especially true as the price gap grows between a Denison education and public education. It’s worth noting [Ohio State’s recent announcement](#) that they will make an OSU education debt-free for students. As more states go down similar paths and offer a cheaper and/or free public option, the pressure will grow on private colleges. However, I would also strongly argue that we don’t want to reduce career exploration to merely getting a job. A liberal arts college should contextualize career exploration as part of a larger process of life launch—helping students become the architects of their lives.

Mentoring students to integrate the pillars: The power of a Denison education occurs as the three pillars of academics, residential campus, and career exploration are integrated. Students have to do this work, but they need a roadmap. Most often this comes from the mentorship they receive from faculty and staff. This makes Denison a supportive, rigorous, and challenging experience. Faculty push students to achieve their academic potential. Coaches push athletes to achieve at a high level and to do so by working with others. Across campus we ask students to be engaged; to try new things; and to learn to listen to, hear, and live with people who see the world differently.

We need to recognize that none of this is easy. Denison is hard work and is not for everyone. Students have to be excited about and ready to live on a fully residential campus, be challenged in the classroom, and be engaged across campus. They have to be ready to work hard, rise to their potential, and confront important issues in ways that may make them uncomfortable.

To succeed, students need various levels of support. This work often starts with faculty, student development staff, and coaches, and it includes staff from across the college. It is often AAAs, facilities staff, and work-study supervisors who are there for students in moments of need. My August 2020 [welcome back letter](#) was one attempt to provide a roadmap. Pre-COVID, we were just starting to re-

examine our first-year program and considering adding a sophomore year program which can be a lost moment to engage students in creating a map for their education. We need to get back to these conversations.

Integration is happening in interesting ways. Some academic departments are connecting with the Knowlton Center to do more explicit work to connect academic work with potential career paths. Other academic departments are focused on developing co-curricular components that close the gap between students' academic and co-curricular experiences. And some academic programs are working with the Center for Global Programs to more closely align the major with the off campus/study abroad experience.

How do we prepare for the future?

The guiding question for me is: How can we work together to strengthen the three pillars above and integrate them in ways that deepen students' learning? And how do we do this work in ways that keep the college healthy, ensuring that we will have a place to work where we can thrive, feel productive and respected, and build connections with one another well into the future? To this end, we need to:

- **Enhance the attributes that define the Denison experience.** While it is an uncomfortable question, we need to ask ourselves: As public colleges continue to offer more variety at a very low price, what will lead a family to pay \$158,000-\$290,000 for a Denison education? We have a strong answer if we focus on the academic and residential experience that form the core of a Denison education and lead to so much gratitude from students and families.
- **Focus on career exploration as part of a larger process of life-launch.** We need to better document the success of our recent graduates, close small profession-specific skills gaps, help students better explain to employers how their liberal arts learning translates into career-related skills, and ensure that every student is engaged and creates a post-graduation career plan.
- **Create strong and healthy relationships and work environments.** As soon as we can be together again, we need to focus on creating space and time for relationships with colleagues. The number of faculty, staff, and administrators has grown. We work in more buildings, live farther apart from one another, and have lots of demands on our time. We need ways to be together and to build and sustain an intellectual community and social relationships.
- **Support our people.** With 800 faculty and staff, many have had their professional lives interrupted in a variety of ways. Some have been hit harder than others. We need to recognize these realities and find ways to help faculty and staff get back on the professional tracks they were working towards pre-COVID.
- **Create a financial model that carries us into the future.** We need to carefully develop a comprehensive plan to ensure the financial health of the college that includes keeping a Denison education affordable to students across the socio-economic spectrum.

Final Reflection

Reflecting on the last year, a senior faculty member recently wrote to me, "The COVID-19 experience has affirmed for me the way Denison's mission and success are defined by the dedication, commitment, and devotion that arise from relationships. From our faculty, who overcame myriad hurdles to deliver a quality liberal arts experience; to our support staff, who transformed our campus and learning platforms; to our alums, who stepped up to ensure our students had the resources needed to move forward; to our Board of Trustees, who delivered a personal message of gratitude; and, to our students, who pulled together as a community to take advantage of being on campus mindful of the necessity of adhering to our compact. Our success in navigating this crisis has been the product of the commitment and dedication of our entire community to the liberal arts mission and the centrality of relationships in realizing our goals. These qualities are Denison's secret sauce." This seems like a perfect observation to finish this letter.

Appendix: Getting Started on Creating A Post-COVID Plan

Timing: It has been an exhausting year and most faculty and staff have very little time and energy beyond what we are using to give students a great semester. At the same time, we need to develop a plan to manage a challenging time for higher education. The planning will also feed ideas into our next fundraising campaign. As such, we need to start to get ideas in place by fall 2021 and finalized by winter of 2022. The process below builds on current work and structures while also giving people lots of opportunities to participate and help shape plans for the future. While we are doing this work with faculty and staff, we will also be engaging our trustees and alumni through a series of virtual meetings.

Phase #1: March-June

- **Campus Conversations:** Kim and I will organize Zoom conversations to create opportunities for small groups of faculty and for staff to use this document as the basis for discussion. We will work with the Faculty Leadership Group, which includes the chairs and vice-chairs of the faculty, UC and AAC, the Engagement and Communications Committee (ECC), and others to make sure there are opportunities for anybody who wants to participate. As ideas emerge, we will create space for faculty and staff to work on and refine them.
- **Focus on the Three Pillars:**
 - **World Class Academics.** We are going to start with three different conversations. The Provost Team will work with department chairs and program directors to create plans for each of our divisions (arts, humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences) and interdisciplinary programs. This work will start this spring and continue into the fall. The Provost Team is also going to work with faculty to finalize the academic space plan with timetables by early summer. We anticipate starting space projects in summer 2022. Finally, we are going to rely on The Center for Learning and Teaching, Lisska Center for Scholarly Engagement, and Center for Global Programs to help steer relevant pieces of this work. The Provost Office is going to work with each center to pull together a small group of faculty to organize some planning sessions in late May and early June. The sessions will bring together interested faculty to imagine ideas for ways that these Centers can address the opportunities and challenges that lay ahead. We hope to include a social element in many of these May/June conversations.
 - **Great Residential Experience.** Student Development within the division and with students and interested faculty and staff will address the future of campus life with a focus on the issues outlined in this letter. The goal will be for a draft plan to be developed by the start of the next academic year.
 - **Career Exploration.** The Knowlton Center, Red Frame Lab, Lisska Center, and Launch Lab are working together to create an integrated plan for our work on career and life launch. The plan will be done by June. The Knowlton Center will also continue its work with academic departments on ways to enhance career work being done within academic departments to support students in any academic program.
- **The Denison Forward Plan:** will be completed by the working group this semester and a small leadership team will be put into place with resources to implement the plan, create accountability, and report to the campus community regularly.
- **Supporting our People:** This work will proceed on multiple tracks. The Provost will work with Department Chairs and other groups of faculty to identify ways faculty have had their professional lives interrupted. VPs and HR will do the same for staff. We will also work with the faculty leadership group and ECC to bring faculty and staff together when we can do that again.

Phase #2: July-September- As we get into the summer, we will use the conversations above to map out the next phase of planning. Our goal is to have some draft ideas for the community to explore by the start of the next academic year.