

REDEFINING OUR GREATNESS

In my inaugural address last November, I committed us to the work of redefining Columbia College Chicago's greatness as an institution. To achieve that goal, we must re-embrace our mission, assess how well we deliver on the promises that we make to our students and to the wider world, and commit to changes that will allow us to fully meet the obligations placed on us by our mission. We must strengthen our sense of community and raise the bar of our collective aspiration, setting our sights on nothing less than achieving our full potential as an educational innovator, a generator of student success, and an incubator of new creative practice.

We will embark upon this journey with significant advantages. Columbia College Chicago's focus on creative practice positions us at a cutting edge of the early twenty-first century. Our core values of access to rigorous, hands-on learning; diversity and inclusion; and deep engagement with community connect us directly to key national conversations about the value of higher education in our changing world. Our fundamental commitment to preparing students to author the culture of their time differentiates us from our peers in a powerful and compelling way.

While we seek to develop the highest level of skill in our students through an intensive learning-by-doing model, we know that skills alone will not suffice as a foundation for lifelong success. Given life's vagaries and the inevitability of change, we must develop our students' capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, make sound judgments, continuously adapt, and recognize and respond to opportunity. We must also equip them with the competencies and proficiencies that will support their success and achievement in the twenty-first century.

We are neither a traditional arts and media college nor a liberal arts college. The former focuses on developing the specific skills which will prepare students to take their places in existing professions and industries. The latter values the common learning outcomes achieved through study across a range of disciplines as the basis for building meaningful lives, but struggles to provide students with a clear starting point for building those lives. Our mission requires that we populate the educational space between those models, constructing a hybrid model that combines the best of both.

If our students are to be authors of culture, they must approach their futures with a sense of agency and ownership of possibility. This is not merely an acquired attitude; it requires fluency with a set of practical skills that will allow them to translate their creative passions into real world success.

It also requires the confidence of purpose, which only comes from having tested one's actions, beliefs, and values in the world. Our students must learn in part through deep engagement with our communities; their work must interact with and interrogate the world around us if they are to develop the authentic voice which must animate their creative practice. At Columbia College Chicago, producing expert makers and doers is not enough. Our students must become creative agents in the world whose work and practice is informed by a sense of social justice and responsibility.

If our students are to create that which does not yet exist, they must also have every opportunity to learn from the voice and the experience of the other. At Columbia College Chicago, our commitment to diversity is inextricably linked to our educational purpose. We believe that a community which brings diverse voices and experiences into close proximity is fertile ground for creating new ideas and new creative practice when a fundamental social tenet is the honoring of difference and a fundamental educational principle is collaborating with difference.

This commitment must become systemic so that the institution, all institutional processes, and all members of our community can be held accountable. We must educate our community in the often uncomfortable work of hearing and honoring the voice of those who have been marginalized, neglected, or silenced, and we must push ourselves to move this commitment into the very fabric of the institution so that it is reflected in the content of what we do.

Finally, we must embrace technology and new media, both as tools and as partners in creating new content and imagining new creative processes. Our teaching, our facilities, and our curricula must fully embody our commitment to exploring new technologies, lest we fail in our obligation to prepare our students for the future.

WHERE WE ARE TODAY

As I approach the end of my first year at Columbia College Chicago, I continue to be inspired by my belief in our institution's bright future. With a new insider's perspective, I see more clearly than ever that the promise and potential which drew me here are real. But we are far from realizing our promise. While where and what we are is very good indeed, we must go much further and become much better.

At the heart of our institution are the profound bonds between our expert faculty and our courageous students. These relationships and the deep, engaged learning that they foster define our value. Moving outwards from that luminous core, we encounter the challenges that we must name and overcome in our work ahead:

The college has not responded strategically to massive change in the external environment triggered by the 2008 recession. While other educational institutions, particularly those in the public sector, have engaged in intense experimentation and reinvention since that time, we have remained relatively passive in spite of six consecutive years of enrollment decline.

Lacking a compelling vision for the future and a plan to get us there, administrative and academic leaders have been unable to provide clear, consistent direction, leading to frustration, fragmentation, and territoriality.

Our academic structures and curricula impede experimentation and collaboration, and we lack an effective infrastructure for assessing our educational effectiveness.

Our undergraduate retention and graduation rates are far lower than they should be, and make our narratives about fostering student success ring hollow.

Our resource base is inadequate to the task of fully supporting the college's aspirations. The affordability of a Columbia College Chicago education is a major concern to many of our students.

In our administrative operations, we struggle with a legacy of patching problems – a tendency to add to rather than replace. We seem to have accepted an inadequate level of skill in many key administrative positions and functional areas as the norm. We have yet to develop the effective central administrative structures necessary to implement significant institutional change.

Our development operation is underperforming both in dollars raised and in the degree of sustained engagement with our alumni.

Our information technology infrastructure is ineffective and compromises our ability to function optimally.

Our external reputation is mixed and inconsistent, largely due to our not having framed a consistent, compelling narrative about who we are and what we do. We are not widely recognized as a key asset to Chicago, and we continue to be described as a well-kept secret.

None of these challenges is unique to us, and no challenge that we face is without a solution. We must recognize, however, that we are late to the race, and that our better future depends on our summoning a collective urgency to move forward as quickly as we can. We must be courageous in the face of our reality. We must take informed, decisive action.

WHERE WE MUST BE STUDENT CENTEREDNESS

As we commit to moving forward together, we must reaffirm that our core purpose is to serve our students. Everything we do at the institution must help foster their personal and creative growth, support their academic achievement, and prepare them for success over a lifetime of accomplishment and meaningful contribution. Other objectives are secondary.

THE ACADEMIC ENTERPRISE

As we review and assess current and future academic programs, projects, and structures, we must always ask if and how they advance our mission. While we must never become ahistorical, our primary role is not as conservators of culture or perpetuators of existing cultural practices. While honoring and learning from

tradition and history, our mission makes clear that we must focus on emerging culture and practice so that we can effectively prepare our students to thrive as agents of creative and social change in an unknowable future.

CURRICULUM

In order to succeed in this task, our curricula must:

Connect our students to emerging trends in industry and creative practice. Our majors must map to what the world is becoming, not what it has been. To ensure the currency of our curricula, thought leaders and practice innovators must engage in a continuous reexamination and reinvolution of what and how we teach.

Promote exploration. We must not penalize our students for not yet seeing their paths or for changing their minds. Indeed, this should be one of our core educational principles. Exploration and experimentation must be understood as fundamental to the development of our students.

Teach our students to become expert collaborators, skilled at working on multi-dimensional challenges with unlike partners – the complex collaboration skills demanded by twenty-first-century professional reality.

Demonstrate our commitment to diversity and inclusion. Curricular content in all areas must celebrate the experience and the narrative of the other.

Provide our students with a wealth of opportunities to begin understanding who they are in the world through community engagement work and experiential learning.

Develop our students' facility with the latest specialized technologies in their fields, and build their capacity to adapt as those technologies continue to evolve. We must offer robust curricular pathways for students who aspire to create those emerging technologies, and we must provide our students with state-of-the-art learning and discovery environments.

The Core Curriculum

We must revitalize our core curriculum, beginning by defining the distinctive twenty-first-century learning outcomes and proficiencies that we believe all Columbia College Chicago students must acquire. Given our commitment to the real-world success of our students, we must integrate into the core required courses that teach business and marketing skills and introduce students to entrepreneurial thinking and practice. We must make explicit the value of the core curriculum to all students; the learning achieved through the core embodies our fundamental educational promise to our students and also our promise to the world about our students – in short, our educational brand.

First-Year Seminar

Our first-year seminar will serve as the gateway to the core, introducing students to the college experience generally and to the learning outcomes and the principles and practice of diversity and community engagement that will define their Columbia College Chicago experience. A defining feature of our first-year seminar will be the transformative opportunity for first-semester college students to learn from our most expert faculty members. We must also use the first-year seminar to introduce our students to our city and all that it offers them.

ACADEMIC STRUCTURE

The arrival of a new senior vice president and provost offers a rare opportunity for us to re-imagine our current academic structures. The impending shift of enrollment management and admissions, the registrar, and degree evaluation to the provost's office is only the beginning of this process.

We must ask:

How do we benefit from the existing three-school model and the current distribution of majors across those schools? Can we imagine more effective models?

Are our major and degree requirements overly rigid and prescriptive? Do they impede student success by blocking innovation and collaboration?

Could categories of academic leadership reflect a functional rather than a discipline-based orientation?

Do all of our departments continue to be valid stand-alone academic/disciplinary units in light of real-world industry realities?

Does our current academic structure optimally support graduate study?
What is the optimal balance of undergraduate to graduate students?

Assessment

If we are to speak truthfully when we state what our students learn, we must be able to support any such claims with evidence. We must build a robust infrastructure for the assessment of programs and learning outcomes, and we must provide learning opportunities for our faculty to hone their skill in the adoption of assessment tools and the use of assessment findings to inform their teaching.

Advising

Advising, when done expertly, creates the foundation for students to achieve academic, career, and life success.

All full-time faculty must be required to advise students, and we must support our faculty in this critically important work.

We must clarify the different objectives of staff-based advising versus faculty-based advising, and must determine where advising should best reside and how the enterprise could be optimally configured.

In order to maximize the benefit to students of their face-to-face interactions with advisors, we must adopt online interactive advising technologies which help students monitor their progress to completion.

FACULTY

No amount of innovative curricular design can suffice without an outstanding faculty to teach and guide our students. Our expert and committed faculty is our greatest treasure. The fact that many of our faculty members are also active creative professionals has long been one of our rightfully celebrated institutional strengths. As we commit to implementing our mission more fully, we must build on that legacy and raise our standards for faculty qualifications and credentials.

We must assess the impact and significance of professional work, not just the fact of professional activity. If our students are to author the culture of their time, they must learn from teachers who are innovators, makers of emerging culture, and creators of new knowledge. All faculty evaluation models, promotion protocols, and hiring plans must recognize and reward such transformative work.

Similarly, we must re-examine our faculty advancement guidelines to ensure that we explicitly value faculty work that advances our mission and our core values of diversity and inclusion and community engagement.

Because our mission creates complex challenges for our faculty, we must invest in faculty development so that faculty can better:

Teach to the diversity of experience and expectation that we celebrate in our students.

Stay abreast of emerging trends in rapidly changing industries and creative practices.

Learn to make best use of the latest specialized technological advances and innovations in their fields.

We must continue to undo the legacy of mistrust between the college and our part-time faculty union. While acknowledging inherent differences between our full-time and part-time faculty and continuously assessing the optimal balance in relative numbers, we must build a culture of ‘one faculty’ focused on mission and student success.

We must also commit to building our shared governance model, clarifying the role of the faculty voice in decision-making and untangling the strands of the school’s complex history to devise a governance model which is clear and effective.

STUDENT SUCCESS

While a rigorous and innovative academic program is paramount in attracting students to Columbia College Chicago, we must support and enhance our students’ overall college experience in order to maximize their success. The core outcomes of a successful Columbia College Chicago education must be

graduation, employment, and life-long success. To support those goals, a robust student success infrastructure must focus on building an engaged, participatory student community; connecting our students to experiential learning opportunities in our communities; and creating the pathways which will lead to their employment following graduation. We must also strive to ensure the mental, physical, and spiritual well-being of our students and to provide the full array of student services required by our diverse student body.

Working with the faculty, our student success team will:

Create and coordinate a wealth of opportunities for students to participate meaningfully in the life of the college, building their social networks and, in so doing, a sense of a cohesive college community.

Connect students with alumni mentors and industry professionals. Such interactions will be a feature of a Columbia College Chicago education from its onset.

Coordinate and oversee internship programs and career and life counseling.

Develop opportunities for students to create their professional materials and portfolios and build their professional networks.

Build the infrastructure which supports our students in achieving employment after graduation.

ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

Having moved away from our college's historical open admissions policy, our mission continues to commit us to admitting the broadest range of students whom we believe are qualified to succeed here. While standard measures used by higher education are useful, we must also evaluate prospective students for less quantifiable characteristics that are essential for success at Columbia College Chicago, including creative potential, grit and resilience, and curiosity. To do so, we must make full use of all appropriate evaluation methodologies, including auditions, interviews, and portfolio and essay submissions. We must also ensure that we are recruiting prospective students to Columbia with authentic depictions of our expectations and of the educational experience that we offer.

We must stabilize our institutional enrollment between 10,500 to 11,000 degree-seeking students; within that number, we must determine the optimal size of our academic programs and recruit to program-based targets.

Additionally, we must:

Develop multiple feeder school relationships, nationally and internationally.

Rebuild transfer articulation agreements and relationships with community colleges so that we can significantly increase the percentage of transfer students in our student body.

Increase the number of international students.

To achieve higher levels of institutional success, we must:

Increase freshman-to-sophomore retention to a minimum of 80%.

Increase our six-year graduation rate to 60% to bring us in line with the national average for four-year institutions.

RESOURCES

Our lofty institutional aspirations require that we grow our resource base. We cannot advance without the ability to invest in our faculty and to fund excellence and innovation. We must also never waver in our commitment to keeping a Columbia College Chicago education affordable for our students, knowing that while the recognized value of our education to our students is paramount, cost cannot be ignored.

While seeking new resources, we must make a college-wide commitment to re-examining our spending to ensure that we are making the most efficient use of our current resources and allocating them in ways that support the college's priorities and goals. Operating beyond our means is a guarantee of failure.

We must diversify our revenue stream by thoughtfully expanding our educational enterprise, including continuing education for adults; programs for children;

online programs and degrees, particularly at the graduate level; professional master's degrees and certification programs; executive education programs; and intensive summer programs. Recognizing that such new programs take time to develop, implement, and become profitable, we must move far more quickly on program development than has been our custom.

To ensure that a larger percentage of our annual budget is provided by endowment income, we must significantly grow the endowment. We must also raise new dollars for student scholarships and grow unrestricted annual giving to the institution.

These tasks will require a reinvention of our development operations. A national search is currently underway for a new vice president of development who will be charged with transforming fundraising at the college and building more extensive connections with our alumni. She or he will also begin to lay the groundwork for our next capital campaign.

CAPITAL NEEDS

While any commitment to new capital projects will require thorough investigation and extensive examination by our trustees, I believe that our two greatest current facilities needs are a new campus center for our students and new formal and informal performance venues.

Our students need a central location where they can socialize, study alone and together, collaborate formally and informally, work with community partners, incubate new ideas, practices, and businesses, interact with new technology, eat, rest, and feel safe. Additionally, bringing together student services and the business office in this facility would greatly improve the student experience, taking us one step farther towards our goal of operating a student-centered institution.

Our performance venues for theatre and music are inadequate and unworthy of the quality of performance which characterizes the work of our faculty and students. They do not adequately support our students and they hinder our ability to recruit prospective students. The college also needs more space to support the array of student programming and performance activities that characterize our institution.

ADMINISTRATIVE OPERATIONS

In order to fully support our institutional aspirations, we must function at a much higher level of efficiency and effectiveness. The leadership in the key operational areas of finance, human resources, information technology, and communications must embody the highest level of professional skill and managerial expertise and demonstrate an abiding commitment to advancing the institution. External assessments currently underway in a number of these areas will inform decisions about personnel and structural changes we will be making as we move forward.

Working with our dedicated and caring staff, managers must continue to advance our operations towards a culture of clear goal setting, accountability, clarity of communications, and a relentless focus on achieving results.

Some specific thoughts:

Communications

We must rebuild our communications function around a central core of expertise which can support the entire institution. Institutional messages must be consistent and must focus on that which differentiates us and defines our value. Narratives about the academic experience must be developed in conjunction with both the academic leadership and our students; we must celebrate the rigor and quality of a Columbia College Chicago education as well as our commitment to student success. Both our website and our use of social media must reflect expert understanding about how students interact with each other and the world.

Finance

A national search for a new chief financial officer is currently underway. Once in place, the CFO will work with the provost to craft a budget which intentionally allocates resources to institutional priorities and goals. The budgeting process must be forward-looking, strategic, and transparent to the college community. We must develop sophisticated multi-year financial plans and forecasting models that will enable us to better assess the possible implications of tuition pricing and discounting decisions on our future financial health. The college's finances must be administered centrally, and we must put stronger internal controls in place to ensure prudent financial management.

Information Technology

Given the regular interruption that we experience in our daily work, we must thoroughly re-evaluate the IT systems that support the college's operations. We must build a more robust IT infrastructure to facilitate better institutional management, and we must invest in the resources and expertise to support innovative explorations of technology at all levels of the institution.

OUR INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

Let us acknowledge that in order to truly advance our institution, we must commit to cultural change. Changing practices without changing the behaviors and attitudes that underlie those practices is a guarantee of long-term failure. To achieve the institutional greatness of which we are capable, we must:

Put our students first.

Move faster.

Be bold.

Communicate with one another and with the wider world.

Stop settling. How we do things – the “Columbia Way” – must become a source of pride, not a cause for mildly affectionate tolerant frustration.

Grow a robust culture of assessment and evaluation so that we can hold individuals and programs accountable to clear standards.

Develop an effective managerial culture in which we do hold individuals and programs accountable to clear standards.

Always measure our progress against a plan.

Assess everything we do through the lens of our mission and within the broader context of higher education.

Make decisions informed by data.

Celebrate that which truly differentiates us, recognizing that we will almost always find those distinctive features at the level of mission and purpose, not in particular events, stories, or traditions.

Honor our past, but not be limited by it. We must let go of that which no longer works or makes sense.

Teach ourselves to value the institution as a whole.

IN CLOSING

In these pages, I have made my best effort to summarize my thinking about Columbia College Chicago from the vantage point of ten months in the president's office. My absolute belief in the value and potential of our college requires that I call out what I see and that I set the bar of expectation as high as I can. I believe our students deserve nothing less.

We will now need time and a structure within which we can freely discuss the ideas I present here and the new ideas which arise in response to this document. We will also need a plan and a structure for a strategic planning process which will be inclusive of our community but not allow us to get bogged down in endless discussion. I am committed to having a finished strategic plan approved by our Board of Trustees by the spring of 2015, early enough to shape the budget for the 2015-16 academic year.

As I turn my attention to working on next steps, I am reminded of the words of a colleague who once urged me and a group of would-be college presidents to "find a place where you can surface your courage." I know that I am one of the lucky ones who has found that place. I now ask that each of us in the Columbia College Chicago community find a way to surface her or his courage on behalf of this wonderful institution, girding ourselves for the tough work which lies ahead of us, confident that we will succeed in achieving our college's brighter future.

Kwang-Wu Kim, May 7, 2014