

DISTINCTIVENESS, VALUE, AND PURPOSE: BUILDING OUR BRIGHTER FUTURE

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Seven years ago, I issued my first position paper as president of Columbia College Chicago. Even though I was comparatively new to this community, it was already apparent to me that Columbia's distinctiveness afforded it considerable advantages in the competitive landscape of American higher education. It was also apparent that the college had been drifting, distracted by competing commitments and overly invested in institution-specific practices that added little value to the educational experience. As I wrote at the time, I recognized that in order to reestablish our strategic direction, we needed to "reaffirm that our core purpose is to serve our students" and to organize our common work around this commitment.

In the years since, we have made real progress in advancing our mission as a college for creatives. But the work remains far from done, and the context in which we seek to add value for our students has grown ever more challenging. Having struggled with disruption and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, and having devoted our energies to keeping pace with the many changes that it has effected in our world, now is the time for us to return to strategic thinking and planning for our college's future – to resume our investigation of what it means for our college to truly thrive and of what we must do to reach that state.

What follows is a synthesis of my current thinking about Columbia College Chicago. Its release will serve as the first step in the college's upcoming strategic planning process, which I have asked Provost Marcella David to lead.

THE WORLD IN WHICH WE OPERATE

Moving forward, we, like all other institutions of higher education in this country, will continue to face three primary external pressures.

ROI mentality

Since the 2008 financial crisis, American families have increasingly come to view the value of higher education through a return-on-investment (ROI) lens. Given the reality of continually rising costs, post-pandemic we are likely to encounter heightened expectations that higher education provide guaranteed, tangible returns.

Outcome metrics

At the same time as families and students are demanding to know what they "get for the money", there has been an increasing focus on specific outcomes as the primary measure of institutional quality. Many of these are enshrined in the College Scorecard, an initiative launched by the Obama administration and expanded by the Trump administration that compares all institutions of higher education on a series of metrics: cost, graduation rate, employment rate, average amount borrowed, loan default rate, average debt, and average post-graduation earnings by field of study.

If we are to flourish in this environment, the value proposition of a Columbia College Chicago education must be evidenced in our own record on these metrics, particularly retention rates, graduation rates, and post-graduation employment statistics.

An oversaturated marketplace

A sharp pandemic-driven drop in fall 2020 higher education enrollments has exacerbated longer-term demographic trends that have spurred ten consecutive years of national enrollment declines. In a higher education market increasingly characterized by oversupply, many institutions are operating on thin financial margins without the wherewithal to withstand a continuing disruption in operations or consecutive years of enrollment shortfalls. The financial strains generated by COVID-19 may be the final straw that forces some of them to close or merge.

As competition for students increases, we are entering a period not of survival of the fittest, but rather of survival of those institutions with the most distinctive, compelling, and demonstrable value propositions.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

In spite of this challenging external environment and the acute financial challenges brought on by COVID-19, I remain optimistic about our future. Unlike many other institutions, we have remained true to our core values as a college for creatives. As the pandemic recedes and higher education resumes some version of regular operations, our distinctiveness will cast a bright light on us even in a competitive marketplace.

But distinctiveness alone is not enough. We must define and demonstrate the ways in which our distinctiveness is the source of the value that we provide to current and prospective students. We must fully realize our college's distinguishing value proposition, which is, as I have always argued, an educational experience that propels creatives to real world success.

I. LEADING WITH OUR CORE VALUES

A College for Creatives

This is not a marketing slogan. It is a statement of our commitment to the principle that creatives can succeed in any endeavor they choose, regardless of what they study, and it is an affirmation of our belief that there is a profound need in all walks of life for those whose engagement with the world is informed by their creative practice. As a college for creatives, we must prepare our students to enter the world with a sense of agency, which can only come from mastering skills and concepts, developing critical judgment and the ability to frame a cogent argument, discovering one's authentic voice, and testing one's ability to navigate in the world.

"A college for creatives", then, is also a description of our responsibility to our students – that rather than "polishing" them to fit into existing professional paths, we must equip them to bring the full force of their creative voices to bear on the world and to establish new pathways to fulfilling and meaningful lives.

Embracing difference: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

The principle of embracing difference is fundamental to our identity as an institution. Advancing principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) was a primary strategic focus of the college long before the current national reckoning with racism and white supremacy culture. Indeed, the 2015 strategic plan proclaims our aspiration to be a national leader in this endeavor.

At Columbia, DEI is inextricably bound to our educational purpose. If we are to prepare our students to "become authors of the culture of their times" - the centerpiece of the college's mission statement - we must help them to understand, experience, and interrogate different viewpoints, narratives, and histories, and to recognize that difference has historically been suppressed and devalued in many fields of creative practice. Students must become expert at collaboration across all forms of difference and learn to see the world through another's eyes and lived experience.

For this aspiration to be fully realized, the college's commitment to DEI must be apparent in all aspects of its operations. We must see it in our populations, our culture and behavior, our policies and practices, our metrics for evaluation and reward, and, most importantly, our curriculum.

Together, we have made real progress on this challenging project. Through the Undoing Racism workshops led by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, we began to establish a framework for a college-wide examination of structural racism and to initiate the difficult conversation about our complicity in that historical legacy. We have reoriented our thinking about faculty and trustee recruitment around the notion that every hiring decision and trustee nomination is an opportunity to expand the college's diversity. We have reimagined the charge of the office of student DEI so that it is less focused on supporting separate identities in isolation and more about supporting inclusion across those different identities.

From the start, our DEI initiatives have focused on the college's academic core. Many creative disciplines determine value in relationship to an established canon which often ignores competing narratives, histories, and traditions of creative practice. Our challenge is to broaden our curricula so that our students can engage with those alternative traditions as they develop and refine their own practices.

Here too, our faculty have made progress, including an assessment model for a new DEI course designation, an exploration of DEI-specific pedagogy, and crucially, the recruitment of new faculty with DEI expertise.

Now, in conjunction with Crossroads Antiracism Organizing and Training (CROAR), the college has embarked on a comprehensive self-examination of legacies and artifacts of structural racism within our college, the ultimate goal being to identify, comprehend, and eliminate them as we seek to become an anti-racist institution. The formation of the Anti-Racism Transformation Team (ArTT) comprised of faculty, staff, and students is the first step in this effort.

As we push forward, we must be bolder still. We must develop a comprehensive, better coordinated approach to the wider project, supported by a robust

infrastructure, and establish measurable outcomes in order to gauge and evaluate our progress. We must also determine how we hold ourselves accountable to the work and how we reward those who advance it.

There are other questions we have yet to answer. How do we sustain anti-racism training and an ongoing college-wide discussion about DEI? Who supports the staff in this work? How can we better integrate the office of student DEI into the college's diversity efforts?

II. OUR COLLEGE'S PURPOSE: OUR STUDENTS AND THEIR SUCCESS

Student success: A Columbia profile

We know that our most successful students feel a part of a vibrant creative community and take fullest advantage of what Columbia has to offer them. They challenge themselves by exploring the college's academic and creative offerings and by experimenting with new pursuits. They develop resilience by taking risks, failing often, and struggling through challenges. They actively participate in student organizations and activities, developing as leaders and organizers. They live out the idea of Chicago as their campus. They seek to develop their authentic voices and identities. They systematically pursue pre-professional opportunities and build extensive professional and personal networks. By the time they graduate, they are ready to begin their journey of cultural authorship and to enter the workforce at the cusp of meaningful careers.

This is the Columbia College Chicago success story that we have all witnessed and celebrated. We must build our future around maximizing the opportunities for every one of our students to make this story their own.

Student success: The college's reality... losing too many

As I pointed out earlier, a key institutional indicator of overall student success is outcome metrics, particularly freshman-to-sophomore retention, the six-year graduation rate, and post-graduation employment statistics. These are not arbitrarily selected figures; they correlate directly with how well we deliver on our value proposition. Yes, there are students who are disappointed by their Columbia experience but still persist to graduation, and students who leave for reasons that have nothing to do with the college. But for a long time, Columbia paid too little attention to the degree completion record of its students, and we continue to struggle with that legacy of complacency. We must reorganize our work around a contrary premise: student attrition is evidence of an institutional failure, and an indication that the college's systems – academic affairs, student affairs, residence life, financial aid, counseling, admissions, etc. – have not coalesced to provide those students with the necessary support to succeed.

The 2015 strategic plan called for the college to achieve a six-year graduation rate of 60 percent and a freshman-to-sophomore retention rate of 80 percent. These numbers were based on an examination of national graduation and retention statistics and an assessment of what was realistic given our generous admissions policies. We have made tremendous strides in improving our six-year graduation rate, having recently reached the 50 percent mark, an increase of almost ten percentage points since 2013 and a new milestone for the college.

Retention, however, remains a stubborn challenge. In spite of much work in this area, particularly in strengthening systems to identify and intervene with at-risk students, and notwithstanding the steadily improving academic profile of our entering classes,

our retention rates have remained stuck in the high 60 to low 70 percent range.

As a college with a stated commitment to our students, their well-being, and their overall development, we cannot continue to rationalize the fact that so many of them leave us early. We must accept our collective responsibility for this state of affairs and respond to it with informed action.

Student success: Whose responsibility? - the traditional divide

At Columbia, as at most institutions of higher education, we operate on the assumption that the primary student experience is an academic one, supplemented and enriched by student affairs and student activities components. Recently, I have been pondering whether this model truly correlates to the experience and expectations of our students, and whether it minimizes the centrality of personal growth and development as fundamental to the college experience, particularly in light of the realities of our student body.

We have done much in recent years to strengthen our student support systems. The establishment of Columbia Central, the development of a true registrar's function, and the collaboration among the student advising, student financial assistance, and registrar's offices reflect the hard work and dedication of many. But we must do much more. I believe that we need a new way of thinking about how we, as an institution, can maximize our students' success. We must conceptualize and implement a new Columbia-specific model for achieving this objective.

Specifically, we must eliminate the twin barriers of territoriality and presumed privilege that traditionally separate the purviews of academic affairs and student affairs, recognizing that a seamlessly coordinated approach to the whole student

experience is what is needed. If student success can be likened to a large, complicated machine, and if our expertise necessarily limits our personal responsibilities to the maintenance of discrete systems and parts, then it is essential that the machine's overall design integrates those systems to the benefit of our students.

OUR STUDENTS' CHALLENGES

Building community from Day 1: The case for a comprehensive Columbia first-year experience

While we ended our policy of open admissions in 2012, we continue to be a college with a foundational belief in admitting the broadest range of qualified students as part of our mission. In a school dedicated to innovation and emerging forms of practice, we know that it is only by maximizing the diversity of our student body that we can build the mix of experiences, personalities, and skills most likely to spark the next best ideas.

This means, however, that many first-year students at Columbia, as first-generation college goers or individuals from non-privileged backgrounds, may need additional support to adjust to the new realities of college life. Indeed, it is arguable that all of our students could benefit from greater guidance with one of life's more complex transitions.

We know that our discontinuous urban campus and the absence of school spirit- and cohort-building institutions such as intercollegiate athletics and Greek life – whatever their other drawbacks – can contribute to a feeling of isolation for many of our students. We also know that disconnection from a community is a leading cause of student dissatisfaction. Other than the introduction of Big Chicago courses to the curriculum (a major accomplishment), how are we building community and cohorts of peers among our first-year students

following the annual flourish of our Freshman Convocation in Grant Park? And are we reinforcing a message of degree completion as the desired and achievable outcome of a Columbia education from the moment those students arrive on campus?

A persistent challenge posed by our new students is that relatively few of them take advantage of the rich array of readily available campus resources. Could we promote these more effectively? Is comprehensive training about support services a regular part of onboarding and start-of-semester activities for faculty and staff, so that all of us can better advocate for student needs?

It is time to take up the challenge of designing a comprehensive and distinctive Columbia first-year experience that could become a fundamental part of the college's value proposition, building a lasting sense of community among our first-year students and promoting their deeper engagement with both their education and their overall college experience.

Different preparation, different needs

The conversation about student support at Columbia often centers on students who fall into an 'at-risk' category for one reason or another. For example, data reveal a persistent achievement gap between some of our students of color and the majority white student population; we are trying to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the reasons for those gaps and continue to allocate resources to address identified needs.

As we have gradually increased admissions selectivity, however, the academic profile of a large part of our student body has continued to improve. Increasingly, students have been telling me that they would like to be challenged more by their coursework, particularly at the introductory level. Have our efforts to rethink and reimagine curriculum kept pace with changes in the student body? Are we challenging our most academically advanced

students to their fullest, and providing opportunities for those students for whom the existing sequence of coursework may not be rigorous enough? Are we taking full advantage of the honors program? Does our curriculum provide the flexibility for students who may be capable of completing their degree requirements in less than the prescribed number of years?

Engaging the non-engaged

Our existing support structures may also be inadequate for those students whose satisfactory academic performance fails to trigger academic warnings but whose lack of involvement with the overall college experience predisposes them to drift away. We must develop mechanisms to identify them early and programs to re-engage them. Could college advisors function as part of a comprehensive “early alert” network, and if so, should periodic check-ins with advisors be mandatory? Can our faculty learn to better identify these students so that the college can intervene as appropriate? Do we understand the range of reasons why some students do not get involved? Is it possible to identify commonalities among these students, and could those insights enable us to be more proactive in how we design services for those who may otherwise not seek them out?

Our commuters

The majority of our students are commuters. Evidence indicates that college students residing on campus tend to succeed at higher rates, in part because they benefit from stronger ties to a community and the additional layers of support provided by a residence life staff. How can we do a better job of extending that sense of belonging to students who commute and may spend a limited amount of time on campus?

Mental health

One alarming national trend in recent years has been the ever-increasing prominence of student mental health issues. As an example, suicide rates nationally increased 35 percent over the years 1999-2018; suicide ideation has also been on a steady rise. In recent years we have devoted additional resources to respond to students’ mental health needs; this will remain an institutional priority for the foreseeable future. Ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic-inspired shift to tele-mental health counseling may prove to be a beneficial and lasting innovation in mental health intervention.

The post-pandemic student experience

This fall’s entering class will come to us following a high school experience that was impacted by pandemic realities. Having been limited in their opportunities for rich, in-person interaction with friends, colleagues, and teachers, they may be less prepared academically, socially, and emotionally for the new challenges of college life. We may find that students who would not ordinarily be categorized as at-risk or otherwise disadvantaged may require additional levels of direction and guidance. (As an aside, let us also be mindful that the fall 2020 entering class has had to navigate restrictions imposed on them by the pandemic; they too may require special attention as things ramp up in the fall.)

We must ensure that our support structures for student mental health and emotional wellbeing are adequate to the task, taking fullest advantage of the advances in tele-health and tele-counseling noted above. We must also equip our faculty and student-facing staff to identify potential problems early and to initiate the necessary interventions.

BEYOND GRADUATION

Prepared for career success

At Columbia, success beyond graduation entails young creatives entering the workforce equipped with the skills and capacities to build meaningful careers. Positioned as we are at the intersection of a liberal arts college and an arts and media school, our mission has always obligated us to prepare young people for employment and to pay attention to their career outcomes. We have continued to invest in the structures that support this objective, most notably through the launch of the Career Center, which has significantly increased internship and pre-professional opportunities for our students. In addition, some of our academic departments have been working to provide students with more substantive, practical insights into the business side of the industries and professions that they might seek to enter.

But we must do more to ensure that our students can prosper in the world after they graduate.

A practical education

Knowing that our students are likely to pursue multiple careers over the course of their lifetimes, we must be more intentional and systematic about developing their fluency with fundamental business skills that they will need regardless of their occupation. Our students should understand finance and marketing principles. They should be able to assemble a basic business plan that takes a creative concept and translates it into timelines, numbers, and deliverables. They should be able to read and evaluate contracts, budgets, and financial statements. This suite of skills will give them an advantage in the workplace and help to shield them from being exploited by others.

21st-century success skills

Embedded in our mission to prepare our students to become “authors of the culture of their times” is a commitment to positioning them for careers and industries which may not exist today. Teaching them to succeed in existing industries is not enough. Beyond high-level specialized skills and the practical learning that I argue for above, Columbia College Chicago students must develop a set of foundational skills that will facilitate their future success regardless of profession or industry. I would suggest that the following three are essential.

Complex collaboration

The ability to collaborate across all forms of difference, whether of personal experience, disciplinary expertise, or paradigms of knowledge creation, is a skill much sought after by industry leaders across diverse sectors. I refer to this skill as complex collaboration.

This concept takes us beyond the collaboration among individuals employed in a common industry, such as the teams that assemble to shoot a film or stage a theatrical production. It necessitates an ability to work together on projects that may fall outside of every participant’s regular professional sphere. Imagine a group of students from dance, music, interactive game design, business and entrepreneurship, and American Sign Language tasked with expanding access to the COVID-19 vaccine. Each starting from a base of their own expertise and knowledge, together they will have to define a shared analytical framework that is informed by their different ways of thinking and being and come to agreement on a structure for testing concepts and making decisions. And as a condition of working together effectively, they will have to learn to appreciate the value of seeing a problem from radically different perspectives. I believe this is what we must prepare our students to undertake; this is complex collaboration.

Critical thinking/sound judgment

We often describe our students as critical thinkers, knowing that this is a vitally important element of their identity as creatives. In fields of creative practice with a history and culture of critique, a pathway to developing our students' critical thinking is self-evident; the same is true in liberal arts disciplines, for which critical thinking is foundational. That said, we must ask some probing questions of ourselves in this regard. Is critical thinking truly taught across the curriculum? In our model of learning by doing, have we formalized reflection as a core element in the development of critical thinking? How do we assess and evaluate critical thinking? Relatedly, are our students learning to analyze data and interpret evidence as a basis for forming sound judgments? In an age of social media and its accompanying deluge of unfiltered, unlimited, and often intentionally misleading information, this is a necessary skill.

Presentation

Professional success almost always rests on the ability to put forward a cogent argument, pitch an idea or product, or sell a concept. Previous generations focused on writing and speech as the two primary modes of communication, but in our multi-media, multi-modal world it may be more helpful to think in terms of presentation. The key is the ability to frame an idea, develop a coherent narrative, and find optimal ways to tell the story, regardless of modality. This skill comes naturally to some of our students. How do we develop it in those for whom it may be a struggle?

ADVISING: Bringing studies and career preparation together

We have transitioned to an all-professional staff advising model in which advisors help students navigate the curriculum and stay on track to a timely graduation. Faculty in turn play a complementary part as mentors and exemplars. Absent in this model, however, is an equal, intentional emphasis on career advising, which, in spite of the progress we have made in this area, is only available for those students who seek it out in our Career Center. For our students to make the most of their education, it is vital that their academic choices reflect a meaningful understanding of career options and of the professional implications of their course of study. Could we develop a co-advising model, involving teams of academic and career advisors, for all of our students?

ALUMNI: Modeling student success

One of the greatest resources available to our students is our impressive and accomplished alumni population. We have made real strides in building greater community and pride among our alums and in creating programs whereby they can mentor our students. Expanding these programs and increasing their availability to students must be a continuing priority. Whenever possible, alumni should be seen on campus and featured at key events throughout the academic year as a reminder to our current students of what is possible in the world as a graduate of Columbia College Chicago.

III. CURRICULAR INNOVATION

Pandemic questions

The college's response to the disruption caused by the pandemic begs the question of whether our unforeseen pivots might contain the seeds of more effective curricular models as we move forward. We should use this opportunity to ask whether curricula which assume the inherent value of linearity, sequence, and continuity are in fact optimal for our students. For example:

Could a more modular, flexible, and non-linear curricular design facilitate and even accelerate student degree completion?

Is some content more effectively delivered and mastered by students in an online or hybrid format?

Should we re-examine learning outcomes that are predicated on access to specific learning environments and devices, knowing that these might become unavailable, or in some cases obsolete?

Would new forms of stacked credentials, badges, and other non-traditional certifications create new, more flexible pathways for student success and attract more students to the college?

Core curriculum

As I have often observed, our college is a hybrid of an arts and media school and a liberal arts institution. We believe that combining skills acquisition through learning by doing with the development of the capacities instilled by a liberal arts education best supports the long-term success of creatives. Much of the viability of this model, however, is dependent on the strength of the core curriculum, the large suite of classes representing the college's general

education requirements – how aptly curricular content is tailored to the needs of creatives; how boldly it advances the college's commitments to DEI, social justice, and engagement; and how effectively it teaches all students the skills they will need to succeed, regardless of their career choices.

While we have created a new framework for part of a reimagined core curriculum (the Columbia Experience in the Columbia Core) and have made progress in designing and introducing new core courses, further opportunities may exist to reimagine and reinvent this central component of our curriculum. I believe that we ought to double down on our efforts to design a signature core curriculum, one that, as with a comprehensive Columbia first-year experience, could become central to the college's value proposition. This proposal also invites several questions:

Traditionally, the core curriculum at Columbia has fallen under the purview of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Could we incorporate other disciplinary areas more systematically into the core so that different literacies (audio or visual, for example) and modes of understanding (embodied awareness or improvisation, for example) become part of the learning of all Columbia students?

While we have created a DEI designation for core classes, does it reflect the depth of thought that has characterized this work over the years, and can our faculty deliver DEI courses that truly stretch the curriculum? Additionally, is a reliance on a DEI designation the optimal approach to incorporating DEI principles across the core curriculum?

Given the centrality of a practical education as a defining aspect of a Columbia education, why is business and entrepreneurship not integrated across the core?

And should the teaching of skills for the 21st century be the responsibility of the core curriculum?

Themes and adjacencies

Our provost Marcella David has wondered for some time whether we might reconceptualize the curriculum by identifying themes that connect disparate departments and programs and mapping their overlay onto existing college structures. A few that she has suggested are “sound”, “movement”, and “making”. When viewed in this light, we start to see the necessary connection of programs currently separated by arbitrary administrative structures - for example, Music in the School of Fine and Performing Arts, and Audio Arts and Acoustics in the School of Media Arts.

The idea of themes suggests the importance of adjacencies as an organizing principle in a rethinking of curricular design. Bringing together programs and content which are thematically linked could open up new possibilities for curriculum, content creation, and collaboration. The forthcoming campus master plan promotes this idea by proposing a radical reorganization of our campus to draw faculty and departments that are connected in this fashion into closer physical proximity as well.

Any conversation around this issue will require us to reconsider whether our existing three-school structure advances our college’s lofty aspirations. In some cases, the current combinations of disciplines within a unit seem arbitrary. More importantly, I wonder if our highly traditional administrative model, which segregates disciplines based on old definitions of content, impedes creative exploration and collaboration.

Institutional crosscuts: another layer of educational value?

Related to the idea of adjacencies is the identification of paradigms that cut across departmental and programmatic lines, enhancing the value proposition of a Columbia education and defining the essence of its distinctiveness.

As I have often noted, I believe that business and entrepreneurial acumen (practical education) must be one such crosscut.

Is design another core paradigm threaded across the institution? Might the principles of design thinking help to define our college, the work that our faculty and students do, and the value that our graduates bring into the professional world?

Is storytelling another such paradigm? Could we position all of our students as expert narrators, capable of communicating across a wide range of media and equipped to bridge divides of difference?

If these are valid constructs, why not position them as guiding principles for the development of new courses in the core curriculum and our majors?

Teaching to the leading edge

Central to our educational purpose as a college for creatives is the idea of cultural authorship - the notion that our students will reimagine and recreate the cultural realities of the world that we inhabit. Many of our students will invent and participate in new industries and enterprises that do not exist today. How do we position them for that future?

While a grounding in historic forms of creative practice may be valuable in giving our students a context for their work, we are not a school whose primary purpose is the conservation of artistic or cultural traditions.

As we continuously evaluate the content and relevance of our programs, we must devise sustained models of expert external involvement in that process so that we remain connected to the leading edges of industry and can influence emerging forms of creative practice. As entire industries reinvent themselves, we must be part of that conversation.

In response to profound and accelerating trends in the world around us, we must recommit to

developing new curriculum and programs that explore the intersection of creative practice and technology. The strong interest among prospective students in projects that bring together teams of artists, engineers, and computer scientists; the myriad professional opportunities that this area of exploration might open up for our graduates; and our relative lack of technological sophistication as a college all dictate that we pursue partnerships with other institutions that are more focused on these disciplinary areas than we are. That we must reach outside of our own community to do this should not be viewed as a shortcoming but rather as a welcome opportunity to connect more broadly to the world of higher education.

Graduate education

Finally, I feel obligated to mention a subject with which we continue to struggle, namely the nature and purpose of graduate education at Columbia. Our experiments with different models for supporting graduate education have not led to enrollment growth or faculty satisfaction. Clearly, a deeper conversation about the appropriate role of graduate education at Columbia is required. Should we be thinking of graduate education as a significant revenue source? If so, what sorts of programs might that lead us to offer and develop? Should we expect graduate education to be a driver of educational innovation at Columbia? In what areas? What are the implications for required faculty credentials if we plan to grow our graduate programs? What changes in academic delivery and scheduling will be needed to grow those programs?

IV. OUR FACULTY

Our faculty is the core of our college’s value. During this time of COVID-19, they have once again demonstrated their remarkable creativity and

expertise, their care for our students, and their commitment to the college.

Our imperative to continuously review and update curriculum - reflecting our commitment to delivering on our value proposition for our students - requires a related institutional commitment to the continuous development of our current faculty and the strategic recruitment of new faculty.

To reinforce the college’s expectation that our faculty are actively contributing to their fields and furthering innovation in their professions and at the college, we must provide them with opportunities to experiment with new educational technologies, pursue their creative activities, and keep abreast of the latest developments in their disciplines. In a model where we are all responsible for promoting and supporting comprehensive student success, we must clearly define expectations for the role that faculty will play in that work outside of the classroom and studio.

As we continue to build our faculty, we must ensure that the qualifications of new faculty reflect their ability to advance the college’s aspirations and strategic goals, and not just to address current curricular needs. And given that many of our part-time faculty members do not come out of a traditional academic background and are hired on the basis of their tested experience, we must be clear and consistent in how we assess that experience, always focused on guaranteeing the highest quality education for our students.

Finally, if we are to promote complex collaboration and build a culture of innovation, discovery, and risk-taking, we must encourage and nurture the growth of a more cohesive and collegial faculty community. It is faculty working together across many forms of difference that will generate the audacious new ideas about content that will drive the college forward. Advancing the principle of adjacencies, as outlined above, will be an important step in the right

direction. But we also need a new space, analogous to the student center, that is dedicated to our faculty and their social and professional engagement, and to academic community building. The forthcoming campus master plan positions a new academic hub as the college's next major capital project.

V. ENGAGEMENT

Our commitment to student success requires that we facilitate our students' exploration of who they are and what their creative voices mean in the world outside of Columbia. Engagement with the world is a critical part of shaping their most authentic selves.

We have an opportunity to develop a comprehensive definition of engagement at Columbia, one which states that our value as an institution is determined in part by the quality and breadth of our relationships with our neighbors, with community-based organizations, with our city, and with fields of professional creative practice and their associated creative industries. It should also articulate our college's commitment to helping our students become responsible citizens who actively participate in the lives of their communities. The value of engagement should be embedded as a core principle in our curriculum; our students should be learning about organizing, community building, and activism as part of their Columbia journey.

Activating our neighborhood

Recognizing that our campus may soon be hemmed in by large residential towers that are currently under construction or in the planning stage, we should seize every opportunity to contribute to the vibrancy and character of the South Loop. After all, we know that developers tend to pay minimal attention to the role of the streetscape in determining the feel of a neighborhood. The college could lead the way in making our campus environment more vibrant,

colorful, and eclectic; for the South Loop to develop a reputation as a creative district would benefit both the city and the college.

The new campus master plan explores this relationship to neighborhood as a core concept and proposes that we reimagine the use of some of our ground floor spaces to revitalize the Wabash Avenue streetscape. By extension, we should reexamine the viability of the Wabash Arts Corridor project as a way of putting a distinctive Columbia College Chicago stamp on the South Loop.

Finally, we must develop a plan for developing more meaningful relationships with our neighbors - both residents and businesses - and create an infrastructure to sustain that work.

The importance of being seen

Based on my conversations over the years, I am aware that Columbia remains relatively invisible to the city's most influential citizens; if we are known at all, it is for an incarnation of the college from the distant past. We must prioritize building our reputation and recognition among civic leaders so that our college's value to the city is more widely understood and appreciated. Our progress in this endeavor will have a ripple effect on Board development, fundraising, and student recruitment.

We should explore the creation of a cohort of "official" community-based partners whose mission resonates most powerfully with the college's core values. Similarly, we should cultivate a cohort of industry partners, a network of companies that could work with the college to test and develop new concepts, practices, and products. Inevitably, such partnerships would generate new opportunities for our students. Implementing this partnership model will require that we reimagine our campus to create dedicated, accessible spaces that can serve as collaboration hubs.

VI. TECHNOLOGY

Notwithstanding our significant upgrades of the college's technology infrastructure and client services function over the past eight years, the pandemic has revealed gaps that we have yet to address. The next step must be the establishment, implementation, and maintenance of a consistently high baseline standard of technology across all teaching and learning spaces. This will necessitate more rigorous expectations for faculty fluency with educational technology, and the provision of the necessary training for them to achieve that fluency. This is not just a pandemic-related issue; student complaints about ineffectual faculty use of educational technology have become a pressing concern.

We must also continue to invest in the core enterprise infrastructure, prioritizing areas where inadequate systems impede the college's ability to function at peak effectiveness, a case in point being our Student Information System.

The lesson of Columbia Online

The experiment known as Columbia Online was terminated after three years, not because of program quality issues but rather because its underlying business model proved to be flawed. The premise of the project was that we could identify a market niche in specialized adult continuing education spaces that was not already over-populated by competitors, and serve it with programs that reflected the college's creative focus and expertise. We also decided to design and build the enterprise as a start-up. In the end, we underestimated the cost of developing such a program in-house and we overestimated market interest.

For me, the key lesson learned is that future online initiatives must focus on our degree-seeking students. We are too late to the game and too under-resourced to compete with the many established

programs offering online continuing education in creative fields. Instead, we must make robust investments in our existing educational technology infrastructure and personnel to expand the college's core educational enterprise. We should diversify our educational model by developing the capacity to offer fully online degrees and more sophisticated forms of hybrid and low residency instruction.

An aspirational role for technology

While we have greatly strengthened the college's technology infrastructure, we have yet to address the aspect of technology which I find most intriguing, namely the question of how it might drive innovation at the college. Would the opportunity to "play" with new technologies lead to the development not just of new models of educational delivery but also of new ideas about creative practice and content? What investment in expertise and infrastructure would be required for a meaningful exploration of the notion of technology as creative content partner?

VII. BUSINESS AND FINANCIAL OPERATIONS

Fixing a broken model

American higher education is facing a reckoning with an unsustainable business model. With all but the wealthiest institutions relying almost exclusively on tuition revenue as their primary revenue source, tuition continues to rise to keep up with increases in operational and personnel costs. This is a national crisis; as of January 2021, Americans owed over \$1.71 trillion in student loan debt. At the same time, private institutions have trapped themselves in a competitive cycle of ever-deeper tuition discounting in order to recruit from a limited pool of better-prepared students and respond to families' affordability concerns.

Although Columbia's published tuition remains low compared to similar private institutions nationally, many of our students face just such affordability challenges. To address them while simultaneously rebuilding our enrollment, we have significantly increased scholarship spending, funding this in the short to medium term with budget deficits approved by the Board of Trustees (see below). This is a transitional strategy, and one which cuts into the college's ability to invest in other priorities. If we are to achieve the thriving future to which we aspire, developing a model of long-term financial sustainability must be a top priority of the administration, working in conjunction with the Board.

As part of this project, we must:

Determine the true cost of delivering a Columbia College Chicago education and the differences in cost among our various programs and departments.

Assess program capacities across the college so we can identify near-term opportunities for growth.

Continuously review expenditures, distinguishing between the truly essential and the "nice to have."

Improve the effectiveness of our business practices and operations by establishing stronger controls, eliminating redundancies, automating business processes where possible, improving managerial effectiveness, and holding individuals accountable to clear expectations.

Explore opportunities to develop collaborative partnerships with peer institutions that could reduce administrative costs.

Diversify revenue streams while remaining true to our mission. For example, although Columbia Online did not succeed in this regard, there may be other opportunities in online education more closely aligned with our mission that could be profitable for the college.

Invest new resources in development and fundraising and continue to build a culture of philanthropy at the college.

Refine our current enrollment management plan to incorporate a viable strategy for increasing net tuition revenue while addressing the issue of affordability.

Prioritize budgetary support for student success, DEI initiatives, faculty development and recruitment, and general excellence and innovation.

Enrollment 2.0

Following many consecutive years of enrollment declines, the college in 2018 developed a plan for regrowing enrollment to 8,500 students by FY2025, a level at which, according to financial modeling, its finances would become stable and sustainable. Under the plan, the Board of Trustees agreed to multiple years of operating deficits to fund a substantial increase in scholarship spending. The first year of plan implementation, 2018-19, was a major success, yielding a 34 percent growth in fall 2019 freshman enrollment and the first increase in total headcount enrollment in eleven years. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, we were on track to surpass that achievement this past fall. In the end, while fall 2020 enrollment declined by 2.6 percent, we did experience a second consecutive year of freshman enrollment growth, a notable accomplishment during a year when nationally, freshman enrollment was down over 13 percent.

The pandemic has afforded us an opportunity to reexamine and refine the plan. In light of changes in the external environment, we should revisit both the desired enrollment goal and the length of time required to achieve it. A more sophisticated analysis of program capacities will have to be factored into our recruitment strategy. And now is the time for an internal discussion, backed up by a market

analysis, that will frame our decisions about what new programs we should develop to achieve our enrollment goals.

EARLY LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

As we continue to navigate the multiple challenges associated with the global pandemic, we are at an early stage of asking what lessons we may have learned.

Having experienced COVID-19, there is no going back. Successful institutions will reinvent aspects of themselves around new models of hyper-flexibility, nimbleness, and rapid adaptation to changes in the environment.

This imperative is at odds with the reality of higher education which, by design, approaches change in a measured, deliberative fashion. How can we streamline decision-making processes so that we can respond quickly to opportunities – and, perhaps, future crises – without violating the spirit and practice of shared governance?

And how do we grow and sustain a culture of embracing bold, audacious change, knowing that incremental change may not get us to our goals?

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

Reviewing my position paper from seven years ago, I am struck by the congruence of content between that document and this one. This affirms my belief that we have been following the right course to advance our college. Because of the diligence and dedication of our community, we have laid much of the necessary groundwork for our future success.

The next phase of our common efforts will not be easy. It will require that we intensify our focus, make our ideas real, and execute our plans. We will have to be disciplined in our thinking and self-critical as we assess our progress. Having established a powerful framework for articulating why we matter in the world, we now must turn our attention to establishing the proof points that make our case.

The years have not diminished my ambitions for our college. I believe that Columbia College Chicago should be the destination college for creatives who seek to bring their voices to bear on a world that is in need of them. Our determination to embrace difference and our willingness to tackle the difficult challenges entailed by that commitment should make us a leading light in the national conversation about diversity, equity, and inclusion in American higher education. As a college, we have the extraordinary privilege of educating and guiding creatives on their journey to success. The work we do is essential, as are the students in our care. In the end, our institutional value will be measured against our ability to help our students realize their aspirations and achieve their goals.

Yes, we still have much to do. But I am confident of what we can accomplish together. Time and time again, I have witnessed the Columbia community coming together to confront major challenges and accomplish big tasks. Wrapped in the power of our purpose and our core values, let us once again surface our collective courage on behalf of our students, and take up the hard work that lies ahead.

Kwang-Wu Kim
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