

*Reactions to Potential Strategic Initiatives  
By Selected Members of the Grinnell College  
Community*

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## Executive Summary

This executive summary includes the verbatim consensus for each planning strategy that is reported elsewhere in this report. It is provided for the reader who is interested in a synopsis of our findings. We encourage interested members of the Grinnell community to read the entire report to develop a more complete understanding of the contributions of the participants to this report. We also understand that some members of the community are interested in an overview of our report, and this summary, then, may be useful to them.

### Strategy 1: Consensus

Overall, respondents were in favor of increasing the diversity and ability (broadly-defined) of the student population. However, the majority of respondents thought that using test scores (i.e., PSAT/SAT) to determine ability was too narrowly focused. Participants stated they would want the college to assess students more holistically. Faculty members were not in favor of increasing the international student population if the curriculum would become less focused on the liberal arts. Finally, participants stated that it was important that Grinnell continue to provide need-based scholarships for eligible students.

### Strategy 2: Consensus

While we have presented a number of observations that support this strategy, in reviewing the totality of the comments, fewer than 25% of all the comments were supportive of the strategy. The dramatic nature of this strategy was attractive to some participants, and a few indicated that this would help diversify the student body. Others disagreed with that conclusion and also reported that they thought that “something for nothing” would diminish the value of the experience.

### Strategy 3: Consensus

Less than 15% of the comments of the participants favored this strategy. It was seen as low cost and if some additional strong students could be recruited, that was perceived as positive. But having feeder schools, trying to develop more career opportunities, or offering additional financial aid to Iowans was not received positively. A number of concerns about this strategy were expressed, including the effect this might have on out of state recruitment, the College's image, and the diversity of the student body. In the final analysis, this comment from a senior faculty member summarized the concerns of the participants: "The Iowa connection is not a primary focus of the College."

### Strategy 4: Consensus

Overall, respondents were in favor of enhancing the student experience and provided support for each of the outlined elements. However, respondents also noted potential disadvantages of specific elements such as reducing temporary faculty, increasing expectations for faculty-student interaction, and increasing funding for residential life and mental health programs. One student summarized a common sentiment, "Focus on the student experience and not a different type of student." A faculty member noted, "Every student in my class has the potential to be a top performer."

Respondents endorsed the strategy for several reasons. A faculty member explained, "We've gone away from the student experience, and have become more business oriented and run like a company." Respondents indicated that improving the student experience would result in more applications, greater student satisfaction and retention, increased alumni giving, and improved satisfaction and retention of faculty. A student from the Class of 2004 explained, "It's about maintaining and establishing the Grinnell [that I've] come to know

[with] an emphasis back on faculty and students and less importance on ranking.”

#### Strategy 5: Consensus

There seemed to be little consensus on this strategy. Everyone agreed that partner employment was an issue requiring attention. A focus on good teaching was evident throughout the comments of each group. Respondents also were in favor of not increasing class sizes. Mixed reviews resulted from discussions of the 2/2 teaching load, temporary faculty, and hiring prominent scholars.

#### Strategy 6: Consensus

The participants received this planning strategy more favorably than the other five strategies. Another way of summarizing the reactions of the participants was that this strategy elicited the fewest negative reactions. A faculty member indicated, “The most appealing is enhancing the student experience, but not for what it says under the heading.” Yet another offered, “The best expenditure of our resources, both human and financial, is to focus on what we do and to make those stronger.”

## Introduction

Vice President Jonathan Brand and Professor Mark Montgomery invited us to conduct a study of the Grinnell College community's reaction to various potential strategic initiatives that were in the process of being developed by a committee they headed. Toward that end we met with them and Vice President Tom Crady on September 4, 2003 to map out a strategy for doing so.

We decided that we would interview students, faculty, staff, administrators and trustees through a series of focus groups and telephone conference calls during the month of September 2003. We conducted 16 focus groups on campus on September 19, 2003 and also conducted telephone interviews on September 26 and 29. In the end, we interviewed a total of 105 members of the Grinnell community. A list of the interviewees by their relationship with the College is included in Appendix A.

Prior to the interviews, the committee made a copy of the various options available to the campus community through the following URL:

<http://www.grinnell.edu/offices/institutionalplanning/strategicplanning>

This listing included six strategies that potentially would form the heart of the College's strategic plan. That document was provided to the focus group participants prior to our visit to the College on September 19. A summary of the strategy is identified at the beginning of every section of this report.

Our interviews primarily focused on these strategies, but also included other related information that the participants chose to share with us. A short protocol of questions was developed to guide our interviews. The protocol is included as Appendix B.

The results of our work are included in the balance of this report. We have chosen to organize our report around the six strategies prepared by the planning committee. We will provide an analysis of the transcendent values that the participants commonly cited in responding to the strategies. Finally, we also will share some observations of the strategic planning process that may be useful as this process moves forward. We would like to point out that we have done our very best to quote people accurately. Occasionally a speaker's voice was not recorded clearly by our tape recorder, and in those cases we had to rely on our hand-written notes from the interview session. We apologize if there are any inaccuracies in the quotations appearing in this report as a result.

### Strategy #1: Offering a Full Ride to the Most Meritorious Students

As the title implies, this strategy would offer free tuition, room, and board to the most talented students. This strategy specifically would target National Merit Scholars, National Achievement Scholars, National Hispanic Scholars, and international students of merit for the purpose of increasing the talent and diversity of the student population. Participants noted advantages and disadvantages of this strategy.

#### Advantages

Respondents felt that the main advantage of this strategy would be its ability to attract more diverse domestic and international students. One staff member noted that Grinnell competes with larger institutions for merit students and this strategy would, "assist the recruitment and matriculation of students of color."

Students stated that this strategy would help recruit top international students, especially because international students are limited financially and cannot afford the cost.

One faculty member felt this strategy would encourage students to apply to Grinnell for admission: "Offering full-rides may sculpt the international student group and applicant pool. If you know it's free, you may apply but if you know it costs, you may choose [to apply] only if you could pay." Another faculty member suggested that this strategy might allow Grinnell to recruit "an international clientele that hasn't been tapped."

One trustee was in favor of this strategy if, indeed, it would increase diversity. "Would minority enrollment increase to 25%? This would be laudable." Another trustee noted that there are many top academic students of color who can't afford

to come to Grinnell so the College needs to provide access for these students. A faculty member noted that international students, "add something important to life and I'm in favor of what it adds."

One staff member liked the strategy because it "would have an immediate impact and would enhance programs like MAPS."

Several students applauded this proposal, as it would relieve the financial burden for them and their families. One student observed, "Many top students can't afford to come here. There would be less pressure from parents to go to a school that costs less." One National Merit Scholar from the Class of 2006 said: "I would like to not go into huge, huge debt to come here. Some people can pay but I'm taking out large loans and it would be really nice not to have to do that."

A member of the Class of 2004 stated that similar to tuition free Grinnell, the strategy is "cost prohibitive but would be a good use of the endowment without passing on costs to students." Another national merit scholar from the Class of 2007 liked this strategy but added some words of advice, "If they do go to (a) full-ride for (the) most meritorious, I hope Grinnell still asks students to go through the application process. Some colleges offered me a full (ride) without going through the application process and I figured that if they were going to offer me full tuition without seeing my application, they weren't very good schools. I wouldn't go to those schools that didn't evaluate me on more than just my National Merit Scholar standing."

### Disadvantages

Respondents cited several disadvantages of this strategy. They thought that by rewarding full-rides to National Merit Scholars, the institution would be overemphasizing the importance of test scores such as PSAT and SAT.

Respondents were critical of this approach for several reasons. One, this strategy would conflict with the institutions' values. As one trustee stated, "We will not better satisfy our mission with test performance-- - this strategy does not work to pursue our mission and values."

The strategy would define merit too narrowly. Respondents from the trustee, faculty, student, and staff groups identified this disadvantage. One trustee asked: "Should we have as a goal that everyone be smarter? We should look at other criteria for admission."

A faculty member noted, "I applaud the emphasis on getting better students but they haven't done enough study to know who are better students." Another faculty member had a similar response, "The concept hinges on the definition of merit. It would be a good strategy if the college shared a rich concept of what is meritorious versus a narrow definition of test scores." Still another faculty member was opposed to a strategy that rewarded test scores over other criteria: "The policy outlined here is naïve and indefensible. You take one test, the PSAT. They send you a letter if you are a national merit scholar. Does that mean Grinnell wants to pay to have you here and not to pay for have someone else here?"

One staff member suggested that the definition of meritorious be tied to the way students currently are admitted. "Don't limit to just numbers/SAT scores. Even if we attracted students with only high test scores, we may not have well rounded students." A student from the Class of 2007 echoed this concern: "National Merit is like basing it all on one test. So like, if you have a bad day, that one test can destroy your chance at a full ride. I think they should look at it more holistically."

Finally, this strategy would alter the student character according to some of the participants. Several faculty members voiced concern that this strategy would recruit students to Grinnell because of the financial aid package and not because they wanted to be here and "in turn this would exclude other students who want to be here." Another faculty member commented, "Students may apply here as a safety instead of those who really want to go to Grinnell."

One student from the Class of 2007 mentioned, "You would lose student character. Grinnell students are very strong and driven but they want to save the world, not just get an 'A.' But if you have the top students with the top grades and the top test scores, then that will become the emphasis and this will be a very different place." A member from the Class of 2004 had a similar response, "There used to be an emphasis on students' self-selection of Grinnell; now it seems their recruiting is focused only on smart students who don't fit." Although some respondents were in favor of this strategy because of its ability to increase diversity, other participants felt this strategy would make Grinnell "more homogeneous." Respondents felt that this strategy would target students in higher socio-economic groups and would limit racial and economic diversity. One faculty member observed, "We want a diversity in our students in as many ways as possible. We want students who are not the best. They are getting an opportunity here. That is an important thing." One emeritus faculty member commented, "It would create a meritocracy and class system." A staff member also questioned this approach: "Does this strategy contradict a commitment to diversity? If we move to a point where all students are in the top 10%, then we will lose diversity."

A member from the Class of 2004 expressed concern about "targeting mailing to upper SES families - this seems counter to Grinnell's ideology of getting folks together regardless of SES."

One trustee recognized the competing goals of recruiting for merit versus recruiting for diversity: "There might be a give and take between merit and diversity."

Faculty members were not in favor of increasing the international student population if this meant emphasizing majors such as computer science and engineering over liberal arts. One emeritus faculty member summarized this view: "I take exception to the international emphasis. This is not a vocational college; this is a liberal arts college. Students come here thinking they can succeed in business. Such is not the liberal arts." Faculty members from the social sciences, humanities, and science also expressed disfavor with expanding science and engineering over humanities and social sciences.

One staff member wondered if bringing in the top 10% would "bring in more psychological problems."

One faculty group discussed the impact of this strategy on career placement. A faculty member did not want the career preparation responsibilities to fall on faculty and another questioned what improvements were needed if "most students are interested in service or graduate school after graduation." One faculty member, however, felt that there was a need for more staff in the career development office: "It would benefit students to talk about how to market their experiences."

Several other respondents mentioned that Grinnell must continue to award financial aid based on need. "We can't get rid of need blind admissions." One trustee suggested that Grinnell must consider a "scholarship provision for

minority middle class or depressed SES who don't meet the definition of 'merit' or who don't show considerable 'need.'"

One trustee disapproved this strategy because it "opposes where we've been going, building on our financial strength. This would take us back to where we have come from. How do we afford it?"

### Consensus

Overall, respondents were in favor of increasing the diversity and ability (broadly-defined) of the student population. However, the majority of respondents thought that using test scores (i.e., PSAT/SAT) to determine ability was too narrowly focused. Participants stated they would want the college to assess students more holistically. Faculty members were not in favor of increasing the international student population if the curriculum would become less focused on the liberal arts. Finally, participants stated that it was important that Grinnell continue to provide need-based scholarships for eligible students.

## Strategy #2: A Tuition-Free Grinnell College

This proposal is straightforward. If implemented, it would result in the College not charging tuition but it would retain fees for room and board and perhaps for other services.

### Advantages.

The respondents identified a number of advantages of a tuition-free Grinnell College. In the eyes of some, tuition-free Grinnell would result in a more diversified student body. One tenured faculty member indicated, "This approach would enhance us strategically. This would also enhance the quality and diversity of the student body." Another faculty member agreed and observed, "I would feel 'really something' about working at a place like this. It would be very egalitarian and reflects our values."

Another faculty member thought this proposal would result in social change. This person pointed out that with the College being tuition-free, graduates could take positions with non-profit organizations and as a consequence could work for social change.

A senior faculty member indicated that this approach would reduce the financial burden on families. Another faculty member added that the College has lost students because of costs, and a tuition-free Grinnell might ameliorate such problems.

Another faculty member indicated that tuition-free would be appealing to benefactors. "I believe that alumni would be inclined to give and would find this notion appealing. We could raise some money." Another faculty member

indicated that a tuition-free Grinnell would send a good message to benefactors and demonstrate what the College is doing with its endowment.

Some of the respondents indicated that a tuition-free Grinnell would send positive messages to broader constituencies. A student member of the class of 2006 indicated, "Tuition-free Grinnell would reduce student pressures and make the institution more prominent." A student from the class of 2005 added, "When I meet with a prospective student I can't tell them (sic) a tangible thing that makes Grinnell unique. Tuition-free would give me a tangible thing to tell them." Another student agreed by pointing out "It would make Grinnell stand out as a unique place and add more diversity."

Finally, the dramatic nature of this strategy was appealing to some respondents. A graduate indicated, "I was taken with the boldness" of the plan. Still another added: "Somebody is fearless."

### Disadvantages

This strategy has a number of disadvantages associated with it. Several respondents wondered if providing a college education without charging tuition would devalue the experience. "Free tuition devalues the product" according to a graduate. A senior faculty member observed, "There is some value in paying for one's education." Another senior faculty member was more blunt: "Tuition free is nothing more than something for nothing."

Some of the respondents wondered if tuition-free Grinnell would attract students who would come only because the cost of attendance would be so modest. "Do we want students to come because Grinnell offers them a good education or because it is free?" asked one faculty member. Another wondered if the strategy

would backfire? Could “there be a feeling that the institution has a bunch of rich kids?” this person asked.

Students raised a number of issues with this strategy. One pointed out “Tuition free would take away the general quirkiness of the student body and that’s why I came here.” Another said that “Tuition free would change the student body immensely – you would get people who were driven, always had success and expect (it).” Still another reported “I think it would be nice and my parents would pressure me into it, but I think I’d be unhappy.”

A tenured faculty member observed the following: "I don't agree with tuition free either in principle or ideologically. Need blind admission is most important. Then the question is, how do we allocate resources to students (so that) they won't be burdened by the loans? A kid coming from a home where they have a \$500,000 mortgage is in a different position than the kid whose family makes \$23,000 a year. If students can pay, they should."

Another tenured faculty member declared, “I think tuition free is unappealing and unethical. The arguments are flawed. There is a premise that people would give more money if Grinnell were tuition free and there is no evidence of this. It’s wrong-headed. They had to pay for their own education but now they are going to pay for some else’s education? That’s a non –starter. The larger population is not necessarily interested in giving money for a Grinnell education. From an ethical perspective, any student to Grinnell who can pay has an obligation to pay that money.”

A trustee also wondered about this approach. “This would not necessarily increase giving to the College.” Another trustee pointed out that “We are having

a difficult time raising funds for current projects and tuition free would compete for these funds.”

### Consensus

While we have presented a number of observations that support this strategy, in reviewing the totality of the comments, fewer than 25% of all the comments were supportive of the strategy. The dramatic nature of this strategy was attractive to some participants, and a few indicated that this would help diversify the student body. Others disagreed with that conclusion and also reported that they thought that “something for nothing” would diminish the value of the experience.

### Strategy 3: Enhancing our Connection to Iowa

"This strategy is based on belief that a school of Grinnell's reputation and caliber ought to be among the top choices of Iowa's most accomplished high school graduates."

#### Advantages

One student reported that if Grinnell had some feeder schools in Iowa it would be a good strategy.

The strategies involved in recruiting more students from Iowa would involve several dimensions according to the respondents. A faculty member observed that this strategy would involve having to advertise and sell the College. A sophomore student asserted that a recruitment program would have to involve more than going to the local farmers' market. A senior speculated that this strategy would result in changes as to how Grinnell would recruit students and where the College would send admissions counselors.

One trustee thought that maybe recruiting national merit scholars more aggressively in Iowa would be a good idea, but the rest of the strategic elements were not attractive. Another trustee shared the following: "We can do a better job of reaching out to Iowa's best students through initiatives like distance education courses. We are perceived as an 'odd' place. We need to connect our students to Iowa high school students. We need to break down the perception that Grinnell is a place for 'odd' students."

#### Disadvantages

The participants reported a variety of disadvantages. Students pointed out that if Grinnell were tied more closely to Iowa, the attractiveness of the College

would be diminished. A sophomore from Des Moines said that Central College in Pella had a similar focus in the past and now is dominated by Iowa students. A junior from Iowa contended that Iowans have similar experiences and this student came to Grinnell to get a different social structure and be around different people.

Several people expressed concerns about the implicit careerism in this strategy. An administrator said that if the College attracted more Iowans, more jobs would have to be found for them. A senior faculty member declared, "If we try to prepare Iowa students for careers, we're like Buena Vista. This is not liberal. Practical programs are not what we are about." Another senior faculty member indicated that the tone of the strategy is antithetical to a liberal education. Also, "This is far too simplistic."

Some participants feared that if the College strengthened its recruiting in Iowa that it might become more of a regional institution. An administrator scoffed, "Does this (strategy) lead to 'big fish in the small pond' approach? Are we prepared to have a booth at the Iowa State Fair? Should we advertise on television?" A sophomore student concluded, "Grinnell would become a more regional school where I think they (sic) want to become a more national school. It wouldn't be as attractive if I knew so many students were from Iowa." One student expressed concerns about regional recruiting and said, "I don't like the focus on recruiting regionally." Finally, a faculty advised, "Don't become a regional school."

A faculty member said that this looked like a business strategy. In this person's view there is a reason that national institutions are more prestigious than regional institutions. Grinnell "needs to cultivate national and international relations."

A number of participants were concerned that recruiting more Iowans would diminish the diversity of the student body. A trustee asked, "Do we de-emphasize diversity or internationalism (to do this)?" A faculty member asked that Iowans not be recruited at the expense of others. Two faculty members agreed that by enhancing the connection to Iowa and recruiting more Iowa students, perhaps US and international diversity would be affected negatively. Two students from the class of 2007 echoed the potential limit on the diversity of students. Both agreed that enhanced recruitment of Iowa students would limit the diversity of students from out of state, a strength of the College in their view.

Several participants questioned the connection to the prairie. One student declared, "When my parents saw this they thought, 'How can you have an excellent internationally known college in a Midwestern prairie environment where there is nothing?'" Another student observed, "The student from California or Florida won't buy it (the prairie environment)."

A sophomore student shared several observations about the College's location in Iowa. "I think the thing with Grinnell that hurts the most is its address and not the location. It's a nice campus but it's Iowa. Almost everyone likes it once they get here but the whole idea of spending four years in a cornfield." A staff member said that what is emphasized about Iowa will take finesse. In this person's view the rural nature could be emphasized, but not farming.

Finally, a tenured faculty member observed this: "Not many faculty are from Iowa. Becoming too 'Iowan' could cause faculty issues."

### Consensus

Less than 15% of the comments of the participants favored this strategy. The strategy was viewed as having minimal costs and if some strong students could be recruited, that was perceived as positive. But strategies such as having feeder schools, trying to develop more career opportunities, or offering additional financial aid to Iowans were not received positively. A number of concerns about this strategy were expressed, including the effect this might have on out of state recruitment, the College's image, and the diversity of the student body. In the final analysis, this comment from a senior faculty member summarized the concerns of the participants: "The Iowa connection is not a primary focus of the College."

### Strategy #4: Enhancing the Student Experience

The focus of this strategy is to “enhance students’ experiences, both in and out of the classroom.” Specific elements outlined in the strategy include: 20% reduction in financial burden on students, fewer temporary faculty, more faculty-student interaction, increased ethnic and socio-economic diversity, and more funding for residential life and mental health programs. Participants noted advantages and disadvantages of this strategy.

#### Advantages

Respondents offered support for a 20% reduction in the financial burden on students and their families. Faculty members indicated that this element represented “thinking out of the box” and stated that “we need to do more to alleviate financial burden.” In addition, a few faculty members noted that efforts to reduce financial burden would align with the mission of the institution. One faculty member suggested that this strategy could help the institution because decreasing loan debt might result in increased alumni giving. A student from the Class of 2006 commented that reducing the financial burden of students would be more effective than eliminating tuition. Another student from the same class indicated that “the impact [of financial aid and more faculty] would be dramatic and would create a culture shock.”

Students offered strong support for a reduction in temporary faculty. One student explained that some people “scramble” to find new advisors when temporary faculty leave. Another student stated that having temporary faculty limits the bonds with tenured faculty. Faculty also provided support for reducing temporary faculty: “From the students’ point of view that is the single biggest reason they have a noncontinuous experience - that we have so many people on one or two year contracts.” A current temporary faculty member

talked about the difficulty of contributing to students' experiences when temporary faculty invest a great amount of time into developing courses. Another faculty member noted the difficulty of students getting faculty recommendations when faculty have left.

One student supported an increase in faculty-student interaction: "MAPS is a great ticket to graduate school." Additionally, a faculty member expressed the need for more summer research opportunities. One trustee explained that students have a close relationship with faculty members due to tutorials and senior projects.

Respondents supported an increase in the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the student body. For example, one student was disappointed by the lack of ethnic diversity on campus and liked the idea of increasing both ethnic and socio-economic diversity. A different student thought that the addition of another POSSE was a good idea. Another student explained that it was important to have a large proportion of international students at the institution. One faculty member indicated the need for more lower-income students. According to one student, "Many parents won't pay for their students' education and there is no way a student can put themselves (sic) through Grinnell."

Regarding funding for residential life and mental health programs, a staff member indicated a need to address student life areas and to build programs. One student stated that many weekend activities involve alcohol and explained that it would be nice to have an alternative, while another student said that students struggle with the academic rigor and that there is a need to improve counseling services. Yet another student explained the need for additional funding for mental health services to support students who may need more than eight visits. One trustee noted that residence halls and academics seem to be

independent. Another trustee asked, “Should we strengthen the residence hall connection with course work?”

A staff member noted that enhancing the student experience would help alleviate the reasons students are disconnected. Enhancing students’ connection would result in greater satisfaction and loyalty according to this person.

### Disadvantages

The strategic planning document offered several options to reduce temporary faculty including leave-proofing the faculty, reducing the number of leaves, raising class sizes, and reducing the offering of low-enrollment courses. Several faculty noted that increasing class size and reducing course offerings would not enhance students’ experiences. In addition, a few respondents noted how other strategies outlined in the focus on recruiting faculty could also result in larger class sizes and fewer course offerings, which again would detract from students’ experiences.

Trustees noted the disadvantages of decreasing temporary faculty. One trustee indicated the potential positive impact of temporary faculty as a way for both the institution and the temporary faculty members to test each other: “We can check them out and see how they do.” Another trustee cautioned against eliminating temporary faculty who can be “a wonderful tool.”

One faculty member noted the importance of providing additional support services to a more diverse student body: “Diversity is laudable, but diverse students need support. Without it, they will fail...We would need smaller introductory courses so that they get support...We have no remedial science or math...”

One faculty respondent questioned the need for additional faculty/student interaction and indicated that the current expectation is high. Another faculty member noted the absence of any complaints about the time faculty spend with students. One faculty member thought that students currently have a great experience and questioned the need to enhance the experience.

One trustee expressed uncertainty that one or two “episodes” warrant an increase in spending in residence life. Another trustee noted that Grinnell spends more in residence life compared to peer institutions. Similarly, a member of administration questioned, “Do we need to throw more money on mental health and residence halls? Is this a self-fulfilling prophecy?”

One staff member indicated that this strategy needs to include civic engagement and service as ways to enhance the student experience and fulfill the institution’s mission.

Students from the Class of 2006 offered additional ideas for enhancing the student experience including: offering more interdisciplinary courses, providing more opportunities to do things away from Grinnell, increasing library hours, increasing the break between the end of classes and the beginning of finals, and improving access to technology.

A few individuals noted the need to focus on students and faculty. Several comments contrasted this need to focus on students and faculty with a perceived focus on building projects. For example, one staff member asked, “What is the cost of enhancing students’ experience? Why is that not more valuable than buildings?” A faculty member stated that “new buildings are not classrooms and

that should be a priority that enhances student life.” A student indicated the need to make the college attractive, noting “faculty and students do that, not buildings.” Although these comments contrasted building projects with improving the student experience, one trustee explained that the facilities are very focused on improving the student experience.

Similar to comments regarding the sixth strategy, “Building on the College’s Strengths,” several individuals commented on the need to develop the relationship with the town of Grinnell. A student explained, “There is a need to make up our minds about isolating ourselves or working with the community of Grinnell. We all know how this place can be a cocoon.”

Students noted the need to improve communication with the town. One student stated that the college did not consult the town when tearing down houses for the residence halls. Another student explained that a city street near a residence hall was closed when students were scheduled to move into the hall. Other students noted a need to improve relationships with the Grinnell police. Several students expressed concern with the lack of communication between the town and college regarding a sexual assault that occurred in the town during the summer.

Regarding the overall strategy, a trustee noted, “What is absent? Grinnell [the town] is a community. We need to integrate faculty/student activities within the community.”

### Consensus

Overall, respondents were in favor of enhancing the student experience and provided support for each of the outlined elements. However, respondents also noted potential disadvantages of specific elements such as reducing temporary

faculty, increasing expectations for faculty-student interaction, and increasing funding for residential life and mental health programs. One student summarized a common sentiment, "Focus on the student experience and not a different type of student." A faculty member noted, "Every student in my class has the potential to be a top performer."

Respondents endorsed the strategy for several reasons. A faculty member explained, "We've gone away from the student experience, and have become more business oriented and run like a company." Respondents indicated that improving the student experience would result in more applications, greater student satisfaction and retention, increased alumni giving, and improved satisfaction and retention of faculty. A student from the Class of 2004 explained, "It's about maintaining and establishing the Grinnell [that I've] come to know [with] an emphasis back on faculty and students and less importance on ranking."

Strategy #5: Focus on Recruiting Faculty Who Will Enhance the College's  
Academic Reputation

“This strategy assumes that the key to providing an excellent education is to recruit top faculty.” It has a number of components, which were discussed by the focus group participants. In general, no one wholeheartedly supported the entire strategy. However, various components of the strategy were seen as advantageous and disadvantageous. In addition, respondents identified alternatives to this strategy.

Advantages

Respondents primarily addressed three components of this strategy as advantageous – the 2/2 teaching load, partner employment, and recruitment of prominent scholars. Most respondent groups saw both the teaching load and partner employment as important considerations that merited further focus. Some also saw the recruitment of prominent scholars as beneficial to the reputation of Grinnell College.

Most faculty responded favorably to the concept of a 2/2 teaching load. One faculty member indicated that he/she was “stretched too thin” when teaching three courses during a semester. Another indicated that the 2/2 teaching load is a priority. A staff member suggested that the 2/2 teaching load may be appealing.

Partner employment was identified in the document as a focus within this strategy. Some respondents highlighted it as a priority. Almost all faculty groups emphasized the importance of this aspect of the strategy. A student indicated, “It’s important for Grinnell to help partners find jobs.” One faculty member inquired if the career placement office could assist in this process. One

trustee group noted that lack of employment for faculty partners may result in Grinnell losing good faculty, and both trustee groups identified partner employment as a significant issue.

Finally, some students and trustees viewed recruiting prominent scholars as valuable. One student stated, "Prominent scholars give us a better name so students get into better programs and that helps Grinnell's reputation. It's a cycle." Another student said, "Recruit top faculty but recruit a lot of them." A trustee suggested that hiring prominent scholars is one way to enhance "the reputational capital" of the institution.

An alternative presented by several participants would be for the College to hire prominent scholars to teach courses on an occasional basis rather than hire such people permanently. For example, a well-known scholar might choose to come to Grinnell for a semester while on sabbatical to teach a course. One trustee mentioned taking a course from Arnold Toynbee as an undergraduate at Grinnell under an arrangement similar to this proposal.

### Disadvantages

Respondents identified a number of disadvantages to this strategy. All groups focused on the importance of faculty teaching ability as a high priority. Some suggested that the 2/2 teaching load was disadvantageous to the institution. Most focus group participants seemed to perceive that "big name" scholars are more concerned with research than teaching. This clearly was considered a disadvantage as respondents articulated a very strong stance that faculty at Grinnell primarily should be good teachers. Some faculty considered aspects of this strategy "insulting" and felt that it suggested that current faculty are not as good as those who could be recruited.

Some respondents indicated that messages in the strategy detracted from the focus of strong teaching. The 2/2 teaching load, while at times appealing, suggested to some respondents that the focus of faculty would shift so that research would be a higher priority than it currently is and than is considered fitting with the mission of this institution. A member of the Distinguished Faculty/SHS/Emeritus Faculty group said, “[A] 2/2 teaching load moves us in the wrong direction. As we expand opportunities for scholarship we move away from our teaching.”

A faculty member also voiced dissatisfaction with this component of the strategy, “I do not like the 2-2 load. This is what defines a liberal arts institution from a research institution. [I] would prefer a 3-2 load with leave in the 4<sup>th</sup> year.” Another faculty member suggested full-year sabbaticals every 4 or 5 years.

Some faculty felt that a reduction to a 2/2 teaching load was not a significant change. One faculty member questioned the perception that accompanies the various teaching loads, suggesting that teaching a 3/2 load suggests that the faculty member is not a strong researcher but that a 2/2 load suggests that the faculty member probably is not a good teacher. Another faculty member echoed that sentiment, stating frustration that the 2/2 load suggested a lack of commitment on the part of the faculty.

A staff member asked if a shift to a 2/2 teaching load would create an expectation that faculty do more research. This was often viewed as antithetical to the mission of the college. As one trustee stated, “Grinnell is not a place where faculty should do ‘tons of research.’” Another trustee asked whether the teaching load was a factor in recruiting quality faculty members to Grinnell.

The 2/2 teaching load component of the strategy also raised questions about potential changes in class sizes resulting from this shift. One faculty member stated that the document was not clear about the results and questioned whether or not class sizes would increase. Other faculty members were concerned that such a shift without the hiring of additional faculty would cause a loss of upper-level courses. A tenured faculty member stated that faculty cannot remain stimulated when they only teach entry-level courses.

Students in particular expressed strong dissatisfaction with anything in the strategy that would cause increased class sizes or reduced connection with faculty. "More sabbaticals would ruin the continuity and bonds between students and faculty," according to one student. Another stated, "I feel like the plan for attracting better faculty is a low priority. . . . I don't like, at the expense of course offerings or class sizes, [the idea] of getting better professors." Students stated that raising class sizes would not enhance the student experience.

Hiring "prominent faculty" produced mixed reviews from the respondents. Many questioned the necessity of hiring "stars" and whether or not these faculty would be dedicated to teaching. Others also stated that Grinnell already has excellent faculty, and faculty in particular felt insulted by this aspect of the strategy. Two respondents referred to this strategy as one of buying "big names" which was not seen as favorable. A staff member suggested that a prominent scholar might be a "prima donna" which is not what she perceived faculty as wanting. She stated that such an approach could be demoralizing to the faculty.

Students in particular saw this component of the strategy as unnecessary. In addition to commenting that the current faculty are excellent, they noted that having top scholars would not improve the student experience at Grinnell. One student stated that it is "more important to have good teachers than great

scholars.” Another declared, “I’m not in favor of prominent scholars because prominent scholars don’t mean better teachers.” One student shared that he/she did not see this aspect of the strategy as special: “I guess I assume that top colleges have that [prominent scholars] so I don’t know if that would set us apart.”

One Distinguished Faculty/SHS/Emeritus said that faculty “leave proofing” should be the goal, although not all respondents agreed. A tenured faculty member stated, “The question then is, what are the reasons for the departures? If it was from poor recruitment, that’s a problem. If it’s from poor mentoring or support, then that’s a reason, and if it’s the environment that precipitated them leaving, that’s a third reason. No one has actually said, ‘We need to take a global look at why people who are here for 9 years, why do they stay?’”

Students and faculty expressed concern about the number of temporary faculty. Faculty noted that attending to the current faculty and to the quality of life issues of faculty should have been strong considerations in this strategy. Beyond partner employment as an issue of quality of life, faculty salaries and other issues such as community resources (i.e. restaurants, theatres, etc.) and childcare for current faculty were raised as issues.

Diversity was cited as generally important, and diversity of faculty in particular was noted as important by faculty. They felt that a diversity component was missing in this strategy. An untenured faculty member stated that “critical diversity” of the faculty is missing. She said that the numbers of faculty of color may suggest that the faculty is diverse, but those faculty are either temporary or tenure-track who leave.

### Consensus

There seemed to be little consensus regarding this strategy. Everyone agreed that partner employment was an issue requiring attention. A focus on good teaching was evident throughout the comments of each group. Respondents also were in favor of not increasing class sizes. Mixed reviews resulted from discussions of the 2/2 teaching load, temporary faculty, and hiring prominent scholars.

### Strategy #6: Building on the College's strengths

"This strategy is based on a belief that Grinnell is essentially 'on track' in terms of fulfilling its mission statement, but could further build upon some of its key strengths.

#### Advantages

As an overarching approach, a number of our participants found this strategy attractive. One senior faculty member observed, "Student experience and building on strengths are the way to go." Another faculty member pointed out "We are in a great position to emphasize our strengths. The best expenditures of our resources, both human and financial, are to focus on what we do and to make those stronger." Yet another faculty member agreed, "I also felt building on the College's strengths is the closest to what the College should do." Two staff members agreed with this approach and a third commented, "Building on the College's strengths allows everyone to contribute. This would benefit employee morale and student morale. If students aren't happy, they don't want to help recruit." A trustee provided a summary of this strategy by concluding, "#6 is more of a potpourri. This is less focused than the others – it pulled from (the) other strategies. The others are more dramatic but this is a good strategy." Another trustee observed, "This strategy is very close to our current strategy."

Several other trustees also were supportive of this strategy. One reported that there was nothing that could be criticized on the list and two others reported that this strategy highlighted that the College will have to make choices. Yet another trustee observed, "The focus on the liberal arts emphasis is great."

A group of tenured professors also liked this plan. They thought that reducing class sizes and focusing on the student experience was an appropriate strategy.

One commented, "We would like to see the outcome (of the planning process) as enhancing the student's classroom experience." Another added, "We are here to educate students. This is the core (of the College)."

Several participants emphasized the importance of providing financial aid to international students. One faculty member asked, "Why not make international student admissions need sensitive compared with need-blind for our domestic students?" Another agreed that having more international students would enhance the student experience. On the other hand, a student disagreed with this strategy. "Need sensitive for international students is a horrible idea..."

Several participants advocated improving the town of Grinnell. A graduate observed the following: "Downtown Grinnell needs to be improved. Also, encourage students to 'go to town.' We need to recognize that we are part of Grinnell, Iowa. Most of the stuff we experienced is closed." A senior agreed. We've "lost a lot since we've been at Grinnell." The College "should invest in that for students beyond the town/gown relationship." The College can be an isolating place and this would enhance the student experience and improve the Iowa connection. An administrator agreed. "There is a need to work outside the College." Another administrator offered this observation: "We need to focus on the town. If we want superstar faculty, we need more restaurants, better schools, day care, prekindergarten."

Several respondents favored study abroad and international experiences. One trustee asserted, "Study abroad is an astounding experience, and very helpful to our students. If we don't recruit international students then we need to continue the expectation that students will go abroad."

The financial dimensions of this strategy caught the attention of several participants. One trustee observed, "I am not sure we market the scholarships at Grinnell. We have a high percentage of students on scholarship." Another added, "We may be expensive, but not more so in terms of debt at ISU (Iowa State University) and UI (the University of Iowa)." Still another concluded, "But we are better off comparing with private schools than state schools. We should tout our comparatively low debt loads for seniors." In a larger sense, one trustee wondered, "What do we cut to spend money in these areas? This strategy does not address what you need to cut." But a faculty member asserted, "I don't like strengthening the fiscal stability of the College. We have a billion dollar endowment...." Another faculty member concluded, "It seems antithetical to talk about reducing expenditures." A graduate agreed: "Budget neutral is wrong. These things will cost money."

Returning to or re-emphasizing the liberal arts core of the College also was an attractive part of this strategy for some. A faculty member commented, "I appreciate on page 17 the need to 'reemphasize the liberal arts core.' There is a need to market how we are different, emphasize what we do well. We should talk about the liberal arts."

### Disadvantages

Some of the participants had negative comments about strategy six, or the strategies in general. Among them were the following.

A graduate indicated that some of the proposals began to define where the College would go, with 20% of the students from Iowa, 20% international, and 25% domestic students of color. This graduate was not sure the College should be locked into these percentages.

Attracting more students from Iowa, in the view of a faculty member, would mean that the College needed to change its political orientation. A student wondered about the advisability of recruiting more heavily from the Midwest. This person said, "We want it (Grinnell College) to be a national and international college that has people from everywhere. It needs to stay cosmopolitan."

Renovating or decommissioning buildings resulted in comments from several participants. A senior stated, "Don't decommission older buildings." A junior added, "Don't tear down old buildings---it doesn't make much sense. Like Darby, there are only three roofs built like that."

One trustee concluded that strengthening the international character of the college and also anchoring the College on its Midwestern setting were antithetical. A faculty member agreed with this conclusion.

One administrator thought the curriculum should be changed but a faculty member disagreed.

An administrator reminded those involved in planning that Grinnell reached its level of achievement by "being cutting edge." Another administrator added, "We need to build on our strengths. There is enough about Grinnell that is unique that we can emphasize." Still a third observed, "I was shocked that it (the planning options document) did not include civic responsibility or service...I did not see Grinnell students give back."

### Consensus

The participants received this planning strategy more favorably than the other five strategies. Another way of summarizing the reactions of the participants

was that this strategy elicited the fewest negative reactions. A faculty member indicated that “The most appealing is enhancing the student experience, but not for what it says under the heading.” Yet another offered, “The best expenditure of our resources, both human and financial, is to focus on what we do and to make those stronger.”

### Other General Comments

A variety of other comments about the strategies did not fit neatly with the six strategies outlined. These comments are offered to provide additional depth from the people who were interviewed.

An administrator was critical that the contributions of staff were not identified in the strategies. "Shouldn't there be something about retaining the best staff?" this person asked.

A graduate reported that "I'm glad someone is thinking about these things." Another graduate observed, "I was thrilled and terrified" by the plan.

A faculty member observed, "The strategies are not mutually exclusive. It seemed like we could pick and choose from various elements." Another said, "We can't do everything because some things are contradictory."

A sophomore was pleased to be a part of the process. "It is great that they came up with some options and ask(ed) for input."

Another faculty concluded, "I love that there is a liberal arts focus (in the document)." But another indicated that there wasn't much for the humanities in the document.

Yet another faculty member said, "There weren't any of these strategies that I felt strong about."

Changing the nature of the student body was something that did not elicit much enthusiasm. A faculty member pointed out: "'Elite' is not valued here."

Another faculty member observed, "Grinnell is a middle class place and not for children of the elite." A first year student pointed out that the "Average Grinnellian is intelligent, works hard, (and) is outgoing in their (sic) own group. It's not the same draw as the Ivy leagues." A sophomore said, "I really like it here. I think it's a very cool place."

One faculty noted that a significant number of faculty members at Grinnell do not care to be involved in the strategic planning process: "I'll speak, not necessarily for myself, but trying to represent a constituency. That is, strategies don't mean much to me. Let me do my job and let my colleagues who are interested in this be involved (in strategic planning). I think you end of talking with a biased sample of people who are more interested than most. There is a group out there who really doesn't want to be part of this. It's a faculty who feels very stressed and may not want to work on this when it might or might not make a difference."

Another faculty member questioned the collaborative nature of the process: "I can see them [the strategies] coming from different parts of the college, not a group of people working together to talk about what will be the best thing. Being a bit of the pessimist, I feel like the decision has already been made."

Another faculty member observed the following: "The document is so depressing in the way in which it has been formulated and its lack of imagination . . . [and this process] conspires to have us decide amongst options that don't actually represent the full range of possibilities."

### Guiding Themes about Grinnell College Emerging from this Process

Several themes emerged from this data collection process. They are presented in the next section and we anticipate that this discussion will help the planning team as it continues to refine the strategies.

#### *Diversity is valued.*

We were reminded by many of the participants that members of the Grinnell community value diversity. The dimensions of diversity that were identified by these participants included the following:

- People of color
- International students
- Various opinions and perspectives
- Socio-economic status
- Standardized test scores of students

The college takes a holistic approach to merit. By that, members of the community define merit as something more than high test scores or excellent grades. To be sure, Grinnell students have achieved well in their precollege experiences, but more than once members of the community we interviewed cautioned the College not to pursue only students with high test scores or excellent grades with merit-based financial aid. The College, in their view, also needs to also seek students who have a commitment to the liberal arts, who have a diversity of experiences while in high school, and who are committed to service and social justice. In the view of many of the people we interviewed, these commitments are every bit as important as strong intellectual skills as measured by test scores and high school grades.

Grinnell is perceived by members of the community as unique.

We were reminded many times by our respondents that Grinnell is unique.

Uniqueness is marked by several dimensions:

- “We are not like other colleges and we don’t want to be.”
- “Rankings are not a focus for us. We are a College of high quality as marked by our students and faculty.”
- We are not for “elites.” Grinnell is a place for underdogs who work hard.
- We should not tamper with the uniqueness of the College.
- “We’re ‘quirky’ and we know it.” That is part of the charm of the College.

It was clear from the people we interviewed that they did not want the College to pursue various initiatives that are designed to move the College up in the rankings. Nor do these respondents want the College to become more like colleges they perceive as being designed for “elite” students. Rather, the people we interviewed were most interested in preserving what they saw as the unique dimensions of Grinnell, some of which are identified above.

Grinnell is reported by members of the community as being dedicated to the liberal arts.

This notion has to do with the fundamental nature of the College.

Elements of this concept include the following dimensions:

- Grinnell is not a professional school
- Grinnell is not research oriented
- Grinnell has high quality teaching, which is highly valued and of primary importance
- Grinnell is oriented toward service and social justice.

From issues related to the curriculum to the kind of students the College should be attracting to how faculty should spend their time, our participants often returned to this concept to frame their thinking. In many cases if the discussion about the curriculum began to drift toward preparing students for various professions, someone in the group would remind the rest that Grinnell is

committed to the liberal arts, and that this commitment should be unwavering. The potential addition of courses in economics and computer science, for example, as a way to attract more international students or to prepare students for jobs was met with a lack of enthusiasm.

*Financial issues were sprinkled throughout many of our conversations.*

Among the recurring themes under this general category, were the following:

- Students should be able to pursue positions in areas of public service and social justice after they graduate, but to do so, they cannot carry significant debt beyond graduation.

The endowment should be used wisely, to achieve several ends, including

- lowering the debt burdens of students
- providing support for students from low socioeconomic status
- sustaining need blind admissions
- providing a physical plant appropriate for the goals of the College

Having an endowment as robust as Grinnell's is a blessing and a curse.

Obviously, the size of the endowment is well known in the Grinnell College community. The endowment allows the College to behave in ways that are rare in higher education (i.e., buildings built for cash, have no deferred maintenance, and so on). At times the size of the endowment can lead people in the community to conclude that the College can fund any project or initiative that it chooses. Of course this is not the case. So, a potential outcome of our process is both complex and simple: Members of the College community need to be reminded of (a) the philosophy the College employs in making decisions about how the use its endowment and (b) more specifically, how the College uses its endowment.

Many questions arose about the temporary members of the Grinnell faculty. The use of temporary faculty was seen as an advantage and disadvantage. In some

cases these faculty were perceived quite positively, that they were enthusiastic about their positions, and if they handled their responsibilities well that they might be offered a permanent position if a vacancy arose. On the other hand, temporary faculty were seen as being less available to students. In the view of some, students are reluctant to develop relationships with them for fear that the faculty would soon leave, and these faculty did not develop deep relationships with the College community and the larger community of Grinnell. Obviously, the College enjoys a financial advantage in employing temporary faculty if for no other reason than their appointments are for the short term and temporary faculty provide the College with flexibility that it would not have with tenure eligible and tenured faculty. Nevertheless, it is obvious that some resolution of the matter of using a substantial number of temporary faculty would serve the entire College community well.

Finally, the strategies appeared as though they were not directed at staff or administrators. These members of the College community make important contributions to the education of Grinnell students. Their professional development needs to be addressed and their contributions should be recognized.

## Appendix A

Focus Groups and Telephone Interviews

- 1: Managers/administrators (M=-6; F=2)
- 2: Alumni (M=3; F=4)
- 3: Tenured faculty (sciences & library) (M=5; F=2)
- 4: Class of 2004 (M=3; F=4)
- 5: Distinguished/SHS/Emeritus Faculty (M=5; F=1)
- 6: Managers/administrators ((M=3; F=4)
- 7: Untenured Faculty in Social Sciences (M=4; F=3)
- 8: Untenured faculty in Sciences (M=3; F=3)
- 9: Class of 2006 (M=2; W=3)
- 10: Class of 2007 (M=1; F=1)
- 11: Class of 2005 (M=2; F=2)
- 12: Tenured Faculty in Social Sciences (M=2; F=3)
- 13: Class of 2004 (M=2; F=3)
- 14: Staff (M=1; F=5)
- 15: Untenured Faculty (Humanities) (M=4, F=3)
- 16: Tenured Faculty (Humanities) (M=5, F=1)
- 17: Trustees, Interviewed by Telephone 9/26/03 (3 males, 1 female)
- 18: Trustees, Interviewed by Telephone 9/29/03 (3 males, 3 females)

## Appendix B

### Grinnell Focus Group Protocol

#### Introduction:

- Introduce self
- A team of consultants has been asked to conduct focus groups with various constituency groups on campus to gather perceptions and thoughts about the 6 strategies identified in the Strategic Plan. Each of you should have received a copy of those strategies, and additional copies are available here.
- This focus group will last approximately 1 hour. I will be taking notes throughout the discussion, but information during this focus group also will be audiotaped so that information is not missed. After all the focus groups are concluded today, the consultants will review the information and create a report that will be provided to Mark Montgomery, the chair of the Planning Steering Committee and Jonathan Brand, the chair of the Planning Team.
- Because I am not part of the Strategic Planning process, I am not able to answer questions about the process, which resulted in these 6 strategies. However, if you have questions, you should direct them to Jonathan Brand.

#### Questions:

1. Of the 6 strategies identified, which are most attractive (maybe 2 or 3)? Why?
2. What do these strategies mean to you as (name of group – i.e. a tenured faculty member)?
3. If these strategies were implemented tomorrow, how would this affect you?
4. What are the potential negative implications of the strategy?
5. Six strategies were listed, and we've talked about 3 or so of them. How do you account for the ones that were not discussed?

### Notes on the Investigators

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*Ann M. Gansemer-Topf* is a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Iowa State University and also an academic advisor for the Departments of Landscape Architecture and Community Regional Planning at Iowa State University. She has experience in quantitative and qualitative research projects related to higher education. Her current research interest is focused on examining the relationship between institutional expenditures and retention and graduation rates at baccalaureate institutions.

*Kevin Saunders* is a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Iowa State University. His current assistantship involves working with a College of Education faculty member on assessment of curriculum changes in several engineering departments. Examples of his qualitative research experience include a study of organizational change at Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany and an evaluation of Iowa State University's U. S. Diversity and International Perspectives Requirement for undergraduate students.

*John Schuh* is Distinguished Professor and Chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Iowa State University. He is the author, co-author or editor of more than 190 publications including 19 books and monographs. He has received numerous awards for research from various professional organizations and received a Fulbright award to study higher education in Germany in 1994.