



**David Lopatto**  
*Chair of the Faculty*

Grinnell College  
Grinnell, Iowa 50112-1690

641-269-3100  
fax 641-269-4473  
www.grinnell.edu

August 18, 2011

To: Grinnell College Faculty  
From: David Lopatto, Chair of the Faculty  
Re: Choosing Grinnell's Future: Prospectus to the Five Topics for Strategic Planning

During a retreat in June 2011, the Board of Trustees charged Grinnell College “with the development, within the academic year, of an ambitious, five-year Strategic Plan.” In a previous memo I reported on the retreat and sketched the strategic planning process. In this memo I will revisit the five suggested topics for discussion and attempt to frame the topics in such a way as to facilitate discussion. By “framing” I mean an interpretation that may help us get started. As problem solving often includes the redefinition of the problem as solutions are sought, I fully expect that the conclusion of our discussion may seem very different from these prefatory remarks.

### **Why plan?**

One writer claimed that planning permits us to, “prepare for the inevitable, preempt the undesirable, and control the controllable.” Planning that is also strategic can provide a pathway for an institution to achieve excellence. The conventional wisdom is that strategic plans have a useful life of about 5 years, and it has been 7 years since the last Grinnell Planning Steering Committee wrote their *Final Report to the Grinnell College Board of Trustees: Strategic Planning for Grinnell College*. Regardless of the changes that a new plan may create, there are good reasons for refreshing our planning, including:

- We lose institutional memory: Nearly a third of the active faculty were appointed after the last strategic planning process. I have no comparable data for staff. I am reasonably sure the student body has turned over completely since the last planning process. We tend to lose our institutional memory for those values and plans we formulated. Few community members can lay their hands on a copy of the old strategic plan; even fewer have read the “core values” statement of 1998; and no one who has joined the community since 2005 has had a chance to participate in strategic planning.





- We temporize: Not all of our earlier plans were decisive. For example, the final recommendation of the 2004 *Final Report* regarding tuition and financial aid policy was, “Maintain current policies in the Short Term – Re-evaluate in Three to Five Years.” It is time to re-evaluate.
- We drift: The old strategic plan described an on-campus student body of 1500, yet the number of undergraduates has risen to 1525 in the years since.
- The landscape has changed: The disturbing change in the American economy is only one aspect of the landscape that we need to consider. Demographic changes in the population of college-age students, a decline in the overall educational infrastructure, and increasing demands of accountability are pressing on our future.
- Leadership has changed: President Kington has completed his first year as President; a new Vice-President for Development, Beth Halloran, has just joined the community; searches are underway for a new Vice-President for Communication and for the Dean of Admission and Financial Aid; both Associate Deans are in their first year of service. Our conversations about planning will mutually educate us.

As I previously reported, the Board named five topics that the strategic plan will address:

- Distinctiveness of Grinnell College
- Teaching and Learning
- Enrollment
- Post-graduation Success
- Alumni Engagement

Permit me a few observations. First, the topics are brief. They represent the “hand off” from the Board’s discussion to the campus community. It is useful to have this hand off occur without a lot of definitions and restrictions. How the topics unfold into meaningful conversations and concrete plans is up to us. Second, I think that discussants at the retreat were sensitive to the fact that some concepts the old strategic plan treated as topics in their own right have become suffused across all of the college’s business. For example, where is the topic of diversity? It is everywhere, and should be part of conversations on every topic. An intriguing aspect of the planning process is that we should see and hear themes playing throughout the topical discussions and providing a kind of synthesis that qualifies the plan as strategic. Here are the themes that were noted during the Board’s discussions:

- Innovation and Ambition
- Fiscal Management and Responsibility
- Globalization
- Visibility and Communication
- Evidence-based Decisions
- Adaptive Processes





- Diversity
- Environmental Sustainability

We will examine the topics and the themes together since a full discussion of any of the topics could not occur without the thematic contexts listed above. The topics and themes are the figure and ground of the strategic planning process.

## The five topics

### 1. Distinctiveness of Grinnell College

A subtitle for this topic might be, “Identify and build-on the distinctive qualities of Grinnell College.” The old strategic plan used the term “distinctive” in connection with strengthening the public profile of the College:

Articulate more clearly and prominently our distinctive academic qualities and devotion to the common good to establish a stronger national profile for the College<sup>1</sup>.

Discussion at the recent Board retreat focused on naming what distinguishes Grinnell or could distinguish Grinnell in the higher education landscape. The communication of this distinctiveness would follow. The following phrases were offered during the retreat:

- A call for a vision that will include new and big ideas.
- A challenge to be the best at accomplishments related to our mission.
- A plan for using the college’s strategic assets to move the college forward and achieve its goals.

The discussion will pursue the substance of our distinctiveness. Note that distinctiveness used here does not mean merely different, but different and excellent. As strategy, this topic is about difference and success.

### 2. Teaching and Learning

A subtitle for this topic may be, “Create a powerful and adaptive learning environment.” The topic subsumes many issues that composed three of the six strategies of the old strategic plan. These were:

- Increase the emphasis on inquiry-based learning and broaden our liberal arts curriculum.
- Foster student, faculty, and staff sense of ambition, adventure, and well-being.
- Advance Grinnell College as a more diverse, robust intellectual community.

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic Plan (2005).





The first of these three strategies proposed the launching of the Expanding Knowledge Initiative and endorsed the Mentored Advanced Projects program. The second addressed technology, facilities, and support (as well as student career preparation). The third advocated diversity. In a previous memo, I reported a list of items that the Trustees considered successes, and these included the success of the Expanding Knowledge Initiative and increasing diversity of our faculty, staff, and student bodies.

Today, several paths suggest themselves. Do we look past the existing programs to invent a new one to generate excitement and opportunity? Do we inspect the impact of our programs on faculty organization (e.g., departmental structure) and vice versa? Do we match our interest in the recruitment of diverse faculty, students, and staff with a clear strategy for development, mentoring, and retention? Do we address the issue of faculty, staff, and student workloads and how to prepare ourselves to remain current in the face of the explosion of information and disruptive technologies? How do we adapt teaching strategies to meet the challenges of a changing world? The topic of teaching and learning is expansive, and we will need to make some preliminary decisions about which paths to pursue.

### **3. Enrollment**

A subtitle for this topic might be, “How will Grinnell intentionally attract and select a student body that complements and enhances its mission?” This topic has been spotlighted recently by President Kington’s presentations on Grinnell’s future. In those presentations, the President has uncovered the tensions inherent in need blind admission, meeting full demonstrated financial-aid need, tuition revenue, and reliance on endowment revenue. Discussion and planning on this topic may include questions such as:

- What is the optimal size of the student body?
- What is the ideal and multidimensional composition of the student body?
- How do our admission policies and practices affect who applies, enrolls, attends, and graduates from Grinnell?
- How do our financial aid policies and practices affect who applies, enrolls, attends, and graduates from Grinnell?
- How are our core values borne out in our policies?
- What external forces and trends are on the horizon that will have an impact on Grinnell’s ability to recruit and retain the best qualified applicants?

These examples do not exhaust the questions that might be discussed under this topic.

### **4. Post-graduation Success**

A subtitle for this topic might be, “Within Grinnell’s residential, liberal-arts framework, how will Grinnell provide guidance to its students and alumni to foster personal, educational, civic, and career success after graduation?” The topic of postgraduate success was addressed in the old strategic plan with this proposition:





Enhance programs that connect College life with students' futures (such as increased internships and active alumni networks) to promote the transition from College to a successful, professional life.

According to documented sources, Grinnell does very well in facilitating student paths to academic doctoral degrees. We would like to provide the same facilitation to other career paths. Questions related to enhanced career success might include:

- How can Grinnell be intentional about helping graduates transition to the next path in their lives?
- While the students are here, what can the college do to help them explore diverse post-graduate options?
- What role should/can internships and externships play in helping students chart out their post graduate plans?
- For the students who intend to go to graduate or professional schools, how best can Grinnell prepare them and assist them in the application process?
- For the students who intend to pursue careers in non-profit or for-profit organizations, what resources can Grinnell provide to help them be successful?

I think there is another challenge to this topic, one that if answered well might aid in our distinctiveness: Given various forecasts that current students may have more than 5 jobs or careers in their lives, given that some students will create their own career, given that some careers the students may have do not exist yet, how does a liberal arts education answer the need for an adaptive approach to life?

## **5. Alumni Engagement**

A subtitle here might be, "How will Grinnell intentionally engage the talent, passion for learning, and generosity of its alumni—starting in the first year of college and continuing throughout a lifetime?" Grinnell's alumni have a history of serving as a resource to students, faculty, and other alumni. This resource could be more energized and networked to the benefit of all. The discussion of engagement of alumni might include questions such as:

- How best can Grinnell develop and make available the network of alumni?
- How can Grinnell benefit from the expertise of its alumni?
- How will Grinnell develop in its alumni a culture of giving to the college?
- How can we connect our students with the passion, success, and talents of our alumni?
- How can we encourage students to appreciate the help of alumni and feed forward their appreciation to the next generation?





## On Task, On Time

The strategic planning process is scheduled for one academic year. In order to progress, participants will need to focus on these topics and work on manageable plans. Before we begin the discussions, we need to re-familiarize ourselves with the mission and core values of our residential, liberal-arts college ([www.grinnell/offices/president/](http://www.grinnell/offices/president/)). These are the guiding principles by which decisions will be made for the new strategic plan. The current list, formed and approved by the faculty in 1998, have remained a robust expression of the college's values over more than a decade. They will function as criteria for the evaluation of any new policy or program that may emerge from the planning process. While the core values may be used as a test of new ideas, it is possible that new ideas offer a test of how we interpret core values. I hope we can be aware of how our values remain a living influence on our planning. Keeping this in mind, please re-familiarize yourself with the core values and consider them as we go through the strategic planning process.

Planning occurs in time, and I expect the process will begin with conversations on a variety of ideas in the fall semester. In the spring semester we will need to prioritize and align these ideas into a coherent strategy. My expectation is that Fall is for contemplation, Spring is for prediction. By prediction I mean that the plans we prioritize will require a forecast of how much effort, how many people, and how much money will be needed to implement the plan. Budgets are predictions, some writers say, and we will need to be conscientious in our predictions concerning the strategic plan and the sustained mission of the college that we prize.

*If you wish to comment on this memo or on aspects of strategic planning, we have set up an email account at [sp@grinnell.edu](mailto:sp@grinnell.edu) to receive your comments. Information and updates about strategic planning will be posted [www.grinnell.edu/future](http://www.grinnell.edu/future) starting August 24, 2011. I thank my co-chair, Angela Voos, and several friendly reviewers for the comments on earlier drafts of this memo.*

