Grinnell College

_Review & Reflection Paper_

Grinnell, Iowa

March 5, 2014
Notes for the reader

We must let the intellect of this place shine through.

—staff member

Grinnellians always have a lot on their minds—and their plates. So, our CRANE team would like to thank you for taking the time to read, consider, discuss, and perhaps even debate this Review & Reflection Paper. Before you begin, here’s a brief overview to set the context.

This paper, a milestone in our collaborative process of discovery and synthesis, represents a sketched portrait of the Grinnell we experienced during two campus visits and a series of follow-up interviews in fall 2013. Much of what you read here will probably not come as news: as a member of this community, you’ve lived, engaged with, or at least heard about many of the things we encountered as visitors.

Our purpose at the Review & Reflection stage is not to claim well-known conditions as our particular discoveries, nor to prescribe pre-packaged solutions right off some consulting shelf. Instead, we seek to ensure that Grinnell and CRANE start the next phase of our work from a common understanding of where the college stands today. To paraphrase Socrates’ first question to Phaedrus, this paper asks, Where are you coming from, Grinnell, and where are you going?

From the outset, Grinnell’s passionately cherished mission has produced world-influencing and life-changing results. On our visits, we witnessed such outcomes and outputs in abundance: Grinnellians really do see the world differently. They approach life more idealistically, and at the same time, more critically. This combination of insistent hopefulness and intensive skepticism strikes us as a truly significant outcome of a Grinnell education. And we hope our work helps the community rediscover—and rearticulate—how marvelous this college really is.

However, this paper does include some frank criticism, especially in the area of operations. We know too well the train of consultants that has rolled across campus in the past decade. Our fiercest hope is not to be another in that long line, but to serve as Grinnell’s partner and ally in fully conveying what makes this college a life-changing investment of not only time, but, when appropriate and possible, full tuition dollars. The value is there; now we must reframe the value proposition more compellingly and more memorably. Grinnell, in recent years, has worked exceedingly hard—and with
measurable effects—to turn around entrenched institutional practices that have obscured and even impeded the college’s academic strengths. Our CRANE team’s work with Grinnell, including the observations we make in this paper, forms part of that ongoing effort. Grinnell doesn’t need to start over yet again, but instead, to build momentum for more positive change. We’re honored to assist a campus full of devoted, earnest, and thoughtful people to do exactly that.

Following the presentation and on-campus discussion of this paper and the review of the Trial Promise Statement, we plunge into the conceptual work to help more fully reveal Grinnell’s institutional identity, and help the college better tell the Grinnell story to the world. Together, we will strive to determine what we call Grinnell’s Category of One: the ultimate distillation of what Grinnell—and only Grinnell—can articulate and promise to outsiders. The framing, quotations, and reflections you read here press us to reach this concentrated point of insight—about not only what Grinnell does, but also why Grinnell does it, and how in very particularly Grinnellian ways. All of the work we do in the coming weeks and months will flow from that point of clarity.

Ready to dive in?
I. Prologue

I wish I had the power adequately to express my abhorrence of the bread-and-butter idea of college education.

The REASON for the liberal education is this:
we Americans are very much elated, as we have good reason to be,
with the overwhelming magnificence of our physical resources. ...

Physical riches are death, unless there be stalwart ethics alongside adequately dominant.

–George Augustus Gates,  
Grinnell President, 1887  
(quoted in Grinnell College’s 2008 Self-Study)

In 2004, Grinnell College, still a proud, rigorous, idiosyncratic liberal arts bastion more than a century after President Gates declared his criticism for “bread-and-butter” college education, made a move. The college rolled out a new marketing tagline:

No Limits.

Pithy and memorable, the phrase seemed to hold promise. It almost seemed to echo the sentiments of Grinnell’s second president, who disdained the mundaneness of “practical” college preparation.

They were trying to convey “endless possibilities.” There was something wonderful about that idea. –faculty member

The tagline popped up everywhere: the website, brochures, the course catalog. And almost immediately, so did the protests—from faculty members, students, and alumni:

The No Limits campaign represented everything that’s wrong with our society. We need to convey that people need to pick and choose in life. –faculty member

With No Limits, Grinnell sought to reach out to the wider world, in recognizable terms. But whereas the intention of No Limits seems to mirror Gates’ own imperative—the AIM of a liberal education is to give larger life—it paradoxically achieved the exact opposite.

I thought No Limits sounded like a commercial for Merrill Lynch or the Marine Corps. –faculty member
Although *No Limits* endured for several years, the idea failed to connect with the Grinnell community, sparking increasingly fervent debate and demands for its ouster. Some perceived it as inauthentic, others irresponsible, while many criticized the development process.

*With No Limits, we were governed by fiat. There was an attempt to give faculty, students, and staff the impression that they were being consulted; in fact, that attempt had zero impact.* —faculty member

So, in 2010, the new president, Raynard Kington, officially did away with *No Limits*. This decision seemed in line with President Gates’s exhortation to avoid “the noise of low and materialistic clamor.” And ever since, Grinnell has had no tagline.

So just what do visitors to Grinnell’s website—the most obvious and accessible public portal to the college’s approach, values, beliefs, and pedagogy—learn these days? Might they clearly see the 2014 embodiment of lofty Gatesian ideals?

*A class of men and women must be raised up strong enough
and in numbers enough and with patriotism enough,
to step into the arena of practical life, and by heroic words and more yet,
heroical living, by imperturbable persistence in the pursuit of high ideals—
still the noise of this low and materialistic clamor.*

Not quite. However, it is easy to learn, in scant seconds,

**EVENTS:** Student Wellness Fair 2014  **DINING:** Scrambled eggs  **LIBRARIES:** What’s new at the libraries  **ATHLETICS:** Grinnell men claim 2 event titles at Wartburg meet —grinnell.edu home page, February 23, 2014

Yes, Grinnell offers sports, libraries, standard dining options, events, and much, much more. Just like every other liberal arts college across the country, from Simpson and Skidmore to Middlebury and Macalester. Why, then, should anyone choose Grinnell?

*It’s unclear to me what message the world is getting about Grinnell. I don’t understand how we are marketing ourselves. If you asked me, “What’s the thesis?” I wouldn’t be able to tell you.* —faculty member

In less than a decade, the college has swung from conveying a vivid but inauthentically imposed image to none at all. From a commercial-sounding slogan to rotating tiles of minutiae.

From *No Limits* to *no thesis*.

How can Grinnell, of all places, have no thesis?
Our CRANE team’s visit to Grinnell over four sparkling October days—and two equally sparkling but frigid December days—provided extensive evidence for why this college must continue to thrive. We met brilliant, intense, funny, and dedicated faculty members, students, staff, administrators, and alums. We sat in on exciting classes, whose small size encouraged deep engagement among students and professors. We saw generous common areas put to good use at the Joe Rosenfield Center, where solitary students plopped down everywhere, peering into laptops, and twosomes and threesomes paged through group-project tablets, steaming or iced coffees in hand. We toured the imposing new Bear Athletic Center, explored thoughtfully repurposed facilities including the Noyce Science Center and the Faulconer Gallery in Bucksbaum, witnessed the timeworn traditional feel of Alumni Recitation Hall and Carnegie Hall, puzzled over the Brutalism of Burling library, marveled at the sensitive yet capacious addition to charming Macy House. We saw “Black Church” advertised in front of Herrick Chapel, opportunities for community service listed on residence hall notice boards, menus chalkboarded outside the dining hall, and multiple faculty books featured in several areas. And we came away more inspired than ever to help Grinnell continue to carry out the college’s exceptional mission. Grinnell, we agreed, embodies an ideal to celebrate and preserve for generations to come.

And yet—there always seems to be an “and yet” with Grinnell—we also found the college difficult to get to know, and not just because Grinnell rejects the dominant utilitarian view of education. While we collected a wide variety of vivid impressions—notably of individual Grinnellians—we struggled to obtain an overall sense of what it’s really like to live, learn, and work here. Through our interviews, we came to understand that Grinnell has had problems not just with self-presentation, but with self-revelation, for a long time.

Without a thesis, of course, it’s hard to make a case. A thesis focuses, organizes, and gives meaning and reason and purpose to an argument. A thesis can align facts, observations, and analyses, transforming them from a disjointed assemblage into a coherent, compelling, perhaps even beautiful argument. And a thesis statement not only concisely expresses what the argument is, but also backs it up with evidence, and, crucially, explains why it matters. A thesis allows the expert balancing of ethos, pathos, and logos, in Aristotelian terms, to make an airtight case.

Lacking this crucial perceptual and persuasive tool, Grinnell now presents a puzzling image to outsiders and insiders alike. More precisely, the college poses a series of paradoxes, double-visions in which a key principle or practice often appears as its exact opposite.

How has Grinnell allowed such a situation to take hold?
II. A theory of the case

We have to fundamentally rethink
how we talk about ourselves,
make decisions about ourselves,
and invest in ourselves.

We have a first-rate product, but we’re not viewed properly.
This issue isn’t peripheral;
it’s central to our future.

—Dr. Raynard Kington,
President, Grinnell College

Since our engagement with Grinnell College began in fall 2013, we’ve grappled with many seeming paradoxes, as President Kington predicted we would.

As the words from George Augustus Gates ringingly remind us, since the college’s founding in 1847, and the move to J.B. Grinnell’s town in 1861, Grinnell has insisted on being different. Different from the Ivy League, different from privileged eastern liberal arts colleges, different from large public universities, different from western colleges founded decades later. Through the years, Grinnell evolved into the institution it is today by consistently choosing to be different.

What an accomplishment, and a heritage.

No one should be surprised, then, that Grinnell ranks eighth in the nation in per capita production of PhDs, or that Grinnell has graduated 14 Rhodes Scholars and a Nobel Prize winner. No one should be surprised that this year’s acceptances will show the highest level of selectivity in Grinnell’s entire history, and the applicant pool projects out to the strongest incoming class ever by multiple important measures. With 48 states and 50 nations represented, 22 percent students of color, 13 percent international students, and 4 out of 5 coming from the top 10 percent of their high school class, Grinnell attracts an impressive—and impressively varied—student body.

Likewise, no one should be surprised that Grinnell faculty members—amazing, renowned, and respected scholars across the disciplines—deploy stellar practices including detailed, generous advisement, meaningful mentoring, transformative MAP projects, and mind-stretching first-year
tutorials, staying largely at the forefront of academic and pedagogical trends, and often writing the textbooks used by departments nationwide.

But it did come as a painful surprise that this thoughtful institution—where faculty members of other colleges send their own children if they can—convinces fewer than half of the prospects who visit campus to actually apply, inspires only a third of alums to give even a small donation each year, and makes the case to only 13 percent of undergraduates that a Grinnell education warrants full sticker price, placing the tuition discount rate at an alarming and unsustainable 61 percent.

What could be causing this disconnect? Hadn’t Grinnell succeeded over a century and a half, through both lean and prosperous years, by continuing to operate from a position of intentional difference while maintaining the highest academic standards?

Our theory: Grinnell, like many liberal arts enclaves, was traditionally shaped by faculty members—and Grinnell faculty members, we were told, are “those who think otherwise.” They took as their personal mission the task of cherishing, protecting, advancing, and sharing this college with each new generation’s brightest minds. Educated in top undergraduate and graduate institutions across the country, these professors and deans already knew disciplinary and scholarly best practices firsthand. And they also knew that Grinnell-quality teaching would come not from imitating other institutions, but rather by surpassing them, or, sometimes, ignoring academic fads and trends. Do it our way, they said to new faculty hires. We’ll show you how to teach differently, because now you are at Grinnell.

This We do it our way mentality may have mistakenly passed for universal wisdom campus-wide, and influenced not only faculty culture, but staff practices. Often influenced by the faculty philosophy of "doing things the Grinnell way," staff members embraced independent thinking. This, combined with periods of administrative decentralization, enabled the emergence of non-integrated practices across campus.

This dogged and once-admirable refusal to conform merged over time with a lack of support for studying peer-campus best practices. The Grinnellian spirit of “otherwise” invisibly morphed into "the Grinnell bubble," an insular culture that too often overlooked the applicability of outside best practices.

That culture continued to function well enough for a time. But eventually, Grinnell, competing on all fronts with academically excellent, reputationally strong, and market-savvy colleges, fell behind because, operationally (even if not academically) other colleges out-thought, out-performed, and simply out-ran Grinnell in many key functions. Even when Grinnell recruited seasoned campus professionals credentialed in their disciplines to lead administrative areas, the inertia of obsolete systems and unimaginative processes kept administrative Grinnell naively driving prospective students away,
exasperating impatient faculty members, failing to re-engage alienated alumni, and creating campus-wide gulfs and silos within and between departments.

On a campus so obsessed with “need-blind” admissions, our CRANE team began to think of this malady as another type of blindness: **GENRE blindness**, defined as a complete inability to see the best practices and systems already in use by peer and aspiration colleges nationwide. Tongue in cheek, we began collecting word pairs to symbolize the contradictions of Grinnell:

- **Extravagantly frugal**: not stationing a modestly salaried receptionist at the John Chrystal Center main floor entrance, yet having to spend far more money retrofitting the newish building because it’s so unwelcoming and ill-suited for information sessions and recruitment activities

- **Hubristically modest**: failing to document and promote for outsiders the accomplishments of alumni, keeping the good news strictly within the family, then puzzling over Grinnell’s relative anonymity

- **Parochially global**: Maintaining frequent contact with hundreds of global study and internship sites while ignoring trends and competitive threats at institutions down the highway

- **Aloofly welcoming**: Sending subliminally hostile messages to guests by not offering wayfinding signs or warm greetings in hallways, by rushing past chances to sit down or share refreshments, and by allowing inadequately trained tour guides to show a general lack of empathy for campus visitors’ needs

Grinnell’s impulse to always be different isn’t wrong. Following the pack is certainly not Grinnellian, nor is it strategic from a marketing standpoint. But outright rejection of tried-and-true tactical systems, services, or software, for instance, without an even more nuanced, *more Grinnellian* alternative, is neither responsible nor sustainable.

Our CRANE team’s proposed solutions in spring 2014 for Grinnell’s identity and messaging questions must and will align with Grinnell’s outlier nature, a way of being that arises from the central strands of this college’s DNA. For a national institution like Grinnell, *professionalization* does not equate to *corporatization*, two terms all too easily conflated. Rather, professionalization means adopting the high standards necessary to reveal Grinnell’s unique, irascible, and authentic identity to all audiences.

We pledge not to corporatize Grinnell—we shudder at the thought—but instead to arrive at third-way solutions that empower Grinnell to preserve its iconoclastic nature, yet also elevate discourse and practices to healthy, even optimal levels.

But first, the paradoxes.
III. Grinnellian paradoxes: a re-view

The paradox is really the pathos of intellectual life
and just as only great souls are exposed to passions
it is only the great thinker who is exposed to what I call paradoxes,
which are nothing else than grandiose thoughts in embryo.

–Søren Kierkegaard
Journals (1838)

Grinnell functions very much in extremes.

–student

Paradox 1: An unknown known

In our focus groups, we heard that students choose Grinnell because their values and goals overlap with the college’s:

We attract really earnest, curious students. It’s a different kind of earnestness than at Olaf. Their students want to make the score; they want recognition. Our students hold themselves to their own standard. Their earnestness is about gaining the skills to help themselves and their communities. –faculty member

There’s a commonality among students who want to give it a try, take a risk, not do what others in high school are doing. And they believe they can make a difference. –alum

Our students are willing to go out on crazy limbs, wherever we send them. I don’t think that’s as true at other places. –faculty member

You are encouraged to be an active participant in crafting your own experience. If you don’t see something happening—go make it happen. You want something improved? Okay, speak up. My personality fits in very well with all of these things. –student

Grinnellians recognize who they are now, and are interested in who they can become through the transformative Grinnell experience. The best-fits don’t think that who they are at age 18 is the best or even remotely complete version of themselves. –parent
The people who come here are willing to be transformed by a deep, engaging, intellectual experience. —faculty member

Because of who they already are—curious and intelligently critical, cooperative, proactive, risk-taking, and self-motivated—Grinnellians-in-the-making open themselves to transformation. Often after just a few months on campus, it occurs:

There is a magical something that happens the first month, where you go from collectively being medium-hot about selfgov or social justice and about Grinnell College, and then all of a sudden, you’re the poster child for all of the above. It happens fast. —staff member

People here are so individualistic, but they’re also fiercely loyal to the institution. That combination ties in to the social justice concept, the self-gov concept, and a really fast enculturation happens. —staff member

And the connection lasts a lifetime:

I was in an airport in Arizona, wearing my Grinnell t-shirt, and someone comes running down the terminal: “What do you know about Grinnell?” There’s something about the experience Grinnellians have that makes them lose it when they see someone with a t-shirt. —staff member

We were telling stories about being in a parking lot and seeing someone with a Grinnell bumper sticker, and we’re like, “Grinnell!” That always happens wherever you are. My friends from Harvard said, “People from Harvard don’t do that.” —staff member

Grinnell is closely tied to who you are. It’s a sacred connection. —student

There’s no doubt that Grinnellians recognize and embrace their distinctive identity, not just during their college years, but throughout their lives.

And yet ...

Time and again, we heard that people outside Grinnell—and even some on the inside—have very little sense of that identity:

After all my years here, I don’t think anyone knows what we’re great at, what all of our alumni are doing. —staff member

There is very little agreement about what Grinnell College is and what makes it special. How do we talk about it and how can we celebrate that together? —staff member

Our reputation deserves to be better than it is, and frankly our reputation 20 years ago was better than it is right now. The college has lost its sense of self. —staff member
I hate, hate, hate it when I say I go to Grinnell College and someone says, “Oh, Cornell?” That lack of awareness frustrates me tremendously. —student

Grinnellians know themselves well and prize their identity passionately; meanwhile, too many outsiders don’t even recognize Grinnell’s name.

But what if Grinnellians could articulate, authentically and powerfully, what they now know in their hearts about their college?

What if Grinnell offered the world a differentiating thesis that came from within the community, making the case through Grinnellian eyes, in a Grinnellian voice?

**Paradox 2: Dumbing down intelligence**

When we asked our focus group members how they defined a Grinnellian, we heard:

I don’t want the superficial; let’s talk about the substance. I hear from friends at other schools about what they discuss in class, and I think, “You talk about some of the most basic, boring, superficial things ever.” We seek more and we demand more of ourselves and of the others around us. —student

Ultimately Grinnellians seek meaning in everything they do. Grinnellians don’t like busywork. We will call a professor out for trying to give us busywork. —student

Grinnellians are really academically hungry. It’s not just being thrown into that environment and having to figure it out; it’s willingly throwing yourself into that environment and knowing that it will be difficult, but you’re doing it because of your passion to learn. Being able to come to an institution to study what you want, you’re going to be so much better at it than if somebody else tells you what to study. —student

A tradition on the Grinnell soccer team is that when we do our stretching circle, everyone shares one thing they learned that day. In that merging of academics and practice, you get to learn interesting things. It shows you can still play soccer right after reading a very serious book. —student

Middlebury kids want to leave and be successful. Grinnell kids want to leave and be challenged. Here, we don’t have that assumption that you’re going to have a fun time in college and then you’re going to be a success out there. Grinnellians want to have this alternative experience. —staff member

This is an inquiring place. People are excited to have their minds blown. —alum
Grinnellians not only seek meaning, they 

crave 
it. They reject the superficial and the ordinary. Relentlessly questioning, they consider everything from multiple angles—not merely to achieve better grades, but to improve themselves and, ultimately, the world. And they insist on taking charge of their own education.

In examining the accomplishments of Grinnellians, present and past, we realize that this description has applied from the beginning. When we read of the college’s namesake J.B. Grinnell acting as a conductor on the Underground Railroad or of Harry Hopkins designing the New Deal; when we hear Joseph Welch stirringly rebuke Joseph McCarthy; when we learn how Clair Patterson determined the age of the Earth, how Robert Noyce invented the integrated circuit, and how Hilary Mason continues to push the limits of technological engineering; when Amy Clampitt’s poems move us to wonder; when we laugh at Kumail Nanjiani’s pointed comedy and marvel at Herbie Hancock’s musical genius; when we find out that hundreds of other deeply interesting, influential, creative, humane people went to Grinnell, we think: of course—that’s a Grinnellian.

And that’s no coincidence. Grinnell’s faculty members nurture and challenge their students’ voracious curiosity.

Before our visit to campus, our CRANE team had already read and heard of the Grinnell faculty’s stellar reputation for both teaching and scholarship. Perusing CVs on grinnell.edu, articles online and in the alumni magazine, and publications in scholarly and popular venues, one quickly discovers the range, originality, and influence these educators possess. In our focus groups, we learned even more about what makes this faculty exceptional.

David Lopatto is doing fascinating work right now. He has funding through the National Science Foundation to look at undergraduate research experiences and how that enhances students’ overall experience in college. –faculty member

Rebecca Hamlin looks at court politics. She involved MAP students in technically encoding court decisions, opinions from not just the U.S., but Australia and other places. They took their coded data set and actually wrote a paper of their own based on it. –faculty member

Danielle Lussier studies Russian, Indonesian politics, and mass behavior. She’s a really good comparativist, a phenomenally active scholar, and very productive. Her students clearly understand the depth of her knowledge and the excitement that she brings to comparative politics. –faculty member

Our faculty do some really counterintuitive work. –faculty member

The faculty are skeptics and critics. They show the students that you can be a healthy skeptic without being a cynic. –staff member
Like top colleges across the country, Grinnell takes significant, influential scholarship by the faculty as a given. But more than one interviewee summed up a crucial distinction with the well-known saying that a Grinnell faculty member is “one who thinks otherwise.”

Grinnell’s faculty members maintain a particularly skeptical, counterintuitive ethos, questioning pieties in all forms. They insistently push their students, themselves, and each other to re-think their thinking. They also take a different view of their work’s primary purpose:

*We have tons of publications and recognition from our peers. We are people who could be at Princeton, but we’re not. We choose to put teaching first.* –faculty member

*Wouldn’t it be great if people knew that Grinnell’s faculty choose to put teaching first? If the problem in higher education is that no one’s paying attention to teaching, well, we are. Not only that, but we’re still doing it in a face-to-face way that ensures quality.* –faculty member

In contrast to faculty members at “brand-name” research institutions, Grinnell professors don’t view the primary outcomes of their work in terms of personal and institutional rewards. Faculty members here focus their intellectual energies on their students’ academic and personal growth.

They enthused about the one-on-one mentoring relationships they build with their students:

*Coming to Grinnell, I’ve been impressed particularly by the strength of our advising, how genuinely individualized and intensive it is. That’s something that very few colleges of any kind can pull off.* –faculty member

*What I enjoy most about Grinnell is the close interaction with the students. Half of my tutorial ended up declaring a major with me, so I’ve had six students for whom I’ve been their only advisor from the moment they reached campus to the moment they graduated, and they all made it. It’s been a great experience for me.* –faculty member

*Victoria Brown and Sarah Purcell have really made a name for American history among undergraduates. That’s in part because of their dynamic style and the passion they convey to their students, but also because of the continuity of their relationship with students long past graduation. They take their roles as mentors very seriously, and they see that as a lifelong job.* –faculty member

*The very first time I meet students, I ask about their lives and hopes and dreams. Then I try to challenge them to do something that is not within that scope of hopes and dreams to get them thinking outside of their self-imposed limits. After that, I see them at least once a semester, but almost always more often than that, to plan for the next semester. I ask them how things are going or what interests they have and how those have changed over time.* –faculty member
We heard how the individually advised curriculum, which facilitates and evolves out of those relationships, represents a defining feature of a Grinnell education:

_The open curriculum works better here at Grinnell than at Brown, partly because the advising system’s much stronger. At Brown, it’s “Meet this guy who has a million other things to do, and see him once a year.”_ –faculty member

_We can give students quite significant experiences on a more individual basis. We can be more responsive to student initiatives. The learning experience is more intense, more integrated, and the student is more involved in the process._ –faculty member

_The open curriculum and the potential for working closely with faculty are draws for students. The Mentored Advanced Projects have been a really significant element in generating interest among prospective students, because it’s really tangible evidence of the kinds of opportunities to get an unusual experience at the undergraduate level._ –faculty member

With the open curriculum, sometimes called the individual or individually advised curriculum, undergraduates chart their own course—but they do not sail alone. They collaborate in shaping their experience through intense, individualized, kind, and purposeful relationships with internationally influential scholars. The students respond to this singular combination of attention and autonomy:

_I declared a history major because of an incredible history class. I have a really incredible professor who’s now my adviser. But I’ve taken amazing English classes. I’ve had amazing interactions with science professors. I can easily see myself being a poli sci major, an English major, and a bio major even. A lot of that comes from the professor. Not only are the faculty knowledgeable, they take an interest in helping students succeed, not just academically but also in their personal life and in the future._ –student

_What’s cool about being able to choose your own curriculum is that similarities pop up in classes that were originally unrelated, and the professors here really encourage that. If I go to my English professor’s office and say, “I’m really interested in an economic reading of the text,” more often than not the professor’s like, “That’s awesome. I’ve never thought about it that way. You should totally go for it. Here’s how I can help you.”_ –student

_I was in a classroom by myself on a weekend. I was so excited about an idea I had that I ran next door to my professor’s office—of course he was there—and brought him over to see what I’d written on the board. That close interaction was very special to me._ –alum

_The faculty are exceptionally good at producing extraordinary people—people I want to be around, who are wholly committed to making the world a better place._ –staff member

The particularly Grinnellian exchange between students and faculty—in which each side pushes the other to critically reexamine themselves and their work—transforms not just ideas, but lives.
And yet ...

Grinnell’s public self-presentation frequently undercuts or downplays this intensive, transformative intellectual experience. For example:

- The campus tour, despite various consultants’ interventions, remains a real estate tour, showing off various buildings but providing no sense of the incredible intellectual growth that occurs at Grinnell.

- The home page of the website, as of this paper’s writing, still flings a confusing collection of decontextualized information at the visitor. It gives pride of place to the dining-hall menu (crinkle-cut carrots) rather than to Grinnellians’ academic interests and accomplishments, and the site’s poor overall functioning thwarts attempts to seek greater depth.

- Grinnell’s photography, online and in print, reveals clear technical skill, but lacks the art direction needed to make life at Grinnell appear as intellectually thrilling as it is.

- Recruitment videos mention classes and academics only briefly, and well after other features like the athletic center.

- The current viewbook focuses on stacking facts (“500+ course offerings”; “24% students of color”; “37 majors and interdisciplinary concentrations”) without context, indicating a desire to appear just like Grinnell’s competitors, only more so.

- The alumni magazine, which regularly features the rich kind of in-depth information about faculty, students, and alumni that motivated potential families would devour, goes out only to members of the Grinnell family rather than to the larger community. Anyone seeking the online archive needs considerable perseverance, as it lies buried beneath layers of generic, “me-too” web pages.

As one student explained:

*In public, we don’t talk about how we’re willing to point out our flaws and pick things apart, which is part of being academically competitive but also being a community. Instead, we try and say we’re just as good as ... fill in the blank.*

Grinnell’s public communications erase the college’s greatest strength—Grinnellians’ vigorously critical, inquisitive, angular intelligence—in favor of appearing just like other superficially similar institutions. But what if Grinnellians reconsidered how they think about the college’s best-fit prospects?
How might Grinnell identify, reach out to, and convince students who seek the particularly bracing intellectual rigor that this college offers, rather than casting the widest possible net and seeing who gets caught in it?

**Paradox 3: Thriving on the prairie / stuck in the cornfield**

In speaking with students, faculty members, and staff members who have made Grinnell their home—for four years, or for a lifetime—we heard enthusiastic affection for the location.

> When else in my whole entire life am I going to live in a small town, ever? Ever? If I do it at any other point, given my interests, it would probably be detrimental. So I thought, “This is great. I can be in a little bubble with smart people.” —student

> I deeply appreciate that we don’t have the glorious mountains that cause the Colorado College kids to be who they are. Their faculty members aren’t even there for a large proportion of the time. All of us here make Grinnell what it is. —faculty member

> The location fosters community. It qualifies the students who come here: they could have gone somewhere with a beach or a mountain. —faculty member

> Grinnell transcends its geographic limitations in a beautiful way that attracts faculty and students from all over the world. —faculty member

> It’s not an ivory tower, but it is an oasis for four years where you get to work with amazing faculty and really focus on your intellectual and personal growth in a quieter place. —staff member

> Grinnell brings you to the middle of Iowa to give you the world. —student

> The location has the advantage of allowing people to be very connected. The engagement with colleagues and students is tremendous. It’s also a place of reflection and solitude, where you can think through what you’ve learned on your travels. —faculty member

> The beauty of Grinnell is the location. There’s so much to do on campus. The interactions are so incredibly positive. You can lose yourself in academics, the nerdy bubble. I would rather attract students who appreciate that than those who feel the need to be in or near a big city. —student
As we learned, the location presents opportunities for self-formation, both for individuals and the community as a whole. The place fosters and requires intention, as well as sustained attention, both of which Grinnellians highly value. If Grinnell is a “bubble,” it’s one that the community has purposefully chosen and created—an equilibrium, rather than a fragile shield against the outside world.

Moreover, self-formation doesn’t occur simply due to the absence of external stimuli—because Grinnell has never really been “in the middle of nowhere.” Iowans have long offered paeans to the prairie:

*I love the prairie! So often I have seen the dawn come and the light flood over the land and everything turn radiant at once, that word “good” so profoundly affirmed in my soul that I am amazed I should be allowed to witness such a thing. Here on the prairie there is nothing to distract attention from the evening and the morning, nothing on the horizon to abbreviate or to delay. Mountains would seem an impertinence from that point of view.*

—Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

And the college has not only joined the chorus, but begun to lead it. Grinnell’s inventive, multidisciplinary Center for Prairie Studies investigates and celebrates the prairie’s many dimensions—ecological, cultural, and historical:

*I am interested in the prairie. I have taken a lot of ecology and evolution classes in the biology department even though I’m a chemistry major. It’s really cool that it’s a simple ecosystem that’s easy to study as a beginning biologist.* —student

*I like to think that we would view the land’s value in more than instrumental terms, that our connection to it would be mediated by filial devotion.* —Jon Andelson, “Changing Heroes,” *The Land Report, Fall 2008*

*The language that they use in Prairie Studies, especially Jon Andelson, can describe the landscape in a way that makes me think, “Oh this is beautiful, the prairie.”* —faculty member

*All that is prairie sleeps in this old hammock, the rugged fabric of a dense earth layer threaded all through with interwoven rhizomes, not deep, not fixed, but vital, always in motion: a cradling web for all that breathes above.* —Paula Smith, Dean of the College, “Rhizomes,” text for the choral work *Broken Ground* by Jonathan Chenette

Largely thanks to Prairie Studies, Grinnellians have begun weaving a resonant prairie vocabulary into their language.
And yet ...

As we heard in our focus groups, such language has yet to translate into the college’s public presentations:

*The admissions office spends so much time saying, “Here are all the different ways we ameliorate the horrible part about being in a cornfield.” But you’re not actually in a cornfield. The landscape itself is cool. The town is incredibly welcoming to students. I don’t feel like any ad campaign needs to be, “It’s okay that we’re in a cornfield.”*—student

*We seem to apologize for the location constantly: “We’re in the middle of nowhere, but we’re so good.”*—staff member

*We have to transform people’s perceptions of Grinnell’s location from a liability into an asset. It’s not something to apologize for, or excuse and compensate for. I think it’s the draw.*—faculty member

*We have to make it clear that we are who we are because we’re in Iowa. We walk to our own drummer and develop the way we want to.*—alum

And unfortunately, as the recent Art & Science report concluded,

*Grinnell’s location is among the most powerful factors working against it throughout the recruitment funnel.*

In our own focus groups, we heard that many potential Grinnellians don’t accept the location as a draw:

*Location is our biggest obstacle. I had three kids this last week say, “I’m going to look at a bigger town. I’m just not comfortable coming to Iowa.”*—staff member

*Some people are from bigger places, so they’re used to having a lot of shopping, a lot of movies, a lot of places to eat. For people who think life isn’t good enough without that stuff, Grinnell is a bad fit.*—staff member

*The problem is not the Midwest. Our students have no problem going to Michigan or Wisconsin. The problem is Iowa, specifically the rural Midwest.*—independent school college counselor

Interviewees reported that people of color and people from urban areas—students, faculty, and staff—find the location especially concerning:

*When I told people I was going to Grinnell, there were a couple of skeptics. They said, “Oh, you’re going in the middle of Iowa to a small, private liberal arts college. That means there’s nothing to do, and it’s just a bunch of rich white kids smoking.”*—student
As a person of color, I can tell you that my family was terrified about my coming here. I have stayed because of the wonderful community, but I didn’t have a sense of that community before I arrived. It’s an additional challenge to communicate what Grinnell is to people of color, who might think, “My gosh, I’m moving not only to a rural town, but to a state that’s 96 percent white.” –faculty member

I have yet to meet a person of color, or somebody from a big city–white, brown–who has come to Grinnell and not wanted to stay because of the resources. Despite that, just two weeks ago, someone said in an open meeting, “It’s hard to recruit to Iowa.” –faculty member

For others, logistics constitute the largest hurdle:

Being in Iowa is annoying in terms of travel. I bring all my stuff here, and I have to logistically think how I can get to the airport when there isn’t a shuttle at the time I want to go. How do I get home just to spend a few days? –student

The biggest hassle is getting to other places. It takes an hour to get to the airport and then fly to Chicago to fly somewhere else. That’s the biggest headache. –faculty member

A lot of students don’t have cars, so even if you tell them, “Iowa City’s great. Des Moines is great,” it may be unlikely they’ll go. So maybe there should be shuttle buses, but then would they be used? –staff member

The location also means trailing spouses of faculty members must confront professional impediments:

We have family around here, and it’s been great to have our son grow up near relatives on my wife’s side. But it’s been difficult in terms of work for her. –faculty member

I came with my wife, who went to grad school, but ended up not finishing her PhD. She worked briefly in the department, but ended up being a full-time mom, because there were not good employment opportunities here. Now she’s in grad school in another field. –faculty member

Finding work for my wife has been one of the more significant challenges of moving here. –faculty member

When I got to Grinnell, my husband was working on his dissertation. He taught a couple of courses here while he was working on his dissertation and after, but he ended up finding a job that’s four hours away, so I have a pretty bad situation. –faculty member

And the occasional cultural stunner:

My wife and I got here in the middle of a gloomy December, just after Christmas night. Our house wasn’t quite ready yet, so we stayed at a hotel down by the highway. We went into the restaurant, and she started to cry. I said, “What’s wrong?” And she said, “They have Jell-O as a side.” –faculty member
We can’t discount the inarguable problems with travel and trailing spouses that Grinnell’s geographical location presents. Nevertheless, those who study, work, live, and learn here clearly understand how crucially the location shapes the Grinnell education.

Our CRANE team sees tremendous potential in merging a poetic, concrete prairie language with Grinnell’s ethos of a self-forming community, creating a powerful vocabulary of place. Literally off the beaten path, Grinnell’s “eccentric” place reflects and helps shape Grinnellians’ alternative thinking. But by presuming that prospective students can’t possibly see the place’s transformative power as Grinnellians do, the college turns a differentiating asset into an almost insurmountable obstacle.

So, how quickly can Grinnellians stop apologizing for the place and start celebrating its rich and varied glory?

How might Grinnell shift the terms of the conversation from Despite the cornfield... to Because of the prairie...?

**Paradox 4: Fostering maturity irresponsibly**

In our conversations with Grinnellians on and off campus, self-governance came up frequently as one of Grinnell’s most distinguishing characteristics:

> Grinnell students really like having a role in decisions about our own academics, as well as the direction of the college. –student

> Students have their hands in the governance of the institution at all levels. They engage from the dining services committee all the way up to a representative on the Board of Trustees subcommittee. They also have their hands around their own experience in a way that students at other colleges don’t. Their ability to shape their own experience is significantly high, and self-governance is the cornerstone of that experience. –staff member

In many cases, we heard, self-governance recognizes and fosters students’ maturity:

> Self-governance ties in very closely to developing maturity. You are responsible for yourself. You are accountable for you. You will be brought to task by your peers, not by the administration, and that makes a huge difference among this age group. –parent

> The college recognizes that you are an adult and responsible for your own experience. –student

> Self-gov comes down to treating others as you want to be treated. We navigate our own problems instead of getting an authority involved. –student
Self-gov is really about good citizenship. The students organically address issues that staff would address elsewhere. –staff member

But self-governance does entail an important if less paternalistic role for student affairs and other staff members:

The self-governance policy provides the opportunity to impose very little staff presence in your life unless you show us a reason that we should be present. We see ourselves as a safety net when self-governance doesn’t work, because not every 18 year old is capable developmentally of making an adult self-governing decision and living within an environment that has so little structure. –staff member

Students don’t come here for self-gov. But after six months here, they will die on the tracks for it. These 18 year olds are looking for independence, but the environment is supportive. It’s like a tightrope with four nets. –staff member

First-years are probably enacting some of these self-governance concepts in the way they understand them, but they still have a higher level of accountability to maintain them than they probably had before they got here. It’s good to have these big-picture concepts to fall back on, to give us an umbrella to talk about events when they happen. –staff member

And staff members don’t just wait for students to come to them with problems. Grinnell has built a widespread mentoring and support system:

People here genuinely care about my success as a student and as a person. They don’t want me to be a successful person but a generally lousy human being. And that is reflected in what they put their money into—their support systems for students. –student

There’s a large framework of people who will help you if you’re falling behind. Last fall my friend had a really bad injury, and it wasn’t just the RLC and student affairs that were helping her out; it was the health center, our coach, one of her professors, and her friends. –student

They’re mentored all over the place. We have staff at all levels, custodial staff, dining services staff, you name it, who are in close contact with our students and also providing a mentoring relationship. –staff member

I had been number one in my high school class, and here I was nothing. I hated it my first year. I was going to quit, but a cook in the dining hall noticed my despair and invited me to dinner at her house. I became part of her family, and she encouraged me to stay. –alum

Self-gov also encourages students to mentor each other:
Our integrated residential system, where you have students of all class years living on the same floor, works beautifully. The staff does an amazing job training the volunteer student staff. The other upper class students sometimes model problematic behavior, but also really good behavior. —staff member

Some of my students put in 30-40 hours to learn to be good advocates for their friends in situations related to sexual harassment. I can’t imagine taking that amount of time and still keeping up with classes. They’re so admirable and doing such great things. —faculty member

Our CRANE team found ourselves deeply moved by the mutual empathy and concern Grinnellians—students, faculty members, and staff members—show for each other on a daily basis. Whether such kindness arrives through official channels or spontaneously springs up in the dining hall, Grinnellians know they’re all in this together. They genuinely want everyone here to succeed.

The support system includes a campus-wide wellness program for students, faculty, and staff. As in other areas, Grinnell looks at wellness from a different angle:

Our goal is to think about wellness holistically. Our idea is that everyone can find their own wellness. It’s not just about our varsity sports; it’s our recreation program, our intramurals program, our wellness programs, and our PE programs. —staff member

Everyone defines wellness differently. For one student, it might be spending time in the printmaking lab. We have so many opportunities for our students, so many student groups, that wellness occurs throughout this campus, including a nontraditional, non-PE definition. —staff member

Our student peer educators are Residence Life student staff positions. They’re in our residence halls, where students are making a hundred different kinds of wellness decisions every day. That is a really intentional, philosophical choice. —staff member

Spending two hours a day unplugged from media, giving yourself permission to not worry about doing work—athletics builds that into some of our students’ days. Other students really struggle to do that. —staff member

The wellness program provides another opportunity for faculty, students, and staff to form close bonds:

We really value the close connections here between our faculty, staff, and students, and wellness is a really appropriate place for that to happen. You can have a professor in your swim class, on your intramural team. —staff member

Athletics and wellness staff members have worked to integrate their program with every other dimension of learning at Grinnell:
Grinnell is special in the way we integrate athletics, academics, and the rest of the campus. We work hard to make sure that athletics and wellness programs are connected with the other parts of campus. We’re not in that little bubble just north of campus, on the other side of Tenth Avenue. –staff member

We ensure that athletics is part of the liberal arts education, with the same excellence that’s in the classroom and the science lab. Student athletes don’t just go to class and then come over and work out. We integrate athletics and wellness into their entire liberal arts experience. –staff member

Self-governance at Grinnell entails an intentionally crafted equilibrium between freedom and responsibility—and between autonomy and support.

And yet ...

Focus group members reported that the community lacks a shared definition of self-gov:

For many years people said self-governance meant something different to everybody—and that set it up to fail. We are working harder to actually provide and help clarify the definition of self-governance, so that people can use the language in a way that sets it up to succeed. –staff member

I have been repeatedly hearing in the context of Title IX that self-governance does not equal fully autonomous status. It’s not the Vatican. For students to learn what those boundaries are is part of their experience of autonomy. –faculty member

How many different definitions of self-gov do we have? The students who work in admissions are all going to have their own different definitions, so how do we get that to a common, good message to prospective students? –staff member

Over my four years here, the definition of self-governance has evolved tremendously. The first-years particularly have no concept of what it is, and during the evolutionary process of being a Grinnell student you learn what it means. But it’s an elusive and abstract idea that’s very hard to bottle up and sell. –student

Self-gov means something different to everyone. –student

It seems to us that the college has not fully succeeded in communicating self-governance as an intentional set of beliefs and actions, instead of a license to define the term however one wishes.

Along with causing confusion for prospective students, more serious consequences may arise from misunderstandings of self-gov. Focus group members discussed another prominent aspect of Grinnell’s reputation:

The weeks are binge/purge: binge on the work, purge on the weekends. It’s really cathartic. That is a side effect of the location and the size. It’s a culture of “work hard, play hard.” –student
Grinnell students, our interviewees reported, do work really, really hard:

This is a very, very rigorous school. It's very go, go, go. The pressure that you feel to succeed comes from within. It has never been very petty or combative, at least in the academic setting. The pressure is always because I want to do better, I want to be better. –student

There is no competitiveness over grades or with one another, but there is a self-drive to achieve and do the right thing. That's 95 percent positive, but it can get to be too much. –faculty member

The students seem to be struggling more with the workload, and the second year is more challenging than the first. –faculty member

The pressure—even though, or perhaps because, students impose it upon themselves—can sometimes become excessive. And that's where, for some students, the “play hard” part seems to come in:

Some of the reputation for the drug culture comes from the fact that people are so serious during the week, and then on the weekends everyone just feels like we've made it. Sometimes it's a little more allowed than at other places. –student

As one of our interlocutors explained, substance use and abuse can also lead to sexual misconduct.

The way students are having sex is untenable. We need to have a conversation about pleasure, violence, sex, pain, the mind-body connection, and drug and alcohol abuse. The situation is out of control. –faculty member

We learned of efforts to educate and assist students around these issues:

We started a program for student health wellness coordinators, and a third of them are student athletes. They can be great advocates for limiting alcohol abuse across campus. We've had a really great response with active bystander training. –staff member

For the first time, we're earnestly addressing sexual assault. But the administration needs to communicate more effectively about what's going on and what's being done. That information is not disseminated effectively. –student

On the other hand, some suggested that the problem lies in Grinnell students’ propensity to reveal their substance use and sexual activity more openly:

Because people are more comfortable with talking about or showing their usage, it can turn off new students and their families. Even the staff have a transition. You can have an initial reaction of, “Holy crap,” because we're used to students drinking behind their closed door in their residence hall room. –staff member
Because our students are freer about talking about other things, and because they rate themselves a little lower on the scale for social skills, they talk more about alcohol, drug usage, and sexual encounters. Prospective students hear it, and it probably doesn’t go over well among more conservative people. —staff member

Our students are not going to lie to you, so prospies really do get to see the other side of Grinnell. It’s a smaller group, but that group really brags about how much they party, and a lot of prospies see that. So they’re getting an honest view but it’s from a pretty narrow group that goes to extremes. —staff member

Other focus group members suggested the problems have been overstated or are improving:

Like communities everywhere, we over-perceive how much our people are using drugs, especially with pot. Last year, 29% self-reported using pot in the previous 30 days. However, they reported a perception that 93% of students use pot. —staff member

Some people do harder drugs, but it’s in very, very small pockets. Whereas marijuana is not uncommon. —student

One misperception is that Grinnell is totally a hook-up culture. There was a survey recently, and only a third of Grinnell’s campus said that they were having sex with multiple people, and the rest of campus either wasn’t having sex, or had only been in one or two relationships throughout their four years at college. The misperception comes from the fact that we are such a small, open, tight-knit group, so we talk a bit more than other schools might. —student

The students are being fairly sensible this year and are working with the community to make campus parties a little saner and better illuminated. There’s a maturity that is, to my mind, surprising. —faculty member

Campuses are much more uptight these days, in part because of pressure from the federal government. There used to be open drug parties at Grinnell. The town police’s attitude was, “If you just stay on campus, we don’t care.” We didn’t even have campus security. You’d have these students at night streaking from the golf course across campus and a fat guy on a scooter chasing them down with a little light. —alum

Self-gov depends upon tolerance for mistakes about topics and issues toward which the world-at-large shows very little tolerance. —staff member

Our CRANE team cannot (and should not) determine whether Grinnell’s reputation for destructive substance abuse has been overstated. But the amount of focus we noticed around the problem does concern us.

While a culture of work hard/play hard may grow naturally out of Grinnellian soil, how can the college both better articulate and better manage the self-gov policy to ensure students recognize limits—on both ends of the equation?
Paradox 5: Global but (too) local

Grinnell’s international ethos brought out our interviewees’ pride and enthusiasm:

We have some very academically focused off-campus study programs like one in the School of Economics or at University College, London, where they’re taking classes that are much more intensive than the classes they take here. If they want to pursue graduate school, it gives them a really nice opportunity to prepare for that at a top-notch institution. –faculty member

We now have begun a program called “course-embedded travel,” which has an overseas component. Students study a subject in the classroom, and then they actually go and experience it in the overseas context. –faculty member

Last fall I studied abroad in Denmark. We have a core course on positive psychology, and we learned what makes Denmark the happiest country in the world. –student

In the spring I’m going to Cape Town to take classes and do service work. I didn’t pick out specifically what I’m going to do, but they have a whole list of options to choose from. –student

The college makes arranging travel easy, both financially and logistically:

I was in a class that went to Berlin for ten days over spring break, free of charge. –student

Going abroad for free? My school did that for me. –student

Last spring I took a leave of absence from Grinnell and taught at a high school in China. I didn’t want to be in a university setting; I just wanted to be with people from different socio-economic backgrounds and places. I asked a professor who taught in China every summer if she had any connections. Her brother was teaching at this high school, and she helped me set it up. –student

Over the summer I really needed to go to Cambodia to do my research. It was a matter of a couple of emails and calls to my research coordinator, and within a month I was able to go to Cambodia. –student

Grinnell also energetically recruits international students ...

As an international student, I couldn’t know what kind of school experience I wanted. I based most of my decisions on what I read on the Internet and college guides, and through my school counselor. My parents were encouraged when Jon Edwards sent me information about acceptance rates in PhD programs. That’s how I ended up choosing Grinnell. –student

I had to narrow my choices down to seven. Grinnell was my number seven. We flew out to visit schools, and my mom said, “Let’s go to Grinnell first. If you don’t like it, we’ll go to Boston.” It was pouring rain, and it was
horrible. But we were here four days, and I just fell in love. I liked that when I came in Jon Edwards saw me and said, “I know you. I read your application.” He knew everything about me. He put me in contact with other international students on campus. After three days my mom asked, “Do you want to go to Boston?” I was very positive I wanted to stay here. I didn’t even visit Boston. –student

... and strives to ensure that they stay here:

The research funding is a big help to international students. They can stay here over the summer, versus the paperwork of going home. –faculty member

Through these opportunities, Grinnell intentionally cultivates a sense of international citizenship:

International travel isn’t just about going places. It’s about realizing our place in the world—not just as individuals, but how Grinnell and the U.S. fit in. We want to open students’ minds to citizenship. –faculty member

Grinnell is quirky in that it’s isolated yet international. We have a strong aspiration to be tied to a global network. –faculty member

We have so many students who are interested in global development studies and doing service work and Peace Corps in the developing world. –faculty member

I don’t just want to do international law; I want to live an international life. –student

Students often return from abroad with a strong sense of their own privilege. They realize they have a responsibility to use that privilege productively, here in the U.S. and around the world. –faculty member

By design, Grinnellians’ self-formation includes developing a globally informed perspective. Students understand and shape themselves, not only as individuals, but as citizens—of the college, of the local community, of their respective countries, and of the world.

And yet ...

Wow, is this an inwardly focused place. Other colleges go out and engage the world. Here we want everybody to come to us. –staff member

In our conversations and interactions with Grinnell, our CRANE team heard about—and encountered firsthand—an inward-facing institutional culture beyond anything we’ve experienced at other colleges and schools:
We don’t communicate with staff members at other universities about similar projects they might have already done, so we can avoid the mistakes they might have already made. We roll our own here, to a fault. – staff member

We have a lot of stability, but with that comes a culture of; “We’ve always done it this way.” – staff member

We were structurally insular. We rarely hired experienced administrators— or senior faculty, for that matter—from outside. Grinnell needed fresh blood. – alum

Most students, faculty members, and many staff strive to act as citizens of the world; but some have little idea how neighboring institutions operate, let alone competitor institutions across the country. It seems that some staff members do not see themselves as fully enfranchised citizens of a larger higher-educational community that shares, explores, fine-tunes, and carries out professional practices.

However, staff members at all levels, in many different offices, have begun to make changes:

There’s recently been a lot of turnover, from admissions to the website to communications, and in many cases people in the community have welcomed those transitions. We sense that we haven’t been getting the message out the way we need to. – faculty member

We’re going to push for transparency and establish processes. We need to rebuild trust. – staff member

But we also heard skepticism about these endeavors.

The administration has promised to fix the new website, which is broken in too many places to name. A lot of us are trying to make up our minds: “Do I trust the history of dysfunction with our online communications? Do I believe that this will really be fixed?” – faculty member

We can’t be a successful “imposter.” We can’t just start “acting like” a top-10 college without having a famous brand name. – staff member

We understand where this skepticism comes from. For far too long, Grinnell tolerated or ignored or even encouraged operational insularity, allowing offices at all levels to remain unacquainted with effective systems not simply for getting things done, but for operating effectively in the Grinnellian way.

In allowing this situation to persist, the college puts the academic side at risk, impeding recruitment, stirring disrespect and mistrust, and thwarting innovation.

To put an end to this destructive siloing, can Grinnell re-enfranchise staff members as citizens of a larger academic world? Can they be given the professional development and training to master current best practices—and then adapt them to suit Grinnell’s particular needs and customs?
Paradox 6: Running hot and cold

Grinnell’s outward/inward duality also reveals itself in the recruitment process. Our focus group members reported a wide array of experiences in deciding to enroll. For some of our interviewees, Grinnell quickly stood out as the obvious first choice:

I did a selective small liberal arts college search, and this was my top pick. It was a good fit. –staff member / alum

I always wanted Grinnell. It's incomparable. I never visited Grinnell before I came here during orientation. I had a friend who came here, and he said I should try it. –student

My high school was a small public alternative program, based on experiential learning and self-governance. That clearly led me to Grinnell because Grinnell is also a self-governing community, and that is really important to me. –student

But for others, the decision followed a more serendipitous route:

I came to Grinnell over the summer, so there weren’t many people on campus, but the people I did meet were all so welcoming and friendly. That was one of the things I remember the most about my visit here. That’s why I applied early decision to Grinnell. –student

We just drove through to get a feel for the college. We stepped out of our car for 10 or 15 seconds, and someone stopped and asked, “Oh, are you visiting? We love it when students come and visit.” Then a professor stopped us, brought us into his office, and talked with us. That really stood out to me, how willing people were to embrace you and welcome you. –student

I showed up on a Sunday, so the John Chrystal Center was locked. I was confused. Two girls came up to me and said, “You look lost, can we help you?” They walked me to where I was supposed to be. –student

For these students, encountering warm, welcoming Grinnellians made a key difference. While some of these encounters occurred by chance, others came about through intentional actions on the college’s part:

I was dead set on going to Whitman for a little while. Then I visited Grinnell and loved it even more. Everything about the visitor experience, from the tours to sitting in on a class to the interview, made me think I could see myself here for four years. –student

Our daughter felt very comfortable here on her visit. She enjoyed the people she stayed with and the social life. It just felt right. –parent
We were sold on our first visit. The way people treated us—it was like a town from the 1800s. Everyone said howdy, good day. I was really impressed by a small thing—the lost-and-found in the JRC. There’s a table with iPads, computers—they were all returned to their original owners. —parent

For student athletes, interactions with members of Grinnell’s athletics department also appeared pivotal:

I didn’t even know Grinnell existed until I got a call from the basketball coach. I was considering Williams College in Massachusetts, Union College in Schenectady, and the University of Chicago. I applied early decision at Grinnell because I visited the other three, and Grinnell felt like home. —student

My older brother ended up coming here and loved it. I didn’t think much of the campus when I first saw it, but I visited him frequently and started to feel more comfortable. I was recruited heavily by the football coach here, who is really an intense guy. I did a year in Maryland before I realized that I did want a smaller-world college feel. I took a year off, worked, and then re-applied as a transfer. —student

I didn’t hear about Grinnell until a week before the application deadline. I went to a college fair to get extra credit in history class, and it just happened that the Grinnell guy had played soccer with me. He said I should apply to Grinnell. Then the soccer coach here kept calling me, so I decided to visit. I stayed overnight with one of the soccer team guys. He was one of the most wonderful people I’ve met here, and everyone I met said, “Hey, how’s it going?” I thought, “Wow, this feels really homey.” —student

I was recruited as a football player. My first contact was a phone call from the football coach, and I subsequently found out what a strong institution it was. I wanted to play football and to be a music major, and those two worlds were separate at the other school I was considering. Grinnell’s very open environment made it possible to pursue those two goals. —staff member / alum

Athletics and wellness staff members highlighted their role in recruiting students:

Many of our top graduates, who get into the finest graduate schools or win the Archibald Prize or the President’s Medal, are student athletes whom we recruited. The athletics program brings in people who are woven into the fabric of the institution. What we do is central to what this college is all about. —staff member

The athletics staff should be an extension of the admissions office when it comes to recruiting. Thirty percent of students here are actually on teams, but that doesn’t mean that we didn’t recruit more people who just decided not to play. —staff member

Many of our coaches also hold faculty appointments, which speaks to the high level of integration between athletics and academics on campus. —staff member
Because the coaches already have a relationship with applicants who are student athletes, those applicants feel way more comfortable when they come to visit. If we can get them here, we have a legit shot to get them. –staff member

Nowadays with club sports and travel teams, parents are used to providing resources for their children. And that continues once their kids come here. Some of our people have that resource, which can be very valuable, even if they’re not just full pay. –staff member

In athletics, we have relationships with families that extend 18 to 24 months, so we can help move the process along. For other applicants, it’s an identification, some mailings, and then we hope you apply and that we yield you. Most of the schools above us use athletics to get a lot of their full pays, and they really push the early decision, because they know early on who will be the contributing matriculants. –staff member

When they commit to recruiting a particular student, or type of student, Grinnellians can roll out the welcome mat with the best of them. This welcome often makes the difference in convincing students—and, notably, full-pay students—to come here.

And yet ...

Grinnellians don’t always play at the top of their recruitment game:

On my visit, my original student host actually abandoned me. But I eventually found some other students who showed me around and were really helpful. –student

A lot of students who visit probably decide not to enroll because their host student was drinking or smoking too much. They’re generous; they want to share. They probably are trying to share their pot or beer. Seriously. –staff member

I absolutely think some prospective students are being turned off by the culture, the usage of alcohol and other drugs. –staff member

At least some student hosts display, shall we say, poor instincts, possibly due to improper training, cases of self-gov gone wrong, or other causes. However, the problem doesn’t just exist at the student level:

We’re not losing full-pay students to schools where they’re getting more merit money. I’m losing them because of our timeline for admission. Do an early read on an application, because that’s what other schools are doing, and students are making decisions at the end of their junior summer. But Grinnell is not in that conversation. –staff member

We don’t fund official visits, flying people out to the campus. There’s a certain way people like to be treated and recognized for their abilities. People need to be courted. –staff member
The athletics staff are the real recruiters on this campus. –staff member

Athletics certainly is a crucial component of our recruitment. We also topped 6,000 applications this year as an institution, which speaks to a better-run admission office. –staff member

Grinnell is not treating potential full-pay applicants in the same way other institutions do. It’s going to take a different model for the recruitment visit. I lost three this last year, and we’re not losing them to schools where they’re getting more money. –staff member

Some of our interlocutors attributed lapses in the recruitment process to a culture of modesty:

Modesty is part of our shtick. We like it when our students aren’t competitive, for instance. But then someone has to tell our story for us, and that is absurd. We will not do well in the next 20 years if we continue to bury our heads. –faculty member

Grinnellians like to show what they're doing well, but they don’t do well at bragging and drawing attention to themselves. That is going to be one of the biggest struggles in getting a message across. –staff member

Our small-town modesty doesn’t serve us well. There’s a belief that people who truly belong here will find us. But you still have to make an argument. –staff member

Our own experience of visiting Grinnell felt less like modesty and more like another condition: introversion.

Introverts have mighty powers of concentration. They’re relatively immune to the lures of wealth and fame. They listen more than they talk, think before they speak, and often feel as if they express themselves better in writing than in conversation. They tend to dislike conflict. Many have a horror of small talk, but enjoy deep discussion.

–Susan Cain, Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking

The above sounds quite a bit like a description of an intensely focused, meaning-craving Grinnellian. And indeed, our conversations with community members, in groups and one-on-one, delved satisfyingly into complex ideas. Our participants could not have been more engaging or delightful.

On our tour, however, few passersby greeted us or the tour guide; staff members often spoke only when spoken to; and the guide dutifully described the buildings but revealed little about student culture, prominent alumni, or what it really feels like to live and learn at Grinnell. The information session, we learned, takes place in a subterranean room in a gleaming but impersonal “welcome center.” Wayfinding around campus can challenge even the directionally savvy. Meanwhile, the website that launched last October, an attempt to merge an intranet with an outward-facing recruitment tool, obscures the information that prospects (as opposed to current students) need most. In short, it’s not just that Grinnell attracts and cultivates introverts: **Grinnell appears introverted as an institution.**
And introverts often don’t realize that their inward focus can come across as aloofness, carelessness, even coldness. The college seems more than happy to let students “who truly belong” find their way here—if they can. Indeed, Grinnell’s elusiveness may act as a qualifying filter. But in the absence of an effectively functioning system to identify, engage, and persuade best-fit prospects, a jaw-dropping 60 percent of students who visit Grinnell still chose not to apply for fall 2013. Happily, this year’s ratio has dropped to 50 percent, though that still leaves much room for improvement.

These statistics feels particularly jarring when we remember the way many Grinnellians see themselves:

Grinnell attracts a lot of students who have been thinking for years that college is the place where they’re going to fit in better than they did in high school. For a great many of our students, Grinnell lives up to that, and it’s a really powerful thing. –faculty member

Grinnellians, of all people, should know what it’s like to feel like an outsider.

So, instead of turning away from visitors, why not draw on the way Grinnell transforms students’ sense of themselves—from painfully misunderstood to exuberantly accepted?

Why not use this thrilling personal journey to empathize with visitors who feel like outsiders at Grinnell—and thereby ensure that future Grinnellians feel at home?

**Paradox 7: Endangering social justice by practicing it?**

Grinnellians take pride in what others might consider a noble but impractical mission: applying education not just toward one’s own advancement, but to serve the common good. As the college’s current mission statement declares,

As a teaching and learning community, the College holds that knowledge is a good to be pursued both for its own sake and for the intellectual, moral, and physical well-being of individuals and of society at large. –grinnell.edu

While the current mission statement lacks the fire of the founding Social Gospel preachers, we discovered that the passion for social justice still burns brightly at Grinnell. The college even offers a prize for social justice work:

The Grinnell College Young Innovator for Social Justice Prize honors individuals under the age of 40 who have demonstrated leadership in their fields and who show creativity, commitment, and extraordinary accomplishment in effecting positive social change. Each prize carries an award of $100,000, half to the winning individual(s)
and half to an organization committed to the winner’s area of social justice, for a total of up to $200,000 in prize awards. –grinnell.edu

Focus group members bubbled with enthusiasm over the opportunities to learn about, reflect upon, and live out social justice principles:

We had a symposium on Title IX a couple of weeks ago. We learned that while Title IX has created equality of opportunity, there still needs to be equity between men’s and women’s teams. A lot of the runners took that seriously, and we decided to make sure that Grinnell is a leader in equity of experience. We had a meeting with the coaches and asked how we could improve. –student

At first I was considering economics, and I interviewed with Goldman-Sachs. I thought I was that kind of student. That totally changed as time went on. Because of Grinnell’s social justice focus I got in touch with a lot of my priorities back at home. I’ve been doing a lot of community outreach. –student

I had never really considered the Peace Corps until this year. I have gone through a lot in my four years here at Grinnell, and I’m a very different person from who I was the first year. –student

I came into this college not having much experience with feminist conversations, social justice conversations; even though I was a little more informed about these topics than some of my peers, it was still uncomfortable to talk about race and class, and to an extent it still is. But Grinnell has given me productive channels to communicate responses. –student

The faculty’s role is to make students uncomfortable with simple notions of “social justice” or “development.” There may not be a morally pristine way of acting in the world. So how do you make the best possible choice? –faculty member

Even when we’re not walking the talk about social justice here, even when we’re messing up locally, our students still buy that part of our history. They come because they’re attracted to that history of working for the common good. –faculty member

We heard how Grinnell’s commitment to fostering cultural and economic diversity relates to the social justice mission. And newly implemented diversity Town Hall forums show the college takes this conversation seriously indeed:

I was amazed at the diversity at Grinnell, and that’s something all the other schools I looked at didn’t have. Diversity of experience, diversity of background, diversity of language and ethnicity, everything. –student

The diversity of backgrounds on our team really stands out to me, because tennis is usually white and upper class. It’s funny, because we’d have our one player swearing in Hindi, and our two player swearing in French, and our
three player, who’s from Guatemala, swearing in Spanish. We’re still an excellent team even though we have diverse backgrounds. –student

There are not too many places in the country that have a position called Coordinator of Diversity in Athletics. That says a lot. –staff member

I got a teaching fellowship from the consortium on faculty diversity here. My intention was to stay for that one year and then leave. But the department created a position for me, and now this is the beginning of my eighth year. I’ve been very happy. –faculty member

I was in a graduate program that focused on leadership, ethics, service, and diversity. The position here at Grinnell, and the college itself, aligned with those values. –staff member

Community members extolled the “need-blind” admission policy as one embodiment of social justice at Grinnell:

On the issues of need-blind admission and institutional identity, the faculty is more unanimous than they are on most other issues. On need-blind, we are all for it. –faculty member

The legacy of our need-blind policy has to be defended. It will change Grinnell for the worse if we get rid of it. Becoming more aware of the implications of that policy for our day-to-day practice is also important. I have taught at places where socioeconomic class correlated to preparation. At Grinnell, it does not correlate. We have only a handful of students who aren’t prepared. –faculty member

Financial aid is an instrument of social justice here. For a lot of people, that’s a huge determinant in coming to the college. Grinnell makes a real commitment to making sure that students graduate with the least amount of debt possible. –faculty member

Interviewees reported that need-blind doesn’t just benefit aid recipients:

Without need-blind, Grinnell couldn’t have the quality of students that they have. Schools with smaller endowments can’t afford to let in all the students they want; Grinnell can. –parent

Having first-generation students in large numbers in my classes has helped reveal what we’re involved in here at Grinnell. We’re engaged in a very rarified pursuit of knowledge. These students see the dimensions of this place; this place is not natural to them. I consider them to be educators in their own right. –faculty member

Need-blind both enacts Grinnell’s social justice mission and strengthens everyone’s education. Without this policy, we heard, Grinnell would not be Grinnell. One readily sees why the conversation about need-blind becomes volatile, touching on the school’s deepest social and educational values—which are already under considerable threat in the larger culture.
Nevertheless, only 13 percent of Grinnell students currently pay full tuition—meaning that 87 percent receive aid. By comparison, 43 percent at Carleton do not receive aid; at Kenyon 50 percent, at Swarthmore 30 percent, and at Vassar 40 percent. Only at Macalester, where 26 percent do not receive aid, does the number come even close to Grinnell’s. (Source: U.S. News & World Report, cross-checked with each institution’s own website)

Recognizing the unsustainability of Grinnell’s current aid expenditures, some faculty members expressed openness to changing the policy, at least in small ways:

We are passionate about preserving need-blind, so we’re willing to think about what other things might have a little bit of give in them. –faculty member

There is a pretty good consensus that the fairly low-impact steps we could take toward preserving need-blind would be acceptable. We don’t want to tamper with the spirit of need-blind. –faculty member

I’m not against recruiting students of means. I am very wedded to need-blind admissions because it is important. We should be selecting the students who are right, based on something other than their economic profile. –faculty member

Grinnell has to be thinking about where we are going to be 20 years from now. We should be attracting students from elite private schools in New York and around the country. If we’re going to have our noses in the air and say we don’t need these elite schools, because we want to be good social justice people, we will end up not having much of anything to offer. –faculty member

I’m an outlier on need-blind. If you want to help people who really need it, maybe need-blind isn’t the best way. You can pursue the goal but change the practices. –faculty member

The faculty is four-square behind need-blind, but the devil is in the details. In the discussion of what measures we might take in order to preserve the college’s need-blind nature, I remember strong dissent on just about everything, voiced by somebody. –faculty member

And yet ...

As we began to realize, “need-blind” does not seem to have the same meaning to everyone:

We can be need-blind. That’s not a problem. Our problem is we meet 100 percent of demonstrated need. In the end, people are more tied to meeting 100 percent of need than they are to the need-blind, but we didn’t want to have that discussion. –staff member

No application is really “blind.” Applicants check a box saying whether they plan to apply for aid. You can also tell a lot by where they went to school and other factors. You can make a good guess about whether they’re going to be full pay or not, even though it’s supposed to be “blind.” –alum
Need-blind is a goal to work toward but it doesn’t exist as an absolute in the real world. That means you can balance the policy’s goals in ways that don’t compromise the concept but allow you to play at the edges. –alum

We also heard that need-blind doesn’t pertain to international students:

A lot of people don’t know that for international students, admissions is not need-blind; it’s need-aware. That doesn’t mean you get lesser, worse candidates or more candidates who are able to pay. You have a wide range. I find it really weird that the administration doesn’t use that argument when talking about need-blind admissions. –student

I don’t like looking at international students as the one group we can squeeze cash out of. Do we want economically diverse Americans but only rich international students? –faculty member

If need-blind does not exist as an absolute, what does that mean in practical terms? To what extent does the community conflate “need-blind” with “meeting 100 percent of need”? Are community members even arguing about the same thing?

Moreover, discussing financial aid brings up the topic of money in general—and at Grinnell, that presents something of a minefield. As our focus group members readily acknowledged, Grinnell has long held a reputation for shunning wealth and personal advancement.

Some seemed to share this mindset, lamenting that the student body seems more self-serving than in the past:

Social justice activism is declining at Grinnell. When the first Posse students got here, there weren’t very many students of color. We all said, “Let’s push the boundaries; let’s talk about it.” Now we are doing a good job, but it’s still important to talk about it. But people are more focused now on building up their resumes and getting internships. –student

There’s a lot of self-serving and lack of candor. In the 1960s undergraduates were going on freedom rides, working against the war; they were as intense as before, and they got their work done. But now, some of it is about vita-building. “How many good deeds have I done? Now recognize me. Maybe I’ll get the President’s Award.” –faculty member

What I noticed in my students during the financial crisis was much more career focus. They wanted to know why the career development office wasn’t doing more for them and connecting them with potential employers and internships. –faculty member

The economic crisis may partially explain this apparent shift from idealism to utilitarianism. But the other side of this coin also bears considering:
“Why are you interviewing with Bain?” Kids who interview with those kinds of companies do get some of that from their peers. —staff member

The faculty are great at preparing students for academic careers. But many of them don’t want to be involved in conversations about other types of careers. Overall, we undervalue and underserve students who go into the for-profit world. —staff member

Students get guidance about going to grad school. They don’t get help with other career options. Their best bet is to go to a grad school that does careers well and get an MA from there. —alum

People see Grinnell as a “service school,” with a lot of graduates going to Peace Corps or Americorps or volunteer programs, or getting a job that pays $30,000 to $35,000 a year. We have this huge discussion about business on campus. Everyone says, “I’m fine with business,” or “I’m fine with someone making a large salary, but everyone else isn’t.” I think we really put off a lot of students whose goal after college is to make money, because we seem to preach that that’s not what life is about. —student

As the fall 2012 issue of The Grinnell Magazine, provocatively titled Does Grinnell Mean Business?, suggests, Grinnell has long held a reputation for ignoring, discouraging, even disdaining for-profit careers. The issue presents strong cases to the contrary, highlighting several alums’ unconventional and significant for-profit work. Yet, as one alum wrote in the Letters section of the next issue:

I found the fall 2012 issue condescending. Grinnell has always treated business with disdain; to suddenly discover that today’s business world needs Grinnell graduates and pros pers from their presence is a welcome new perspective, but laying it on so thick all at once after so many years of ignoring those involved was a bit much.
—Mark Butterman (class of 1976, letter to the editor of Grinnell Magazine)

To the extent that Grinnellians view affluence, and those who possess or seek it, with suspicion, this may stem from a larger rejection of more traditional viewpoints. Focus group members reported that such values do not always receive a warm welcome here:

There’s no amnesty for ignorance. Grinnellians don’t have a lot of tolerance for a mindset that’s not on the more liberal side of the scale. If a student is from tiny little town in Iowa where homosexuality is not discussed, he’s going to have a hard time adjusting. —staff member

I worry that there’s no amnesty for dissent, that there is a Grinnellian view on a lot of topics, which is a fairly liberal perspective, and it’s very difficult for students who don’t believe that to say so. I’ve had students come and talk to me about something after class, and I say, “Well, it would’ve been nice if you had said that in class,” and they’ll say, “No.” I would never allow someone else to be uncivil to them in class, but once they’ve left the class, there may be a penalty for saying, “I don’t believe in gay marriage,” for example. —faculty member
Part of my undergrad experience was meeting really smart conservatives who were good at debating. It was a bit of a shock, and really, really good for me. A lot of our students don’t get that experience. –faculty member

For years we haven’t invited really smart and articulate conservatives as speakers. –faculty member

Does Grinnell’s political culture sufficiently recognize differences between “dissent” and “ignorance”? Does the political climate stifle conservative voices that could challenge and enrich the conversation? And, as a corollary ...

We have had a culture in the admissions office that is not just need-blind, but need-seeking. –faculty member

... does the college currently make an extra effort to attract students—at least U.S. students—with financial need in order to continue enacting Grinnell’s values? While Grinnell does not reject applicants based on their higher relative affluence, why aren’t more of those applicants choosing Grinnell back?

At its best, “need-blind” represents Grinnellians’ egalitarian ethos: the college does not care how much money applicants possess, only about their intellectual and personal qualifications.

And yet, another “yet” ...

Grinnell’s relative wealth, in the form of the endowment, has made it possible to carry out the need-blind ethos for the last 30-plus years. Viewed in this light, rejecting affluence on general principle makes little sense. And valuing pure access over socioeconomic diversity—another core Grinnellian value—equates to privileging one group over another based not on character or aptitude, but on ability to not pay full tuition. As some faculty members explained, speaking of students’ academic and career choices:

We do have a cultural divide among the students. Our students of privilege are here seeking self-expression. And the others are here, in many cases, because their families want them to be, or to make their families proud.
–faculty member

We need to have a conversation around helping some students on campus understand the enormous privilege of choosing to be downwardly mobile. I don’t think they see that for the most part. –faculty member

If being “downwardly mobile,” pursuing one’s ideals rather than income, represents a privilege for students of means, practicing “need-blind” is a form of privilege for Grinnell. And, hefty as the endowment remains, it’s not enough to sustain this privileged position indefinitely. What’s more, sculpting a class with an appropriate mix of socioeconomic backgrounds helps create a robust, diverse student culture. We would ask the entire Grinnell community to examine the extent to which recent sustainability discussions may have led some full-pay students to feel somewhat alienated, as if they’re here more for their money than their minds.
As currently practiced, need-blind is said to endanger Grinnell’s future. So, can the administration make the case for that change as a means to further—not diminish—the mission?

And can the community form a consensus on doing so, based on a more precise and practical, yet no less idealistic, understanding of that mission?

Paradox 8: The gift of (not) giving

While Grinnell has presented our CRANE team with more paradoxes than any other college we can think of, we know one fact for certain: Grinnellians love their college and their community. Our conversations sparkled with joyous comments like these:

- I fell in love with the college on my first visit, and Grinnell has more than lived up to my expectations. –student
- Grinnell’s the place where I want to be. I can’t imagine going anywhere else. –student
- I can’t imagine my life without Grinnell anymore. –student
- I can’t say enough about the rich, intimate educational experiences students have here. It’s just an amazing place. –alum
- I was so delighted to be surrounded by such inquisitive, thoughtful, helpful people. Whatever you’re doing here, someone else will be interested. –alum
- Grinnellians are good citizens and wonderful people. –alum

In fact, Grinnellians have never remained silent when it comes to their college:

- I have never known the alumni of any other institution to emanate such complete satisfaction with their alma mater. I have never heard any of them say that Grinnell is the most wonderful school on earth; they merely exude that opinion in some subtle way that I have not been able to analyze. –John Scholte Nollen, President, Grinnell College (1931-1940)

We’ve already heard how enthusiastically Grinnellians embrace their identity, not just during their college years, but throughout their lives. They will run across a hotel lobby to greet a stranger in a Grinnell t-shirt and shout delightedly when they spot a Grinnell bumper sticker. They warmly reach out to current students:

- We have an alumni game every year, and alums from all the years come back and meet with us. They’re always willing to reach out and help us find internships and jobs. They’re very helpful and connected. –student
Both internships I’ve done have been with Grinnell alumni. That’s not a rare example. Plenty of people do summer work experiences with Grinnell alumni, and the alumni set it up. —student

I just had some students over to my house for Thanksgiving. We had a fantastic time together. —alum

They also don’t hold back when it comes to sharing their opinions with the college:

We have no problem telling the administration what we think. We chew them out royally on a regular basis, and we have very passionate discussions in the forums. —alum

And yet ...

Interviewees described Grinnell’s philanthropic culture—or, rather, the lack thereof:

The alumni have a culture of rigorous self-criticism when it comes to the college, and they can be ruthless about not giving money. We need to build a culture of engagement and support. —staff member

Grinnellians learn here how to be masters of their own destinies, and we empower them to develop a critical mindset which they then turn back on the college. So on some levels, it’s not surprising that they don’t leap at the chance to give back. —staff member

We put an envelope in the alumni magazine once, and people canceled their subscriptions. —staff member

We have a poor rate of giving to the college. That offends me deeply. It goes beyond the fiscal issue. What kinds of graduates can turn their backs on their school? —alum

I don’t see, loving this institution as I do, how you can leave it. How can you leave and not want to continue to contribute financially or by volunteering or just helping students with career advice? —student

The alumni almost seem to take pride in not giving. —staff member

Having heard repeatedly how much Grinnell alumni love their alma mater—how intensely and volubly they identify as Grinnellians—we, too, found the anti-philanthropic culture astounding. Why do only 35 percent of Grinnell’s alumni give to the college?

As with admissions practices, we heard that Grinnellians’ distaste for wealth might affect advancement:

We hear frequently that the only thing Grinnellians do and the only reason alumni don’t give to the college is because they all joined the Peace Corps and they’re all going into service. If you make money, then you’re not a Grinnellian. There will be alumni who will ostracize others in our community because they’ve been financially successful, because they work on Wall Street, because they work for the government. —staff member
The students want a job in a non-profit but they don’t want to run it. Their goal is a job that pays $28,000 a year. No wonder they don’t give money to the college. –alum

The community’s views of the endowment also seem to play a large part:

The endowment is a blessing and a curse. It concerns me that people have stopped thinking about giving. Re-educating them will take a decade. –alum

I’d like to get rid of this idea that because Grinnell has a large endowment, that’s the answer to everything. Faculty have actually said to alums, “You don’t need to give. This place is just fine.” –staff member

Everyone else is talking about being so strapped for things, but we continue to give out and just do, do, do, whether or not we raise the money. So people think, “Why did you tell me we needed to raise money, because it doesn’t seem like that’s true? And now I don’t trust you.” –staff member

The Buffett financial strategy has changed the alumni body over time. They no longer see philanthropic support as an issue, and the college overall stopped thinking about development. Some alumni even think the college is corrupt, if we need money under these circumstances. –staff member

A lot of our peers have at least as big an endowment as we do, and it’s not an issue for them. The value of their endowment doesn’t come up, but it does for us. –staff member

It’s no secret that, even in difficult financial times, Grinnell remains a wealthy institution, especially compared to similar-sized colleges. From several focus groups, we heard that Grinnell’s generous financial aid package played a significant if not decisive role when students chose Grinnell:

My parents had heard it was an excellent school, and they didn’t want me to go as far away as Chicago. I visited, and I really liked how the campus looked. I liked the professors and students I met, and they gave me a bonus scholarship, and so I said yes. –alum

My top choices were a couple of Division 2 schools in Colorado and Wash U in St. Louis and then Grinnell. I ended up choosing Grinnell. The financial aid was great. I could play two sports, and I knew I would get a first-class education. –alum

I didn’t want to go to a rooty-tooty-snooty school, and I needed help paying for college. Over time I started narrowing it down—a small school, a liberal arts program. Grinnell was always my first choice. I found out about Posse afterward; going to Grinnell motivated me to apply for Posse. –student

After my second-round interview for the Posse scholarship, they thought I was a better match for Grinnell than for Berkeley. I was a little sad about that, not because of anything I had heard about Grinnell, but because at that point I was more interested in a brand-name school. But not having to pay for college outweighed anything else that I’d been considering. –student
Grinnell’s extensive resources continue to benefit students throughout their four years here:

We’re not just generous in getting you here. There is a generosity once you are here, of time and spirit and attention and resources that we lavish on students. You come here and you will change and we will help you change, and it will have an impact on the rest of your life. You will know how to think, and you will be able to continue changing yourself because of what you’re able to learn. –faculty member

When I was a student here, I took a lot of money from the school to travel and bring speakers to campus and plan conferences. There are a lot of opportunities for students to form part of their education on their own here. I don’t know if other schools have the resources to do that. –alum

We have this huge budget to bring in award-winning authors almost every week and award-winning academics every single week. They literally bring the world to you. –student

The amenities at this school are ridiculous. –student

Community members especially praised Grinnell’s generosity in funding students’ internships and summer research:

Grinnell is really unusual in having internship funding available for students. They apply through Grinnell for money to do unpaid internships elsewhere. That commitment to opening opportunities for students is pretty remarkable. –faculty member

The research budget for student research over the summer is larger than the faculty budget for research over the summer. That’s incredible, and it points to the value the school places on making opportunities available for students. –faculty member

Each student, if they’re working on a mentored advance project over the summer, is paid $3,400, which is not a bad gig for working really closely with a professor and doing as close to original research as is possible at the undergraduate level. –faculty member

My roommate my first year here was from Alaska. His parents were not wealthy and were very ill. It was very important that the school could pay him to stay on campus in the summers and work with a biology professor. Eventually he got a bug named after him. –alum

However, interviewees reported that, sometimes, Grinnell’s generosity brings about unintended results:

I sometimes hear students saying, “I’ll see if I can get the college to pay for this. I want to go to Germany for spring break. I can tell the college I’m doing a couple of days’ worth of research and get them to pay for it.” Or, “I’m going to see if I can get a parent or an uncle who can speak on a topic to come to campus and lecture, and maybe the college will pay for that flight.” That is the difference between a place that has resources for the right reasons and people taking advantage of it, and that just makes me mad. –staff member
Our alumni giving is terrible, and part of the problem is that Grinnell buys a lot students who would have rather gone somewhere else. We hear this line over and over: “Grinnell gave me the best deal.” I don’t know if we ever turn these alumni around. –alum

Given the discount rate, all the evidence suggests that people are not willing to pay a premium to come here.
–staff member

In certain cases, Grinnell’s generosity seems to diminish rather than foster loyalty to the institution. If the college seems so willing to give it away, some might think, perhaps a Grinnell education isn’t worth much in the first place. Here, again, we see how the college’s egalitarian ideals can inadvertently translate into perceptions and practices that harm Grinnell.

One might also say that alumni giving at Grinnell represents another case of “need-seeking”: according to the prevailing definition of need, the college emphatically does not warrant any “financial aid.” But “need” and “aid” are the wrong terms in which to think about alumni giving in the first place. After all, as participants reminded us, the endowment isn’t an issue for other well-off schools. Only at Grinnell, it seems, does a relatively secure financial position mean that alumni need not donate.

We wonder if this false dichotomy relates to Grinnellians’ general discomfort with overt money-seeking. Recall the words of one staff member, quoting the apparent mindset:

If you make money, then you’re not a Grinnellian.

And if you ask for money, perhaps, then you’re not Grinnell. But without taking in significantly more alumni donations, Grinnell will slowly but surely decline as an exceptional liberal arts institution producing world-changing graduates.

How can Grinnell move out of this maddening double-bind, in which the college both can’t ask—and can’t not ask—alumni for money?

How quickly can Grinnell shift the prevailing alumni mindset from “The college doesn’t need my money” to “I’m responsible for ensuring Grinnell’s future?”
Paradox 9: Transparently confusing

President Raynard Kington and senior administrators have made no secret of the need to carefully examine some of Grinnell’s financial practices, notably the need-blind policy.

*The board’s response was, we think we can continue [this policy]. It reflects our values and a commitment to access and assuring a diverse student population. But there was a caveat that we’re going to come back in two years [and revisit the policy], because even with the commitment to our values, we can’t continue just increasing the amount of aid we give every year. We have to slow it down.* –Raynard Kington, Interview with NPR, May 23, 2013

Next year, the time to revisit the policy will arrive. And that means, between now and then, members of the Grinnell community need to better understand both the original policy and proposed adjustments to it.

On one hand, focus group members praised President Kington’s efforts at transparency:

*The previous president was inward-facing. The current president has a more public face. He’s going for a grander image for the college, getting attention at higher levels.* –faculty member

*In the town hall meetings the president sits down and talks to people, and he gets a very positive response.* –staff member

*The new president has shined a bright light on what we do here. People are being re-energized and told that they are a priority. He does hiring exceptionally well, and he knows how to responsibly represent us to the outside world.* –staff member

And yet …

We also heard a great deal of skepticism, often based on misunderstandings of the proposed changes or the circumstances from which they arise:

*I do not actually buy the notion that we have a financial crisis, or at least I don’t buy where it came from. I’m not turning a blind eye to financial challenges in the next 20 years, but we are still a very privileged institution and a very wealthy institution compared to most. Our trustees are extraordinarily fiscally conservative, and we overbuilt the gym, honestly, without fundraising.* –faculty member

*Many faculty members don’t understand why you can’t take more money out of the endowment to cover the increased cost of financial aid.* –staff member

*Some faculty understand the issue about the discount rate. But some see advancement issues as sinister—they think the administration needs to get its act together.* –staff member
I find it curious that the administration itself, all wonderful people, has suddenly grown. Do you really need a person to do this or do you need your common sense to do this? I’m curious, but I haven’t yet formed an opinion.

–faculty member

Grinnell’s endowment has cushioned financial shocks that other colleges have felt very powerfully. The hiring of new senior administrators, plus the appearance of gleaming new buildings such as the athletic center, further enables a perceived lack of urgency. In the absence of clear, shared understandings about the proper function of the endowment, funding processes for buildings, administrative systems, and other factors, confusion and even suspicion can arise about the college’s true financial picture.

Along with misperceptions about the administration’s goals, we hear, in the comments above, the passionate desire to protect Grinnell’s core social-justice mission as manifested by need-blind. Community members also agree that Grinnell must continue exercising fiscal prudence, another value the community holds dear. But how these values actually work in practice, at Grinnell and other colleges, remains unclear to too many people. While respecting the extraordinary level of expertise and acuity this community possesses, the administration can’t assume a shared understanding of best fiscal practices in an academic setting. That means, even at advanced stages of discussion, stepping back and articulating basic premises, ensuring the community at least understands them, while perhaps not yet fully accepting them.

Can the administration continue conscientiously revealing challenges and discussing potential solutions, while more effectively educating constituents about the terms and stakes of the discussion?

**Paradox 10: No Limits vs. no thesis**

The more time our CRANE team spends with Grinnell, the more we love it. That’s not an exaggeration. Despite the often frustrating paradoxes we’ve spelled out here, we continue to marvel at what Grinnell continues to achieve, every day, every year, every decade. No one else thinks quite like Grinnellians. No one else approaches the world with precisely the same combination of intelligent skepticism and boundless hope. No one else “loses it” in quite the same way when they see a stranger wearing a Grinnell t-shirt.

We want to acknowledge how much Grinnellians seek to protect their college from the kind of messaging misadventure that occurred just a few years ago. But we also hope to demonstrate how the community’s ensuing resistance to articulating any identity—having no thesis—actually makes the college more vulnerable on a variety of issues.

Focus group members described the failure of *No Limits*:
The main arguments I heard against No Limits were that we’re trying to place ourselves in a global context, dealing with things like ecological responsibility and sustainability, and No Limits is pretty much the opposite of what we’re trying to convey there. Second, we were always negotiating with students about how an open curriculum doesn’t mean you can do whatever the hell you want. And No Limits is saying, “No, it’s whatever the hell you want.” We ended up having to advise against that all the time. Then there was the student services and wellness perspective, where they were saying, “Whoa, limits, limits.” –faculty member

On the No Limits campaign, the faculty was pretty clear that this was not a good way to go. We had a special faculty meeting about this, and there were some defenders, but far more people said, “This is ridiculous. We don’t want to have our students think this way, and we don’t want to think this way about the institution.” –faculty member

We had No Limits printed 40 times on the front cover of our course catalog. The faculty members said, “This is a book of limits, so I’m going to cross out ‘no’ in every spot on the cover of the catalog.” I remember sitting with people crossing out “no” all over the course catalog. –faculty member

For the majority of our interviewees, especially among the faculty, No Limits felt inappropriate, even counter, to Grinnell’s educational philosophy. We heard that the development process contributed heavily to that sense of dissonance:

It was too late for us to object to the No Limits campaign. We were shown it when the slick brochures were going out. –faculty member

The day after I first saw the No Limits brochure, I emailed President Osgood, “This is bad.” So he said, “Come talk to me.” I go to his office and he’s got four or five other administrators with him sitting around the table. They said, “We tested this. Everybody loves it.” So I said, “Okay.” –faculty member

No faculty member that I ever found remembered being talked to about No Limits. –faculty member

Faculty members, in particular, came to feel that the previous administration had imposed the No Limits campaign upon them without their consent. This felt especially frustrating to a community so deeply invested—intellectually and emotionally—in the college:

There’s a self-sufficiency here. We’re trying to create a culture where we do things for ourselves. It’s offensive that some consultant out there supposedly knows Grinnell a whole lot better than we do. –faculty member

I don’t know why Grinnell hired outside consultants when there is an amazing faculty here who love Grinnell and have seen Grinnell through worse and better times. They can give the advice that people need about presenting Grinnell to the public. –student
A lot of faculty have built this as their home. They’re here administration after administration after administration. If you hand them something that they see as a completed deal, even if it’s right, they’ll resist it because you just shoved something down their throat when they’re the ones who have the strongest ownership of the college over time. You have faculty and staff who have 30 years invested in this place. –staff member

The faculty will often not react well if they perceive the college moving away from the direction they’re most comfortable in, or leaving behind the thing that they care most about. –staff member

Grinnell celebrates difference and individuality. One has the ability to not only express individuality, but a safe space to do that, where other people should respect it. Perhaps people don’t want others telling them what Grinnell means to them. –staff member

Just as Grinnellians rightly insist on taking charge of their own education, community members—also rightly—do not want their own identity handed to them by outsiders. This resistance, heightened by the still-painful wounds of No Limits, extends to a strong suspicion of marketing efforts in general, including ours at CRANE.

One outcome of the No Limits experience is that people don’t have a lot of faith that any new campaign will get it right or that it will be relevant or authentic. –staff member

This view helps explain why Grinnell has gone from No Limits to no thesis.

And yet ...

As we’ve suggested repeatedly, the wider world has heard heartbreakingly little about this amazing institution we’ve come to admire. Perhaps even worse, plenty of people think they do understand Grinnell, and aren’t shy about saying so:

I’d like to dispel the idea this is the number one hipster college. That was posted online a few years ago. –student

There is a stereotype about Grinnell students that we all drink, smoke a lot of drugs, and just sit around and talk about global poverty. That’s just not true. –student

I’d like to get rid of the myth that there’s nothing to do here. –student

When I told some of my friends I was going to Grinnell, they said, “There’s nothing to do there. It’s just a bunch of rich white kids smoking.” –student

If nature abhors a vacuum, college-age students delight in it. Nothing offers a more tempting screen on which to project one’s “knowledge” than the blurry, almost-blank space that Grinnell presents to the public. Especially today, when 95 percent of high school students get information about colleges from
social media (source: College Board), resisting marketing doesn’t stop it from occurring—Grinnell merely cedes control of it.

How, then, can Grinnell effectively and authentically take control of the college’s image in the wider world?

In many ways, these paradoxes present cause for profound concern—which the Grinnell community openly shares. And yet, they also represent opportunities, because these paradoxes haven’t occurred randomly: They result, we believe, from insufficiently perceiving, articulating, and harnessing Grinnell’s most singular strengths. In other words, we already possess the raw material to shape a powerful, authentic, and indelible vision of Grinnell’s greatness. So let’s have at it.
IV. From resolving paradoxes to revealing Grinnellian greatness

The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.

—Marcel Proust
In Search of Lost Time

Grinnell’s many paradoxes are, on the one hand, flummoxing, frustrating, at times even infuriating to those who care so deeply about this institution. Despite amazing strengths, the college continues to stumble over its own feet in projecting the national position that Grinnell so clearly deserves. But these paradoxes are also completely resolvable. Not with a snap of the fingers, but through hard work that’s already begun campus-wide.

Despite the past obstacles, practices, and habits that have contributed to these paradoxes, Grinnell has made great strides under the new administration to identify and recruit not just national-class faculty members, but nationally experienced staff members and administrators as well. Adding their talent and professional acumen to the rich and ready mix that already exists at Grinnell signals an important shift.

Unfortunately, this narrative must also touch on what happens when seasoned professionals from highly functioning institutions encounter a Grinnell way of doing things that, frankly, shell-shocks them. The gap between best practices and Grinnell’s status quo create a cognitive dissonance not easily overcome. Therefore, while best intentions, long hours, and an abiding commitment to this college certainly propel efforts forward, improvements come incrementally, slower than anyone would wish. That, in turn, contributes to impatience, even though most everyone we met at Grinnell possesses huge stores of goodwill.

The tipping point has not yet been reached. But the tank is filling. We see these obstacles not only affecting, but at times driving the very idea of institutional identity at Grinnell. Therefore we’d like to offer some ideas—some broad and philosophical, others tactical and granular—to help that tipping point come all the more quickly, and flood the nation with the true, inspiring, and, yes, fascinatingly attractive identity of Grinnell.
V. Big-picture observations and recommendations

Part of our partnership with Grinnell entails spurring the college to new ways of portraying what Grinnell already does so reliably and remarkably: the attributes, customs, and beliefs that probably everyone on campus already knows, but doesn’t know how to describe, or doesn’t know even to mention. Reframing Grinnell’s value proposition often just means reminding stakeholders what we, as third-party observers, find so compelling.

In starting the process of articulating the value proposition that already resides deeply in the college’s institutional DNA, Grinnell must:

• **Turn inwardness inside-out.** Embracing the deeply internal, intensive learning experience that makes Grinnell Grinnell, ensure that all external and intra-institutional communications effectively empathize with every audience. Draw on the powerful experience of “finding oneself” at Grinnell in order to welcome and engage all current and potential Grinnellians.

• **Remember that Grinnell is more interesting as an outlier than as a pack member.** Instead of merely comparing Grinnell to peer institutions, adopting a “me-too,” defensive posture, contrast Grinnell with every competitor to ensure that Grinnell’s differentiating benefits shine through.

• **Shift the perception of Grinnell’s location.** Instead of a “cornfield,” which outsiders tend to see on first glance, use language combining the bracing yet contemplative environment with the subtle beauty of the prairie. In other words, don’t apologize—intrigue.

• **Emphasize self-formation as an intentional effect of Grinnell’s philosophy.** Show how Grinnellians apply a continuous praxis model in every aspect of their education, repeatedly crossing literal and figurative boundaries to seek stimulating experiences, then returning to their prairie home, which is consciously constructed to stimulate deeper thinking on those experiences.

• **Make the case for Grinnellian outcomes.** The education Grinnell commits to as a college—and how graduates apply it in the world—makes visible, tangible differences wherever Grinnellians take it. Show how Grinnellians’ endeavors shape every dimension of society: not only scholarship, culture, service, and politics, but commerce and industry as well.
These precepts offer a big-picture, at times abstract way of viewing the college’s trajectory moving forward. And we know many at Grinnell thirst for more practical advice. What can we do tomorrow, next week, to keep our momentum going? How can my office, my department, my staff, help the common cause? To that end, we offer another tool for both self-analysis and subsequent action.

**Continue, stop, start: A lightning round of practical and tactical advice**

Grinnell, as a whole, stands ready to embrace this list of changes, which are largely operational and logistical. The core values, philosophy, and programs the college espouses and delivers should remain constant. But the way in which Grinnell communicates, operates, and functions outside of teaching and learning must be stronger.

**Continue:**

- acting as a national model for undergraduate education, where potential-filled students engage in uncommonly high levels of discourse, interaction, and research with professors and scholars whose passion is to elevate undergraduates to new heights.

- forging the strong personal connections, in the classroom and across campus, that make Grinnell a transformative, lifelong experience, not just an educational decision for four years.

- professionalizing and empowering Grinnell’s hardworking and mission-passionate staff to do their best work, attracting seasoned people from high-functioning institutions, and adopting important industry best practices and then giving them a singular Grinnellian twist.

- providing students with the generous resources and opportunities that propel them to internships, travel abroad experiences, and research opportunities across the nation and the world.

- inspiring the intense and rewarding intellectual discourse that makes Grinnell one of the top undergraduate institutions sending students on to obtain PhDs.

- engaging alumni in real and meaningful ways, and intensifying alumni relations efforts in order to bring those who hold great affinity for Grinnell more squarely into the giving pipeline.

- meeting and exceeding annual applicant goals.

- deploying President Kington’s media-interview talents frequently in major markets.

- hiring personable, interesting, passionate staff members who are ready and excited to grow and flourish under the right plan and direction.
pushing forward the campaign for financial transparency so faculty member remarks like, “we’re a rich institution, you don’t have to give us any money” fade into the past.

• sharing the evocative and meaningful stories that populate Grinnell Magazine, broadening the scope of those personalized, poignant profiles of Grinnellians-in-action.

• honoring the Grinnell tradition of critical, outside-the-box thinking not simply to be contrary, but for the lifelong benefit of each Grinnellian-in-formation.

Stop:

• using “Midwestern modesty” as an excuse for refusing to tell Grinnell’s unique-to-the-nation story.

• accepting harmful "genre-blind" habits as the status quo. Examples include, but aren’t limited to:

  a) building a new, expensive admissions building without including an appropriate space to welcome visitors, hold information sessions, and conduct group meetings;

  b) expecting visitors to tour Grinnell’s sprawling campus without opportunities for eating, resting, riding in carts for long distances—even without receiving a warm greeting at stops along the way;

  c) featuring dining hall menu items like Beef O’le and Crinkle Cut Carrots front-and-center on the Grinnell homepage;

  d) providing almost no wayfinding to assist first-time visitors trying to navigate campus;

  e) allowing out-of-date intranet habits to dictate new website protocols.

• vastly under-positioning Grinnell’s stellar academic programs with website descriptions more on par with commuter colleges than national liberal arts colleges.

• playing by the liberal arts elite’s self-centered and self-reinforcing rules.

• opting out of competitive positioning entirely on the grounds of distaste.

• underselling the true and unique value of Grinnell by settling for the middle ground of “just another small liberal arts college.”

• giving prospects the cold shoulder with a website that hides Grinnell’s brightest light with genericness, inward-facing information, and poor photography.
• accepting temporary or patchwork fixes to already long-deferred operational and infrastructure problems.

• marketing based on what, fact-stacking, and non-differentiating, easily replicable features.

**Start:**

• changing the rules of how Grinnell communicates, recruits, and resonates with best-fit prospects.

• showing empathy to each prospect, visitor, and person who may encounter Grinnell either on campus, through a publication, or on the website.

• conducting experiential admissions events, where every transaction, presentation, and encounter feels utterly Grinnellian in its clarity of thought, audience engagement, and intelligent discourse.

• formalizing admissions and communications standards, staffing properly, hiring and firing strategically, and working on immediately narrowing the documented perception gulf between Grinnell and the college’s overlap institutions.

• tapping and transferring the collaborative energy that fuels student-professor learning relationships to all areas of the college, most notably operations and faculty-staff-administration relationships.

• providing loyal, hard-working, and well-intentioned staff members with the resources and information they need to succeed on behalf of the college.

• making decisions based on who Grinnell is, as an entire college community, not based on who’s in what office or building or holds what title.

• extending the rich and complex conversation—alive each day on the Grinnell campus—to include the whole college community at intentional, key moments.

• equipping current families with messages and platforms to spread the thesis of Grinnell—soon to gain expression through the CRANE metaconcept—in both informal and formal interactions.

• telling Grinnell’s remarkable student stories and making recruitment messages more about profound, boundary-crossing scholarship and outcomes, less about what, lists, and numbers.

• making Grinnell’s value proposition to families who ultimately choose lesser-quality institutions, because Grinnell failed to communicate the college’s distinctive experience.
supposing all prospective families with the airtight argument they need to defend their decision of Grinnell over other top-tier liberal arts colleges, independent of financial assistance.

Revealing Grinnell’s inherent metaconcept

Grinnell’s paradoxes represent often-brilliant ideas and methods, which have also allowed or engendered some worrisome dysfunction. We believe addressing the troubles, through a shared understanding of Grinnell’s exceptional character and purpose, will help the brilliance to re-emerge.

What if all proud Grinnellians—faculty and staff members, current students and parents, administrators and alumni, even trustees—possessed a singular way of not just talking about Grinnell, but relating to one another? What if instead of information silos and narrow understandings, every person who calls this college home could share the one essential truth they know about Grinnell?

Grinnell’s instinct has always been to march to the beat of its own drummer. And of course, Grinnell must continue standing out rather than fitting in. But some operational and administrative practices obscure the most salient, evocative, and inspiring points about Grinnell’s difference.

What if Grinnell could bring all of the college’s practices up to the level of students’ amazing academic experiences? What if professionalization didn’t mean homogenization, but excelling? The paradoxes we saw around every corner at Grinnell can be seeds for great thoughts: the ways in which the college resolves them aren’t just solutions, but a chance to be great, to leap forward, to re-earn the esteemed reputation for which Grinnellians have long been known.

Grinnellians possess great souls and great minds. And there’s no reason why this college can’t be both great and authentically Grinnellian. Together, we can stop thwarting the college’s own lofty ambitions and harness Grinnell’s greatest distinctions. That work has already begun.
VI. Epilogue: Creative skeptics needed

Creativity is not to be trampled
just because it’s divergent from ordinary views.

—Claire Patterson (Grinnell ’43)
CalTech Oral Histories, 1995

Everything we’ve encountered at Grinnell testifies to the passionate loyalty and discerning intelligence with which Grinnellians see not just their college, but their life’s work. And, rather than an obstacle to overcome, we consider divergent views central to our work with Grinnell. Skepticism without cynicism—the critical yet creative stance that aims to make things better and more true—represents one of the most distinctive aspects of Grinnellian culture. Above all, it is this manner of perceiving and engaging with the world that we want to preserve, celebrate, and share.

So this time around—it’s different. This time, it’s about process, not proclamations. This time, it’s about listening first and doing second. This time, it’s about Grinnell and only Grinnell.

We continued this process on Tuesday, February 25, when our CRANE team discussed the content and implications of this paper with members of the President’s Senior Staff. Now, on March 6 and 7, we share this paper along with our first draft of the Trial Promise Statement with the entire Grinnell community. The Promise Statement delineates our thesis in long form, presenting the intellectual foundation for Grinnell’s shared self-description. Then, the subsequent metaconcept, still to come, distills the essence of our Grinnell thesis into language that can propagate across every corner of campus and take flight from the prairie into the whole world.

We’ve relished our work with Grinnell College from even before we were official partners, and we can’t wait for these exciting and invigorating next steps.

Thank you for inviting us on your complicated, maddening, exhilarating journey of discovery.
Grinnell College Trial Promise Statement

Grinnell is the national liberal arts college where thinking otherwise defines the once-in-a-lifetime intellectual discourse that catalyzes original scholarship, spurs global endeavors, galvanizes internships and fellowships, inspires social justice pursuits, and sets the tone for each student’s ongoing personal and professional transformation into an incisively prepared, critically thinking, and socially conscious human being: a Grinnellian.

Students arrive at Grinnell’s intentional community on the prairie predisposed to independent thought, and quickly establish close relationships with Grinnell’s internationally proven, directly accessible professors. Devoting themselves to undergraduate education and the special demands of the individually advised curriculum, Grinnell faculty members lead students on exciting and relevant intellectual journeys through recurrent curricular coaching, graduate-level research projects, and frequent informal interaction.

Grinnell’s campus life hums at its own idiosyncratic frequency, as insightful staff mentors inspire students to test their limits, take on new responsibilities, and grow in self-knowledge by navigating and shaping the college’s unique self-governing culture. Students from around the world come to view the expansive, subtly beautiful prairie as their place to build academic stamina, make close connections, and engage in authentic self-reflection: here, they fully leverage Grinnell’s astounding resources and engage with a passionate, supportive campus community to embark upon boundary-crossing, perspective-shifting, and career-building experiences across the country and the globe.

Grinnellians emerge from this intellect-sharpening gauntlet exceptionally well-prepared for both graduate school and careers, their nascent thinking-otherwise natures now thoroughly tested, refined, and honed into razor-edged minds and generous, empathic spirits which they use in concert to interpret, navigate, and influence the world.