

A Year of Listening Exploring New Heights at Colorado College

By Jill Tiefenthaler, President

When I arrived at Colorado College last summer, many people asked what drew me here. I explained that the unique combination of strength and ambition, along with a sense of adventure, was irresistible! Over the course of my first year, many experiences have underscored that first impression. Of course, great new colleagues and warm friendships have only added to the intense attachment I feel for this wonderful place.

We are indeed a college of immense strengths. Our students are truly remarkable. Their confidence, curiosity, innovative spirit, and talent inspire awe and appreciation for all they offer while they are in our midst — and later as alumni who continue to give back to this community. Our faculty members are absolutely committed to undergraduate education both inside and outside of the classroom; they display their wide-ranging pedagogical and research skills in their mastery of the Block Plan. We have dedicated staff members and coaches who are inspired by our mission and who show their commitment to both our students and community in ways large and small.

Bold action is part of our history. We were one of the first liberal arts colleges in the West, and we developed our distinctive Block Plan in 1970. Our entrepreneurial and innovative spirit continues to permeate today through creative team-taught courses, student endeavors like Venture Grants, blocks abroad, and block breaks. These learning experiences set our alumni apart as independent-minded leaders in their fields.

Another strength is our financial condition. After attending the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents in July 2011, I realized just how strong we are relative to most colleges and universities. While many of our nation's public and private institutions are struggling, Colorado College has weathered the economic crisis thanks to farsighted decisions made by previous leaders.

Early on in my tenure, I realized that I could begin my work with no better foundation than a deep understanding of what the people who make up this special place believe about the strengths, challenges, opportunities, and aspirations that will determine how we move into the future. And so I spent my first year listening to our students, faculty, staff, trustees, alumni, parents, and friends.

And what a great experience it was! Over dessert at the President's House, student government leaders shared their dreams with me. Sitting down to lunch with international students, I learned more about the challenges they face. Meeting with students who live off campus, I heard more stories about community involvement and inspiring professors. Through formal and informal conversations with faculty and staff colleagues, I learned about the Block Plan and its implications, and then I learned even more when I co-taught a block myself. In the 13 cities that made up my

listening tour, I met hundreds of engaged alumni and parents who care enough about CC to provide their input and explore new ideas.

My opportunity this year to think about Colorado College in the context of higher education in the U.S has been another great experience. While our faculty and students continue to distinguish themselves, we and our peer institutions across the nation are encountering important questions about the changing demographics of future students, new forms of learning approaches made possible by technology and digital resources, the shape and feel of the distinctively American undergraduate residential experience, and the considerable economic challenges that all sides of higher education — institutions, students, and families — are experiencing. The issues present us with compelling questions about how liberal arts colleges will draw on these forces and how we'll evolve while maintaining our distinctiveness.

In this article, I will share what I've learned during the year's many conversations, place this knowledge within the broader context of a residential liberal arts education, and explore some strategic approaches in light of these realities. I offer these ideas with gratitude to those who have shared their experiences and insights over this last year, and with great eagerness for our work ahead.

The Learning Adventure

Colorado College attracts a certain type of learner: one who sees higher education as an adventure, one who takes pride in being independent and free-spirited, and one who is up to the challenge of the Block Plan. This is just one of the insights I gained during my conversations with students, faculty, and staff on campus and over the course of visiting alumni and parents in Colorado Springs, Boulder, Denver, Boston, Minneapolis, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Greenwich, Conn., and New York City. I was interested in learning more about how we are distinctive from other colleges in the U.S., as well as identifying areas for improvement and ideas that should guide us as we offer an outstanding liberal arts education to future generations of students. After analyzing the responses — more than 2,000 comments in all — we have identified some common themes that will inform our planning work in the year ahead.

Pillars of Strength

Across our conversations, five themes emerged that reflect a consensus on what makes Colorado College the outstanding institution it is. **First, our students are our greatest asset.** They arrive here in search of a learning experience that they know will be as unique as it is rigorous. Once they are here, their personal and intellectual explorations propel the college forward and renew the bold determination of our community. “We have an insanely interesting and empowered student body and wonderful opportunities to inspire that,” said a Denver grad.

Throughout my talks with faculty and staff I heard how our amazing students contribute to our learning environment in fluid and creative ways. Faculty and staff welcome and appreciate the diversity the student body represents and value their connections with students. According to one faculty member, “our students have an adventurous spirit, a

willingness to try anything and a serious engagement with art that is bigger than any of us.” My talks on campus suggest that other faculty and members of the staff agree.

A second theme is that our faculty and staff make a lasting impact on our students and alumni. One student said, “the time and energy faculty give to students demonstrates how much they value us. Professors’ availability and support for students both academically and personally make Colorado College special. In the words of a Boston grad, “The continued passion from teachers for their students had the biggest impact in my CC experiences, and it is what I hope will have the biggest impact on incoming freshmen.”

Other graduates recalled the attention they got from faculty, one acknowledging that he “met some mentors who changed my life” [Online]. Many would wholeheartedly agree with the current student who said, “Much of what I have learned from professors at Colorado College has been through example. The professors’ high standards of academic passion, intellectual engagement, and professional integrity, while expecting the same from students, have shaped me as a scholar and a person.”

Third, we saw overwhelming support for the Block Plan, the hallmark of our educational experience. As our students and graduates know, the Block Plan provides faculty and students with unique flexibility and expansive opportunities for learning. As one grad recalled: “The Block Plan offers an incredible experience with a superior education that sets us apart. The opportunities to gain specialized knowledge and study abroad on the Block Plan are amazing” [Online]. More specifically, I learned that the Block Plan increases our capacity to emphasize undergraduate research and the role of faculty scholars as mentors to students; promote reading, writing, and analytical skills; sustain our investment in the arts; increase our focus on experiential education; and incorporate digital learning across the curriculum. It is clear that this bold experiment has developed into a powerful strength.

Fourth, our constituencies share a clear understanding of the intrinsic value of a residential liberal arts education. This was quite refreshing considering the increase in calls around the country for emphasis on vocational education, certificate training programs, and online education. Rather than moving in these directions, members of our community ask that we continue to provide a liberal arts education. “Don’t become an institution that trains students for jobs. Help them to become critical thinkers, excellent writers, innovative problem solvers,” said one graduate from Minneapolis. Another graduate asked that CC continue to “stretch our students, faculty, and staff to learn more, give more back, and deepen our abilities to live well in (and change) the world” [Online].

I also learned how the residential experience enriches what students learn in class. Opportunities to lead through clubs and other organizations, engage and collaborate with others in the arts, and build relationships with peers through thick and thin strengthen the overall liberal arts education. In addition, our outstanding athletic programs enrich the campus experience by allowing students to learn more about teamwork and healthy

competition by offering a choice of 17 varsity sports, including Division I men's ice hockey and women's soccer, an array of club sports, and a dynamic intramural program.

Fifth, and without question, we are located in one of the most beautiful places in the country, if not the world. The mountains, canyonlands, and sand dunes of the Southwest provide a stunning environment in which to immerse oneself in nature and to reflect on our shared sense of stewardship over resources. One Denver grad noted that we have the combination of “top-notch academics taught in an adventurous way in a beautiful unique setting.” Some may describe our location as remote given that we are the only private liberal arts college in the Rockies, but time after time we gain clear strategic advantage with our unique setting in the mountains and our adventurous spirit. “What attracted me and my daughter was the concept of going on an adventure,” said a New York parent.

Building on Strengths

Along with the beauty of our natural setting, our environment must also be welcoming and inclusive to all students, faculty, and staff to ensure our academic excellence. Throughout our conversations, people talked about the need to increase campus diversity in its many forms. Many rightly pointed out that a multiplicity of backgrounds, perspectives, and opinions are critical to a first-rate liberal arts education. We should be creating “global thinkers,” said a Boston grad, referring to students who hone skills such as multidisciplinary collaboration and teamwork, as well as mastery of new technologies, to be prepared for a rapidly changing global context. Representing a diversity of backgrounds and opinions, faculty should teach from their experiences as well as their scholarship, helping students to appreciate different perspectives at the same time as they incorporate new ideas and approaches.

In addition to recruiting students, faculty, and staff from a broader base, many suggested that we find ways to make the college accessible to individuals from a wider range of backgrounds, enroll more first-generation students, and clearly articulate the values of the Block Plan to a broader audience. We should preserve our flexible approach to admissions and do even more to strengthen our capacity to use financial aid to help our students and keep our student profile strong. This commitment involves a larger responsibility to ethical thinking and accountability that marks all we do.

Individuals also recommended enhancing the Block Plan so that it provides more flexibility and engages students even more fully. Faculty suggested better structures to support cross-disciplinary learning and “stringing or combining blocks to allow for deeper learning across blocks.” Other ideas from faculty related to bringing in distinguished scholars or experts to teach blocks, more opportunities for team teaching and interdisciplinary teaching programs, programs to support innovative teaching, and more interaction with the local community and overseas (for example, teaching in the community and establishing a sister institution in locations where significant numbers of alumni live).

Students and alumni discussed ideas related to a liberal arts education and ways to bridge the gap between the campus experience and future careers. A grad noted, “There needs to

be a common sense and practical bent, along with superior problem-solving skills that serve better in the outside world than necessarily in the classroom. This is how we adapt to the changing world” [Online].

Many respondents expressed the need for more attention to essential life skills and liberal arts values as critical components of career development. “Providing strong guidance on career skills and professionalism doesn’t need to be a casualty of a liberal arts education,” said one grad [New York]. To align the liberal arts more closely with careers, students should be able to connect research experiences to career opportunities and network routinely with other alumni. This approach would not only help our students develop professional associations, but also prepare them as alumni for eventual transitions to new career opportunities. In addition, career counseling services could help students “bridge the gap between education, career and service” [Washington, D.C.] and develop “lifetimes” of meaningful work. It was gratifying to see so many of you talk passionately about the need for our graduates to think about their life’s work as a matter of principle and ethical engagement.

Seeking closer connections in the community was another frequently heard suggestion. Just as technology is breaking down traditional barriers and allowing greater access to a range of information and services, some suggested that we encourage more linkages to Colorado Springs and our surrounding communities through increased opportunities for service and alliances with local businesses, community organizations, and schools. For example, a Portland grad encouraged us to “create a strong network of smart, easy going people who provide support for each other.” Another grad told us to “identify, design, and implement (and empower) the tools and talents necessary to engage our entire CC community for student success and community enlightenment.”

We also heard a great deal about the need for the college to become more visible and well known — in fact, some alumni stressed the importance of being known on a global scale. Ideas that came forward during our visits ranged from encouraging faculty to build local connections through academic programs to bringing great artists from around the world and involving them in the community. Many agree that we should “bring the community to the college” while “letting the world know of our stellar ways of teaching and learning” [Colorado Springs].

Opportunities and Challenges for Higher Education in the U.S.

As we consider the important insights gained from the Year of Listening, we also need to think about some opportunities and challenges influencing higher education across the country — and the liberal arts sector in particular. This is a tumultuous time in higher education for a number of reasons. Despite some improvements to the economy, institutions and families are still affected by the 2008 financial crisis. A “new normal” has kicked in as individuals and institutions realize that success in the years ahead requires a strong foundation as well as nimbleness and adaptability in facing change. Colorado College is fortunate to have such strengths as we address two important questions: How do we capitalize on our traditional strengths to become an even stronger

institution in this time of change? How do we extend our reach and relevance in today's world?

By embracing change, we protect our core values and keep them relevant in the world. The distinctively American undergraduate residential experience is viewed the world over as the best preparation for young men and women to become well-rounded — and well-grounded — leaders. A recent national study by the Annapolis Group (a consortium of 130 leading residential liberal arts institutions including Colorado College) finds that alumni of residential liberal arts colleges feel they are better prepared than alumni of private or public universities for their first job, post-graduate studies, and a satisfying career in a rapidly changing world. Liberal arts college graduates also are more likely to rate their college as highly effective at helping them learn to write and speak effectively, and are more likely to graduate in four years or less than graduates of both private and public universities. The study supports my belief that a liberal arts education grounded in the residential experience educates the whole person and prepares students to excel in a range of careers and, even more importantly, live a life rich with meaning and purpose.

Colorado College competes well with top institutions for students, faculty and staff. Our application numbers and selectivity (at 5,570 and 23 percent, respectively) are at an all-time high, and we continue to invest in financial aid, with 45 percent of students receiving institutional aid. In terms of diversity, our Fall 2012 entering class will include 27 percent students of color, 7 percent international, and students from 44 states and 18 countries.

However, to thrive in this new climate of change we must manage the challenges facing all institutions today. Competition is increasing for the world's top students, who represent a more diverse group than ever before. Rising tuition and concerns over affordability are driving a national conversation about higher education. Other pressing issues involve globalization, such as managing international enrollment and offering excellent study-abroad experiences, and the need to adapt to new technologies in and out of class, including distance learning, with a special focus on the learning styles of today's generation of students.

The number of high school graduates is declining between now and 2018, and more of these students come from a wider range of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Whereas in the past we've seen many students whose parents attended college and whose background prepared them to make a smooth transition to college, we now expect to see more first-generation college students who may need different kinds of support and resources in the beginning of their academic careers. These students will enrich our campus with their experiences and perspectives. Our responsibility is to ensure that they succeed by providing greater financial aid and a supportive infrastructure that can help them excel in what can be a very challenging environment.

Student loan debt represents a tremendous burden on students and families, especially first-generation students and those from diverse backgrounds. The average student debt in the U.S. for those graduating in 2010 topped \$25,000, up 5 percent from the previous

year. Currently, the college has a relatively low percentage of students receiving need-based financial aid (compared to peer liberal arts colleges) and the average grant is at the median. Loans were about \$7,000 lower than the national average, with a default rate of approximately 1.5 percent (compared to 8.8 percent nationally). Going forward, we hope that Colorado College will appear even more attractive to families, especially with students being able to receive generous financial aid and graduate in four years due to smaller class sizes and greater availability of courses than most public universities.

Beyond the cost of tuition, room, and board, students are also faced with expenses related to a full educational experience such as study abroad. In an increasingly global world, study-abroad programs are no longer a luxury, but necessary to a well-rounded educational experience. As Ben Wildavsky wrote in “The Great Brain Race: How Global Universities Are Reshaping the World” (Princeton University Press, 2010): “More than ever, the key to innovation and economic growth will lie in the freest possible movement of people and ideas—on campus and beyond.” With 81 percent of students studying abroad while at Colorado College, we are recognized as a national leader in international education. We also have a responsibility to help all students pursue this path abroad, as well as attend the college from their home countries. The Chronicle of Higher Education reported recently that three million students worldwide now study outside their home countries — a 57 percent increase in the past decade — and this number could almost triple by 2025. International branch campuses have seen similarly rapid growth, with more than 160 operating around the world.

In addition to these global educational experiences, cross-border research collaborations have more than doubled in 20 years and are expected to continue to grow. For example, partnerships between leading U.S. universities and institutions in Asia and Europe are expanding quickly. As new global institutions and partnerships become the norm, liberal arts colleges need to define their role in an increasingly competitive global market. Fortunately, we have stunning assets on which to build. When governments and educational institutions outside the West seek advice about improving higher learning in their societies, they ask how to teach students to think critically, ease conflict and resolve questions with creative solutions. In other words, they ask how to teach the liberal arts.

Presently, most of our students are members of a generation known as Millennials (born between 1980 and 2000), and they are having a profound impact on our campuses. Many of these students have grown up with very involved parents who scheduled their children’s lives and activities to an unprecedented degree, and encouraged their children to seek out excellence in school and college. As a result, many Millennials have high expectations for the future and are confident they will succeed; at the same time, they face a much more uncertain world and economic climate than their parents.

Yet, even as their resilience is being tested by a shaky job market, numerous reports and studies indicate that Millennials are extremely civic-minded and determined to make positive contributions to society and environmental sustainability. For example, 86 percent of Millennials believe it is important to engage in work that gives something back. Millennials take race and gender equality as givens, are tolerant of religious and

family diversity, have open attitudes about immigration, and show less interest in fighting over divisive social issues of the past. This should be music to our ears.

In a short time, our students will represent the first generation of “digital natives,” individuals who have grown up with technology involving social media and constant connectivity. This generation is always plugged in. Most will have grown up with a mobile device such as a smartphone, video iPod, or tablet device. So another external pressure point for the college relates to the inescapable presence of technology in the lives of these students, which was confirmed by a recent study in the Chronicle of Higher Education reporting that access to technology will figure increasingly into the decisions students make about higher education.

This generation is also actively engaged in their own learning, by video and game simulation, especially in K-12, and digital texts throughout their years in school. Because they have learned differently from past generations, they are naturals at using technology to access information and interact with others. At the same time, the pressures of social media cause them to crave face-to-face interaction even more, which is likely to make a residential liberal arts experience even more rewarding. For these reasons, they are requiring us to rethink how we educate them and meet their other needs.

For example, as we prepare students for careers we must keep in mind that Millennials do not follow the cultural norms that defined the workplace for previous generations. Millennials expect to work in teams, want close relationships with supervisors, expect transparency and open communication, and are less likely to follow the rules of established work-place hierarchies and social status differences among leaders, employees, and clients. Technology has given them unprecedented access to information, and they want a flexible work environment that encourages them to engage their knowledge and skills in creative ways. Unlike the Baby Boomers who helped define the 60-hour workweek, Millennials desire more balance between work and life and time to pursue and develop their professional and personal interests.

So how does Colorado College explain to this new generation that the learning environment we offer is a very special place? Like other excellent liberal arts colleges, we provide opportunities for faculty to mentor students closely, for students to realize their full potential, for an environment that integrates technology and global awareness and moral responsibility at the heart of everything we do.

However, we go one step further by offering an adaptable, flexible curriculum in a natural environment that lends itself to reflection and adventure. As one student remarked, “The intensity of taking only one course at a time has allowed me to become totally absorbed in my studies and provided our class with the experience of taking a trip that brought everything to life.” With the Block Plan, students can find themselves traveling the Rio Grande to learn about the Pueblo Revolt, or roaming the vast Wadi Rum desert in Jordan, or hiking down from Petra as part of the Mediterranean semester abroad.

Our challenge is to extend our Block Plan and incredibly flexible curriculum to increase our students' already intense engagement with faculty and shake up the curriculum with innovative pedagogy that encourages students to apply their liberal arts experience to the community and world, whether it is a particular passion, service project, social issue, or possible career. Making connections across disciplines is at the heart of innovation—it's also the best path to solving some of our world's most complex problems.

The new era of technology also presents an opportunity to re-think and re-design our classrooms, labs, and libraries (for example, libraries are becoming much less about warehousing books and much more about providing space and tools for collaboration), as well as technology-related areas in student recruitment, student services, and administrative information systems. Technology challenges us by offering new opportunities to enrich the classroom experience and lessen the distance among our students, alumni, prospective students and employers. It is up to us to determine how we will respond.

Three Strategies for the Future

Informed by our conversations and research during the Year of Listening, three promising strategies are taking shape to guide our next stage of development. Increasing our focus on engaged teaching and learning, and emphasizing our distinctive place in the world both offer great advantages in terms of building on current strengths. The third strategy — extending our reach — will develop a powerful new asset for the years ahead.

Engaged Teaching and Learning

Building on the strengths of our remarkable curriculum and Block Plan, we aim to take further steps to support engaged teaching and learning during our next phase of development. In this era of increased internationalization, changing demographics of students, and new forms of learning approaches made possible by technological innovations, we realize that a flexible, nimble approach to planning allows us to keep abreast of changes and offer a rich, dynamic learning experience. The following questions are designed to guide our conversations about this goal and our future investment in this defining value.

How can we make the most of all the time our students spend with us? The four years our students spend with us in our residential learning environment are among the most formative years of their lives. We not only have an opportunity to impart knowledge and lessons related to the liberal arts, but also to model them in our approach to learning and community building. Building on our already impressive base, how can we extend the curriculum and Block Plan, offering an even stronger and more innovative academic residential experience?

What are the next steps as our faculty continue to move from oracle to mentor in the classroom and lab? The mentor/coach model of instruction, as opposed to the lecturer/oracle model, is a more active, collaborative form of learning that the Block Plan

naturally supports. Because it encourages the co-creation of knowledge and understanding rather than just the consumption of knowledge, it applies quite well to the current generation of students who are independent, engaged learners. It also lends itself to team-teaching, peer-to-peer learning, collaboration with other schools and visiting scholars, digital forms of instruction, and engaged learning outside the classroom. As we investigate these approaches more closely, what other innovative forms of teaching should we explore and embrace?

How can we do more to support faculty and students as they pursue scholarship and research? The college is known for its research partnerships between faculty and students, one of the hallmarks of a top-notch liberal arts program. Undergraduate research offers students a chance to work one-on-one with faculty and gain a close-up look at knowledge production. For those students going on to graduate or professional schools, it's an invaluable experience. As we seek to promote this form of activity even more, how can we help more faculty and students extend their work from the campus to the community and field? How can we support more research on the Rocky Mountain region and the Southwest, two strands of scholarship that we prize highly? What resources and forms of support would secure our position as the best place in the world to pursue this form of engagement?

Considering our aspirations for engaged teaching, participatory learning, and more collaborative scholarship, what forms of technology should we acquire and support? The current and upcoming generation of students, Millennials and digital natives, have high expectations about a learning environment that incorporates the latest technology and resources. Indeed, many of them have benefited from digital resources and the latest technology since elementary school. How can we meet their needs in the classroom and use our digital investment to improve other programs (for example, online library resources, career development)? How do we support our faculty as they incorporate appropriate technology and multimedia in the classroom?

How can we help students and faculty do more to expand the lesson of the liberal arts to life questions and career development? Students must now prepare for a lifetime of learning and multiple job opportunities, requiring a strong intellectual and ethical foundation. Life skills such as critical inquiry, respect for divergent points of view, measuring risk and making judgments about conditions for proceeding, constructing a culture of trust and transparency, and the ability to communicate clearly are more important than ever as people must sift through more information in a diverse, rapidly changing society. What practices on campus will model these skills for our students? What forms of career development will help students integrate liberal learning and career aspirations during college and beyond? How can our programs do more to connect current students with alumni, creating a seamless connection and valuable networking support system? What resources should be available to our graduates and how can we help them stay better connected to the college?

What do these changes mean for the physical campus? As our programs become more nimble and flexible, so too will our spaces need to reflect this shift. The days are over

when students learn behind closed doors, usually without ever leaving their seats. Today's faculty members address a range of learning styles with a range of approaches that involve exploring, active problem-solving, experimenting, collaborating, transferring meaning to other situations to improve understanding — with lots of evolving and improvising in between. What does this mean for our classrooms, labs, and libraries? How should residential areas be altered to contribute more prominently?

A Distinctive Place of Learning

Over the years, I have talked with many liberal arts college graduates — doctors, teachers, lawyers, artists, those in business and finance — and what they say confirms my own personal experience. Some of the best memories, some of the most influential impressions, come from a close relationship with a faculty or staff mentor or an illuminating experience in a seminar, study group, summer research, or study abroad program. These special moments of engaging in an intellectual community, living the life of the mind while in college, can change one's life.

As the British philosopher Michael Oakeshott told a crowd on the occasion of Colorado College's centennial in 1974, "Each of us is born in a corner of the earth and at a particular moment in historic time, lapped round with locality. But school and university are places apart where a declared learner is emancipated from the limitations of his local circumstances and from wants he may happen to have acquired, and is moved by intimations of what he has never yet dreamed."

While the virtual community is capturing headlines and tweets these days, these "places apart" are found in a physical environment enriched by face-to-face interaction and by our shared responsibility to sustain that environment into the future. It's very likely that this sense of place will become even more important to the next generation of students as they balance their virtual mobility with a deeper, more enduring awareness of physical space and their place in that space. Given that, we are fortunate indeed to have this locus of learning with its natural beauty and strong community. We gain immeasurably because Colorado College inspires a sense of shared adventure and individual entrepreneurial spirit, a ruggedness combined with a reflective culture.

As our students represent more diversity and their lives revolve more around social media, how can the residential experience help them develop and maintain relationships, and live out the core values of the college? Research shows that a positive residential experience greatly enhances the value of a college education. Indeed, many of our alumni's most important memories relate back to relationships forged in our residence halls. How can the residential experience do even more to enrich learning and individual development during a student's time here?

How can we benefit from our location in the Southwest as we offer one of the country's premier liberal arts experiences? Spanning parts of seven states and northern Mexico, the diversity of Southwest landscapes and cultures rivals few other regions on the globe. This blend of peoples and histories — of literature, art, music, dance — provides excellent opportunities for research and personal enrichment.

Programs such as Southwest studies, the Public Interest Fellowship Program, and the State of the Rockies curriculum already take advantage of resources in the region; how can we build on these activities?

As we become even more aware of the need to sustain the health of our physical environment, how can we use the undergraduate experience to instill life-long habits of environmental conservation and stewardship? How can we do even more to protect the physical resources that will sustain the college in the future? In 2007, our students rallied to pursue a more sustainable campus. As a direct result of their efforts and the thoughtful leadership of the board and the administration, the college developed a sustainability plan. This “living document” continues to guide our goal to reduce our carbon footprint and, of ultimately, becoming carbon-regenerative and a net energy producer. Through initiatives such as the organic garden, EcoFund campus grants, LEED-certified buildings, The Preserve natural café, and the living/learning Synergy House, our community is continuing to nurture the core value of creating a sense of place and an ethic of environmental sustainability. What other practices and programs can contribute to a sustainable community and promote healthy living among all the residents of the campus?

How can we increase our presence as a critical strategic element of Colorado Springs? Although we are greatly influenced by the Rockies and the West, our city is our immediate setting and sometimes our classroom. Based on good work by the college over the past 20 years, the newly formed Collaborative for Community Engagement challenges students and faculty to integrate rigorous liberal arts scholarship with collaborative community-based work in ways that strengthen and transform both in the process. Recently our students presented their vision for downtown Colorado Springs as an ecosystem requiring economic and ecological balance to the city council. Our aim is to build more partnerships like these that are mutually beneficial while providing students with research projects, career opportunities and mentoring from community members. How can we do more to integrate the learning experience with the Colorado Springs community? What new alliances could help students develop as leaders and prepare them to be citizens who make a difference?

How can our alumni be more active and engaged? Our alumni and parents are vitally important to our community, but many live far away from campus. Approximately half of our alumni live more than 1,000 miles from us, creating a huge challenge to keeping them engaged. How can we use new technology as well as provide other creative ways to extend our place of learning and connect our various constituencies?

Extending our Reach

Our alumni often ask how we can become more visible and better known for the high quality of our educational experience. We can extend our reach and reputation beyond our immediate area by highlighting ways that we contribute to the world of knowledge and the broader society. For example, we can begin by building on two of our current strengths — the Block Plan and our place as the liberal arts destination in the Southwest.

Several people have suggested that we leverage the Block Plan to create an institute on pedagogy that focuses on the engaged learner idea and experiential education, designing programs that become a model in higher education. Others have recommended that we draw more attention to our intellectual community by hosting more research activities, conferences, and institutes that focus on the Southwest. Our area also hosts some of the world's premier sports organizations as well as five military installations, providing a range of opportunities for partnerships.

How can we be better known for what we do? As a small liberal arts institution, we offer an experience that oftentimes gets lost in the buzz of sound bites. How can we expand our identity as a place that is valued — and recognized widely — for its contributions to broader knowledge and service? What is our particular niche in developing and applying knowledge? As part of expanding our reach, how can we provide more support to our faculty so that they can develop and share their work?

How can our entrepreneurial spirit extend our reach? Just as we encourage our students to take the initiative and seek out new opportunities, greater flexibility in the college will allow us to move into areas that can benefit our academic programs. For example, should we consider new graduate programs or other forms of credentials that would benefit other constituencies while also providing new revenue streams? What other innovative ideas could open up intriguing new possibilities for the college?

Should we consider establishing a physical location in another part of the U.S. or the world? A growing trend in higher education is to open centers or satellites in other locations to provide special academic and outreach opportunities to students and faculty, as well as alumni. If the college were to establish another geographical presence, would an optimal location be Washington, D.C., Denver, or elsewhere?

Building Blocks and Next Steps

As we move from the Year of Listening to more focused work on our strategic plan, we expect creativity and flexibility to be at the heart of the “new normal” that defines the college. By finding new ways to capitalize on our strengths, particularly the Block Plan and our unique place, we will attract top students from around the world who seek an engaging liberal arts experience with a distinctive Southwest flavor. We have the advantage of appealing to individuals who are looking for a bit of adventure as part of their academic pursuits — who want to pursue living and learning on equal terms. Once they are here, we will help them prepare to be lifelong learners and leaders in the global community.

To shape this adventure, we will use new technologies and opportunities outside the classroom, whether integrating academics with on-site work at a local nonprofit organization or with experiences at a remote village on the other side of the world. As we expand our reach and reputation, we will call on our alumni to serve as mentors and role models for students and to help ensure that the college has the resources it needs to support students and faculty in their quest for knowledge and service.

Recently the Board of Trustees expanded its service to the college by targeting a few projects with high strategic significance. Small teams of board members and in some cases faculty and staff are leading this effort. These teams are designed to work intensively for a short time (usually six months to a year), increase their knowledge of the topic as part of their charge, and give specific advice on the questions under consideration. For example, one team has recommended a process to follow for the upcoming strategic planning. Based on their ideas and input from faculty, staff, and student leaders, we will form three planning groups to engage many community members — including faculty, students, staff, and alumni — in exploring questions like the ones posed above and recommending ways to move forward. We will then integrate the work of these groups to propose a strategic plan.