

PROJECT 2024

May 21, 2024

Big Ideas for Big Challenges: Looking Way Ahead

How do we tackle the major challenges facing higher education in the next decades?
What can we do now, and how do we convince ourselves to do it?

Charge: President Richardson asked Project 2024 to look decades into the future, to focus on the biggest challenges CC will likely face, and to identify ambitious responses we can implement starting now.

1. Ask “How big can we go?” while staying true to our mission and our shared values.
2. Convince the CC community that the gravity of these challenges makes the status quo more dangerous than change.

Summary

Big Challenges

This year, three groups composed of students, staff, and faculty considered three challenges.

1. The financial model/demographics/access
2. Online learning/digital wellness/AI
3. Preparing students for 2055

This report combines their work and identifies a set of interlocking objectives and actions.

Big Ideas

Secure CC’s future. These Big Ideas serve the main goal: securing CC’s future in the face of serious challenges. We must make it a collective priority to fortify liberal learning, excellence, and access for the decades ahead. We need to think big and think forward to 2055 and beyond.

Recommendations

1. **Reduce our reliance on tuition.** How close to 50% or less can we get in six years?¹
 - a. Explore **additional and innovative sources of revenue.**
 - b. Increase the **annual fund and the endowment.**
 - c. Curtail the growth of **costs** through careful planning and prioritization.

¹ Six years or the end of the next capital campaign. See these two documents: a preliminary analysis of Long Life Learning and Additional Revenue options and the Finances/Demographics/Access report for specific ideas in each category.

2. Stand firm on **the liberal arts**

- a. Feature interdisciplinary learning, a way of knowing unique to the liberal arts.
- b. Emphasize the ways liberal learning helps students achieve personally satisfying lives and lives of consequence beyond themselves.

3. Extend the boundaries of **learning beyond graduation and to the community**.

- a. Leverage online delivery and our location to increase long life learning opportunities for alums and members of the community. Consider mini-blocks, workshops, and virtual access to CC events.
- b. Explore post bac certificates and degrees, certificate programs, and short-course skill-building classes targeting alums and others as they change careers.
- c. Consider partnerships with other colleges to expand virtual offerings in different formats for alums and the community.

4. **Prepare students now for 2055**

- a. Stress transdisciplinary thinking.
- b. Ensure digital competence and a knowledge of AI sufficient to use it wisely, responsibly, and with a critical eye to its limits.
- c. Encourage healthy relationships with technology by integrating more “low-tech” classes into the curriculum and considering no-tech periods (NSO, for example).

Explanations

The nature of the challenges:

1. As we raise **tuition**, the number of families who can afford CC declines.²
2. That drop coincides with a **marked decrease in the number of 18-year-olds** in the population beginning in 2026.³

²2024-2025, the cost of attendance is \$91,154 (without health insurance; \$94,866 with it). Tuition is \$70,244. VP of Enrollment Mark Hatch and VP for Finance Lori Seager’s presentation on Higher Education Finance, October 16, 2023 on FEC’s Canvas site: <https://canvas.coloradocollege.edu/courses/30050>.

³Carey, Kevin T, “The incredible shrinking future of college,” VOX, Nov. 21, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/23428166/college-enrollment-population-education-crash> The drop may be less dramatic in the Southwest and less so for “nationally recognized 4-year institutions,” and even less for schools perceived as “elite”. Professor Jessica Hoel’s analysis of CC’s finances and the “demographic cliff’s” impact at CC at the March 18, 2024 faculty meeting. <https://canvas.coloradocollege.edu/courses/30050>.

3. Distrust of higher education in general and **skepticism about the relevance of liberal arts degrees** in particular has not abated. For the skeptics, certifications provide increasingly attractive alternatives to bachelors' degrees of any sort.

4. As cheaper, more convenient, and equally prestigious online options multiply, we're seeing the ranks of residential colleges thin. CC is not likely to be as seriously affected, but it needs to strike a thoughtful balance between **online instruction** and the in-person learning it features.

5. Advocates argue that the liberal arts reinforce the skills students need to navigate a changing world, including critical and analytical thinking; complex problem solving; and writing skills. How will **AI** affect the acquisition and the value of those skills?

6. The **Block Plan** arguably gives us an edge. We tout our small classes and intense and collaborative learning. Will a system conceived in and for the late 1960s continue to appeal to and serve Gen Z and their successors, Gen Alpha (born 2010-25)?

Recommendations: details and rationale

1. Reduce our reliance on tuition.

Tuition dependence at a group of sixteen peer schools varies from a high of 81.8% to a low of 43.8% (FY2022). On average tuition supplied 62.5% of budgets at these schools.

The figure for CC was 61.0% in FY2022. Currently Finance and Administration reports that 65% of our budget comes from tuition.⁴

To get to 50% reliance on tuition requires adding \$30 million to the budget.⁵ Achieving that goal will take sustained effort, but we see opportunities to make significant progress over the next six years.

We recommend starting by containing growth in expenses and focusing tuition increases on supporting core programs and commitments, including recruiting and retaining outstanding faculty and staff. Over the next two to three years, we can also develop, vet, and begin to implement supplementary revenue initiatives and programs for long life learning.

In this initial phase, we should intensify our efforts to increase annual fund contributions and plan for the coming capital campaign.

In years four through six, we recommend concentrating our efforts on expanding long life learning and new revenue initiatives, increasing the annual fund, and on a major capital campaign designed to expand our endowment substantially.⁶

⁴ "Tuition Dependency" Confidential document on CC and Peer College Tuition Dependency. Over the period FY2013-FY2022, our rate varied from a low of 57% in FY2015 to a high of 62.8% in FY2021. The document defined tuition dependency as the ratio of gross tuition revenue to total gross revenue. Lori Seager, report to faculty, October 16, 2023, FEC's Canvas site: <https://canvas.coloradocollege.edu/courses/30050>.

⁵ A 15% reduction of a \$200,000,000 budget equals \$30,000,000.

⁶ See the *Demographics, Access and the Financial Model Committee Report*.

2. Stand firm on **the liberal arts**

The committee on Preparing Our Students for 2055 acknowledged the pressure to shift curricular focus and resources toward fields seen as providing a sure path to employment and away from those (mainly in the humanities) associated with self-fulfillment or enjoyment.

They challenge that binary. All fields, they argue, promote “analytic rigor, cognitive acuity, problem-solving, creativity, reasoning, and proficiency in writing.” Exposure to multiple disciplines, the hallmark of the liberal arts, prepares students for the many careers they’re likely to hold over their working lives.⁷

Looking toward 2055, the best and the boldest thing CC can do, the group concludes, is “not to change or lessen our commitment to liberal arts education.”⁸

3. Extend **learning beyond graduation and to the community.**

Current graduates will live longer, work longer, and change careers more often. We need to make it clearer that graduates remain part of the CC community. That means that “they should understand that they can continue to participate in the academic life of the college.” We can and should “construct more ‘off and on ramps’ for students after they graduate, providing opportunities to develop skills and take courses relevant to their changing careers or for the pleasure of learning.

These opportunities feature the expertise of faculty, staff, and alums. They could be virtual or in person; in the form of a lecture, a workshop, or mini-block; intended for alums or open to the community. Some could be free, others for a fee.

Building a long life learning program requires broad discussion, thoughtful planning, and step by step implementation.

4. **Prepare students now for 2055**

- a. Stress transdisciplinary thinking.
- b. Ensure digital competence and a knowledge of AI sufficient to use it wisely, responsibly, and with a critical eye to its limits.
- c. Encourage healthy relationships with technology by integrating more “low-tech” classes into the curriculum.

Conclusions

In its first year, 2021-22, Project 2024 asked the college community to consider this question: of these six challenges facing higher education, which are most likely to affect CC? The challenges included Finances, Demographics, Access, Digital Knowledge, Relevance, and Capacity for Change.

⁷ Weise, Michelle R., *Long Life Learning: Preparing for Jobs That Don't Even Exist Yet* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2021). Increased life expectancy makes it possible to imagine a 100-year work life with 20-30 job transitions, 5.

⁸ *Report of the Preparing Our Students for 2055 Committee*, April 17, 2024.

In Year 2, four groups of staff, faculty, students, alums, and parents analyzed the impact of four of these challenges on CC and suggested responses. The challenges were: Finances and access; demographics and access; online learning; and the effects of screens and social media on cognitive function and wellness. [See Long Life Learning and Additional Revenue Sources, Preliminary Research document.]

Building on their work we extended our sights this year, asking “what can and must we do” to secure CC for the decades ahead, for a future we can only partially predict.

The nature and seriousness of the challenges we see will test even the strongest colleges and universities. It is wise to prepare ourselves now for what we know is ahead. It is wiser still to develop the resources and the flexibility to confront the changes we cannot anticipate.

Of the Big Challenges, perhaps the biggest one is convincing ourselves of the urgency and the necessity of acting now to secure the future beyond tomorrow.

“The present,” observes Rebecca Solnit, “is always a place that was unimaginable at some point in the past. If 2023 was unimaginable in 1973, so was 1973 in 1923: this can equip us to recognize that the unimaginability of 2073 does not prove it is impossible. . . . **It’s a reminder that these futures that become the present were made by our actions and inactions.**”⁹

⁹Solnit, Rebecca, “Looking Forward from the Past: 2023 from 1973,” 158-63 in Solnit, Rebecca and Thelma Young-Lutunatabua, eds., *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2023), 163.

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