



Coe in Context: Navigating a Changing Landscape in Higher Education

*This is the first in a series of reflections for alumni and friends of Coe College.
I welcome your comments and observations.*

This communication marks the beginning of a series of letters and conversations I look forward to sharing with alumni and friends who have demonstrated exceptional commitment to Coe College. These essays and Zoom dialogues will provide a transparent look into the shifting landscape of higher education and invite you into a vital conversation: ***how we collectively best shape Coe's path forward — and how your involvement and support can be part of that momentum.*** Our conversation culminates with a special celebration during Homecoming Weekend in the fall of 2026, when we mark an exceptional milestone in the history of the college, Coe's 175th anniversary (or if you prefer, its demisemiseptcentennial).

***"The most
resilient colleges
are those willing
to reimagine
themselves."***

This was a year of remarkable success at Coe College. We celebrated our third Rhodes scholar, Katie Ameku, who next year will carry the Crimson and Gold with her to the University of Oxford. We successfully introduced new programs while refining existing curriculum to best preserve the breadth of opportunities for our students across the liberal arts. Along the way, we notched scores of accomplishments across classrooms, labs, playing fields and performance stages. We have also benefited from robust fundraising and expanded engagement with the Cedar Rapids and Marion communities where we make our home. Finally, Coe's impact on the lives of our students was highlighted by the recently revised Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Learning, which affirmed Coe's

identity as a national school of arts and sciences that provides high access paired with upward mobility. This is the Coe promise and our mission. We open doors of opportunity, setting our graduates up for lives of personal and professional success.

This success unfolds against a backdrop of deep challenge. Across the country, small, private liberal arts colleges like Coe face a rapidly evolving environment driven by demographic headwinds, changing perceptions about the value and role of higher education and new economic realities. Issues of shifting governance at both the national and state level present additional considerations to navigate. Across all industries, we sense an emerging transformative role of technology due to growing implementation and potential of artificial intelligence. As I complete my fourth year as president, I occasionally seek a chance to pause and catch a deep, restorative breath. But instead of slowing down after the pandemic, it feels as if the velocity of change only accelerates, threatening to undermine the distinctive and valuable place occupied by small colleges in the American higher education ecosystem.

Yet within this disruption lie powerful opportunities. In this initial paper, I seek to highlight a few of the most pressing macro challenges faced by small colleges and offer introductory insight into steps Coe has taken to meet the realities of our environment. Future letters from my desk will offer more specifics about each unique initiative and strategy being pursued and ask for your support to fully effectuate this vision. I intend to detail for you how Coe is evolving through the strategic framework recently adopted by the Board of Trustees, walking you through the initiatives of the framework. With your investments, our work will define Coe's future, and by extension, its continued impact on students, Cedar Rapids and the world.

ENROLLMENT PRESSURE AND SHIFTING INTERESTS

Nationwide, the number of high school graduates is plateauing — and in some regions, declining. In the Midwest, this demographic shift is especially acute. Add to that heightened competition from public flagship institutions, flexible online providers and perceptions that a college degree may no longer be worth the cost, it is clear why enrollment remains a top concern. Finally, all students are increasingly outcome-oriented learners. While these pressures demand strategic adaptation to continue attracting students to our traditional on-campus education, they also open the door for Coe to serve new types of learners, enter new partnerships and add delivery models that can reaffirm our mission and expand our impact.

Coe is responding by diversifying our recruitment strategy, building pathways to better serve transfer students and investing in high-demand academic programs like engineering physics, expanded business concentrations in risk management and aviation management & flight operations. The strategic framework will see Coe develop pathways to fully serve adult and non-traditional students, often in partnership with area businesses to help address growing workforce needs. This will include degree completion and highly sought-after credentialing/certification programs. These are more than enrollment strategies; they reflect Coe positioning itself as a meaningful participant in today's more inclusive and dynamic educational market.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Tuition-dependent colleges face a fragile economic reality. Against the backdrop of lower tuition revenues, Coe's cost of operations have faced significant pressure due to the inflationary forces of the last few years. When I compare the costs of basic operations for the routine expenses of a small college, whether plywood used to build a set in the theater department, furniture for our residence halls or equipment needed for athletic teams, I'm reminded how much of the immediate challenge stems from an abrupt change in the cost curve. Add to this flat or declining federal and state aid, the need for increasingly generous financial aid offers and grave uncertainty around international enrollment, and we are left with a financial equation that is difficult to balance.

We've responded in prudent ways, aggressively holding expenses and making the necessary, difficult decisions these times require. We have a smaller faculty and staff that has been adjusted to better fit our current and forecasted student enrollments. Simultaneously, financial constraints can spur innovation. At Coe, we are pursuing a multi-pronged approach that includes targeted fundraising, smarter use of technology and scenario planning for long-term sustainability. A technology-driven hiring protocol, for example, is helping us assess where artificial intelligence can supplement or streamline administrative functions. While not a cure-all, AI holds promise for improving service and reducing overhead if implemented thoughtfully and ethically. Finally, we have sought out and entered into collaborative cost-sharing arrangements for a number of services through such entities as the Iowa Association of Independent Colleges & Universities.

DELIVERING A SUPERIOR STUDENT EXPERIENCE – FOR TODAY’S STUDENT

The joy of working at Coe comes from experiencing all this community has to offer. Our faculty and staff are second-to-none in their talent and dedication, and I appreciate all they do to advance the college every day. We have a beautiful campus, and any day can be improved by a quick stroll around the quad. But the spring in my step remains our students. Simply put, I think Coe has the best students in the world – year in and year out. Our Kohawks are hardworking, intelligent, humble, driven, optimistic, diverse, full of hopes and dreams, smart and fun. This seems to be the enduring hallmark of Coe over generations. With that said, we must recognize that our current students have different needs and expectations than those I carried to Coe decades ago.

To attract and retain students, we need to focus on delivering a superior student experience across all majors and activities. The lived experience of a small college is paramount to our identity, and despite the technologies of the day, we need to foster the spaces where personal connections and relationships are forged and embraced. Growth of intellect and respect for others needs to be nurtured in all corners to prepare our graduates for citizenship and service in their communities after they leave Coe.

At Coe, we are serving our students by revising curriculum pathways, forging new corporate and community partnerships and enhancing our use of data to inform decision-making and improve graduation rates. Our Center for Creativity, Careers and Community (C3) exemplifies this spirit of integration — bridging the liberal arts with real-world experience and alumni mentorship. Further efforts spearheaded through the Office of Student Success and Persistence coordinate our efforts to improve retention, better supporting every student matriculating at Coe as we seek to measurably improve persistence and completion rates. After all, a walk across the Commencement stage is the ultimate realization of a Kohawk’s aim and dreams when they choose Coe as their college home.

We are also keeping a keen eye on how technology and new pedagogies are enhancing learning itself — from adaptive tutoring systems to tools that support faculty research and student creativity. The key for Coe is to stay mission focused and ensure that such tools serve to elevate human connection rather than replace it.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Through these letters and upcoming conversations, I look forward to engaging you in this important and good work. The outlook for small private colleges is not without risk, but I am convinced Coe is positioned to provide the type of education and experience both students and society need. We will continue to thrive by doing what we do best: educating students in a personalized, rigorous environment, while also embracing the possibilities of technology, partnerships and lifelong learning. To do this, we will also need increased financial support from our many alumni and friends who are committed to the promise of Coe to complete this journey.

Coe College has endured for over 170 years by responding to change with courage, creativity and community. Today, we face a new inflection point which calls for bold thinking and steadfast support. Thank you for engaging with me as we explore together and write the successful next chapter at Coe.

Alma mater, hail hail hail!



David Hayes '93
President

Coe makes it possible. You make it happen.