



*From the Desk of*  
**PRESIDENT DAVID HAYES**  
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## **Progress with Purpose: Innovating Without Losing Ourselves**

*This is the third in a series of reflections for alumni and friends of Coe College exploring the ideas, commitments and choices shaping our future. I welcome your comments and observations.*

### ***Dear Friends,***

Higher education is changing at a pace few of us could have imagined even a decade ago. Demographic shifts, technological acceleration and evolving expectations from students and employers are reshaping what it means to deliver value through a college education. For institutions like Coe, adaptation is not optional. It is essential.

Clayton Christensen's work "The Innovator's Dilemma" offers a helpful lens for this moment. Christensen reminds us that strong organizations often struggle not because they fail to execute well, but because they execute too narrowly. They focus on sustaining what has worked for their current audiences while disruptive innovations emerge at the margins. Over time, those innovations redefine the market and leave even well-run institutions vulnerable if they do not respond thoughtfully and early.

Coe's response to this challenge is not to abandon what has made us successful. It is to innovate in ways that extend our mission, expand access and strengthen outcomes while remaining anchored in our values. With this north star in mind, we are also taking to heart Jim Collins's well regarded insight from "Good to Great" to "fire bullets before cannonballs." Rather than committing prematurely to large-scale transformations, we are testing ideas through disciplined pilots, learning quickly from evidence and refining what works. When an approach proves effective and aligned with our mission, we will invest more boldly and at scale. This method allows Coe to move forward with confidence, reduce unnecessary risk and ensure that our most significant commitments are informed by experience rather than assumption. In short, we are embracing change while honoring the community and values that define us.

### **WHY INNOVATION IS ESSENTIAL**

Small colleges across the country face a stark reality. Those that choose not to evolve risk becoming less relevant to students, less compelling to families and less sustainable over time. At Coe, ***Progress with Purpose*** is our answer to this reality. The framework is designed to ensure that we continue to thrive by aligning innovation with mission.

Christensen cautions that organizations must create space for new models to develop rather than forcing them to conform to legacy structures too quickly. This insight has guided our approach. We are building new pathways alongside our traditional residential experience, allowing each to be strong on its own terms while reinforcing the whole. We are also nurturing innovation within our existing classrooms and laboratories. An example of this is the introduction of an "executive in residence" initiative that incorporates courses led by respected and highly successful business leaders from the Creative Corridor. Another includes the work within the physics department, in conjunction with a consortium that shares access to the RLMT (a world-class telescope in Sonoita, Arizona,) and with the help of federal grant funding, the addition of a supercomputer and expanded student and faculty research support in astrophysics.

### **EXPANDING ACCESS AND VALUE THROUGH ONLINE EDUCATION**

One of the clearest examples of this approach is Coe's expansion into online education. Once viewed with skepticism, high-quality online learning is now widely accepted and increasingly valued by students and employers alike. Outcome data continue to show that well-designed online programs can deliver learning that is rigorous, engaging and career connected.

This fall, Coe introduced its first fully online degree in strategic leadership. More offerings will follow in the coming months. This program reflects our belief that a Coe education should be accessible to learners at different stages of life and career. It also reflects our confidence that the habits of mind cultivated through a liberal arts education can flourish in digital environments when supported by intentional design and strong faculty engagement.

In parallel, we are developing a growing ecosystem of credentials and certificates. These offerings will serve current students, alumni and business partners who seek targeted skill development, career advancement or reskilling in a rapidly changing workforce. For many learners, credentials will complement a degree. For others, they will provide a meaningful point of entry into lifelong engagement with Coe.

## **AI, OPPORTUNITY AND RESPONSIBILITY**

Artificial intelligence (AI) represents another profound shift in the educational landscape. At Coe, we see AI neither as a threat to learning nor as a silver bullet. We see it as a powerful tool that must be understood, used responsibly and integrated thoughtfully.

Our commitment is clear: Coe graduates will be “AI Ready.” Through curricular integration, co-curricular experiences and our participation in the Google AI Accelerator Lab, students are learning how AI works, how it can be applied ethically and how it reshapes problem solving across disciplines.

At the same time, we are attentive to the risks. AI raises important questions about equity, academic integrity, data privacy and the nature of human creativity. These questions demand exactly the kind of inquiry, critical thinking and ethical reasoning that define a liberal arts education. In this way, AI does not diminish our mission. It reinforces it.

## **BALANCING INNOVATION WITH MISSION AND VALUES**

Innovation without discipline can be as dangerous as stagnation. For this reason, *Progress with Purpose* includes the creation of an Innovation Council charged with monitoring implementation, scanning the external environment and ensuring alignment with Coe’s mission and values.

This structure reflects another lesson from Christensen’s work. Successful innovation requires both freedom and accountability. The Innovation Council provides a forum where new ideas can be tested, refined and evaluated against clear criteria, including student outcomes, financial sustainability and mission fit.

## **CHARGING FORWARD WITHOUT CHANGING COE**

As we pursue these initiatives, one principle remains nonnegotiable. Coe will continue to be a community of curious learners who are known for being friendly, supportive and deeply engaged with one another. Technology may change the tools we use. New programs may change the ways students access us. But the character of this special place endures.

The spirit of inquiry and the habits of mind that shape a liberal arts experience remain at the heart of this campus. They are present in our classrooms, our residence halls, our labs and studios and increasingly in our digital spaces as well.

In the next white paper, I will explore more deeply how this spirit of inquiry continues to define Coe even as we innovate and adapt. It is, ultimately, the through line that connects our past, our present and our future.

*Alma mater, hail hail hail!*



David Hayes '93

President

**Coe makes it possible. You make it happen.**