

# Washington College

## Executive Summary of Stakeholder Input to Inform Strategic Planning

December 2022

## Scope of Work, Objectives, and Approach

The Clarion Group has been engaged to facilitate a strategic visioning process for Washington College. As a critical element of this process, The Clarion Group secured input from key College stakeholders to understand their opinions about the current situation and future direction of the College. This input will be used to inform the development of the College's next strategic plan.

The Clarion Group facilitated seven focus groups and 11 individual interviews with Washington College faculty; staff, including senior staff; students; administrators; Board members; and community stakeholders. Participants were asked the following questions:

- *What are Washington College's key strengths?*
- *What do you see as Washington College's weaknesses/areas of needed improvement?*
- *What are the critical issues the College will face over the next five years?*
- *What do you see as the few critical strategic priorities the College should consider as it develops its strategic plan?*

These questions were also included in the recent branding survey so that all faculty and staff had an opportunity to provide their input. 35 faculty and 67 staff members responded to the survey.

This *Executive Summary* reflects the themes that emerged from the focus groups, interviews, and brand survey. It is not intended as a comprehensive summary of all responses.

# Strengths of Washington College

- Academic programs
  - Liberal arts focus, academically rigorous
  - Range of majors and minors
  - Interdisciplinary studies
  - Strong Gen Ed requirement exposing students to new disciplines
  - Emphasis on writing
  - Capstone for all
  - Academic freedom, autonomy for faculty
- Our people
  - Great faculty, strong in their fields, true teacher-scholars, generous – “taking the students with them”
  - Dedicated staff committed to students and the school
  - Caring, value their community
  - History of mutual support that crosses the College – although impacted over past years by circumstances
- Small size
  - Small classes allow for close relationships between students and faculty (accessibility, mentoring)
  - Builds lifelong friendships; “relationships last as long as you want them to”
  - Nurtures a sense of community among all
  - “We do small well”

# Strengths of Washington College

- Student-centeredness
  - Attention and holistic nurturing for students, inside and outside the classroom
  - All are committed and connected to the student experience, student success
  - Customizing an experience based on a student's needs
  - When we disagree, it always comes down to "what's best for the student"
- Location/geography
  - Beautiful campus; two field campuses
  - Unique natural assets, including being on a major tributary to Chesapeake Bay
  - Ecological/environmental, farming
  - Small town, "feels safe" to parents
  - Outlets to metro areas – important to students and families
- Broad experiential learning opportunities
  - Most students participate
  - Research, internships, study abroad
  - Summer programs for high school students (although under-leveraged)
  - Lots of clubs, job opportunities
  - If you're motivated, it's easy to get involved in the community
    - Chance to do things undergraduates typically don't get to do
    - Students can have transformative experiences in our own community; "they can see they have made actual change"

## Strengths of Washington College

- Centers for academic excellence
  - Competitive advantage/recruitment asset
  - Interdisciplinary
  - Opportunities for students to do field work outside of class
  - Highly ranked, high profile environmental studies; opportunity to study climate change
  - Give the largest student prize in the nation in the literary center
  - Civic impact (beyond “history”) of the STAR center
  - Entrepreneurial
- History and legacy of the College
  - Since its founding, unique position in American higher education
  - Helps inform a distinct identity and value proposition; “it’s hard to match”
- Strong balance sheet including our endowment
- Track record for student success after graduation
  - Securing employment
  - Placement in graduate schools
- Relative lack of a complex bureaucracy

## Weaknesses/Areas of Needed Improvement

- Leadership turnover
  - President
  - Critical senior staff
  - Stalls new initiatives; lots of “fits and starts”, poor rollouts, lack follow up
  - Causes disconnects between VPs and front-line staff
- Lack of a clear College vision
  - Lack formal alignment on our identity
  - Individual, vs. collective, resource allocation
  - Reactive vs. proactive; “we’re bad at planning”
  - Can be slow to change
- Faculty and staff compensation
  - Not competitive
  - Extremely demoralizing
- Effects of recent “austerity mindset”
  - Disrupts community, collegiality
  - Reinforces silos as people “hunker down” to protect turf
  - Has eroded faculty, staff, student trust of administration, Board

## Weaknesses/Areas of Needed Improvement

- Staff, faculty turnover
  - Overwork and burnout
  - Lost institutional memory
  - Redundant efforts impacting effective use of resources
  - Faculty taking on administrative work
  - Not enough student engagement staff, students taking over adults' responsibilities – “not okay”
  - Bigger issue at Washington College because of small size and historically tight-knit community
  - Threatens our core strengths
- Poor morale
  - Decisions made without input
  - Communication lacking
  - Some feel faculty seen as a cost, rather than an asset
  - Haven't maintained sense of family
  - People feeling undervalued
  - While some have become hopeful, anger remains strong in others

## Weaknesses/Areas of Needed Improvement

- Awareness/branding
  - Unknown outside of Maryland
  - Have lacked a marketing function
  - Weak social media, website
  - Not telling our story well; do we aspire enough?
  - Impacts our ability to recruit students, faculty, staff
- Campus infrastructure
  - Residence halls with significant physical issues
    - Oldest buildings on campus
    - Mold, HVAC, leaks, broken appliances, ants in the new building
    - Poor repair process, response time
    - “Conditions can be so bad it’s detrimental to your health, ability to be a good student”
  - Deferred maintenance/financial implications
  - Technology
    - Wi-fi issues
    - Falling behind with technology in the classroom
    - Fragmented data architecture
  - Difficult campus for people with mobility issues
  - Lack of competitiveness with peer/aspirant schools negatively impacts recruitment, retention



## Weaknesses/Areas of Needed Improvement

- Location
  - Rural
  - Little to do off campus
  - Remote; isolated and actively isolating for some students and employees
  - Hard to get to culturally diverse environments, or to bring people here – takes effort and money
  - Fosters a desire to “downplay” rather than highlight
- Alumni engagement
  - Not enough consistent outreach
  - For more recent alums, experience not equating with expectations likely having an impact
  - Need to better engage our alumni in the work of the College (beyond financial giving)
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion
  - Incidents on and off campus
  - Often race-based; also gender
  - Have been bias incidents with professors; no accountability to change behavior
  - Hurting the mental health of people of color
  - “We’re not educating our white students well about this”
- Sustainability – we espouse but don’t do
  - Live up to the environmental values students are learning
  - Be a “laboratory of inspiration”

## Weaknesses/Areas of Needed Improvement

- Need more transparent HR processes
  - Inconsistent, subjective, out of date
  - Have to secretly advocate for your people
- For some, emphasis on athlete recruitment
  - Non-athletes find themselves floundering a bit, don't feel a part of things
  - When coaches leave, students leave and add to the gap
- Need to listen better to student issues
  - Have been engaged to provide input on multiple occasions with poor follow up
  - Limited student input to decisions that affect them

## Critical Issues – next Five Years

- Enrollment
  - Applications, acceptances, enrollment down significantly
  - Shrinking pool of students in our market (250 miles from home)
  - Pending “demographic cliff”
  - Upward trajectory in student tuition discount rate exacerbates financial impact
  - Threat to economic sustainability
  - Need to define “right size” for Washington College
- Evolving student makeup
  - First generation
  - ESL
  - Financially disadvantaged; ROI/employment focused
  - Greater need for student supports
  - Are we equipped to recruit, retain, and graduate these students?
- Building back, maintaining sense of community, support
  - Investing in our human capital
  - “If we don’t have our family, who are we?”
- Climate change

## Critical Issues – next Five Years

- Fallout from the COVID 19 pandemic, including mental health and wellness of students, staff, faculty
- Threats to democracy
  - Political divisions, toxic discourse
  - Increasing political polarization on campuses
  - Real need for educating citizen-leaders
- Defining/advancing liberal arts for the 21<sup>st</sup> century
  - What should we be offering our students? What do they want?
  - How do we distinguish ourselves?
  - “You can connect liberal arts with employment; don’t let that hold us back”

## Strategic Priorities

- Grow enrollment to a sustainable size
- Generate alternative sources of revenue
- Diversify the student body, faculty, and staff (“inclusive excellence”)
- Drive curricular innovation that meets student needs and differentiates the College
- Increase compensation for faculty and staff
- Articulate and live a clear, aligned College identity that leverages our strengths
- Communicate a motivating value proposition that builds awareness and interest in a Washington College degree
- Upgrade and maintain our physical facilities
- Grow our endowment
- Implement a sustainability plan tied to climate change
- Better integrate our Centers and curricula
- Build stronger connections to the Chestertown community