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Davidson's Enduring Purpose for a Dynamic World: Strategic Priorities and Proposals

Davidson College embraces our educational mission as articulated in our [Statement of Purpose](#). In a turbulent moment in higher education and in wider society, institutions like Davidson with a clear identity, robust academic reputation, talented workforce, vibrant campus and local community, solid financial resources, and deep alumni engagement are poised to thrive even in the face of challenges[1]. Davidson can and must strategically employ our strengths to continue to serve our mission.

A year-long process engaging senior campus leadership, the board of trustees, faculty, staff, and students has sparked probing analysis and creative visions for the future. Four working groups and a steering committee explored key themes that play a vital part in the strategic priorities and proposals that have emerged. The Strategic Planning Working Groups were charged with developing big ideas; they were instructed to leave planning for implementation for the next stage of the process.

We discovered a consensus across the college on two complementary points: 1) We embrace Davidson's enduring purpose, and 2) To continue to fulfill that purpose, we must seize the opportunities that we see at this moment.

The priorities and proposals described below each support our purpose and enable us to adapt to future demands. We will strategically redouble efforts to deliver the distinctive Davidson experience on campus and across a lifetime. A well-designed Davidson experience that supports and guides students as they move from pre-enrollment to graduation and alumni status is integrally connected to wellness and well-being in mind, body, and spirit. This strategic plan will position Davidson to achieve our purpose more fully—to assist students in developing humane instincts and disciplined and creative minds for lives of leadership and service.

Priorities

1. Enhance our academic resources and curriculum, recruit and support faculty in academic areas of need, and build a library for the future.
2. Reinforce Davidson's strengths in identifying, enrolling, and supporting students who can thrive at Davidson, regardless of their circumstances.
3. Build a four-year advising and "learning for life" program that guides students through Davidson in a spirit of exploration and self-reflection, assisting them to develop intellectually, personally, and professionally.
4. Deepen and expand our work in institutional history; education and reconciliation; and justice, equality, & community.

5. Coordinate and build out curricular and cocurricular work in the areas of ethical leadership and public good.
6. Strengthen our relationships in the Town of Davidson and across the Charlotte region.

1. Enhance our academic resources and curriculum, recruit and support faculty in academic areas of need, and build a library for the future.

Rationale: Academic excellence fuels Davidson’s identity and mission. The past five years have brought a significant wave of retirements of stalwart faculty members who shaped the college over more than three decades. We have hired a new cadre of three dozen tenure-track and other continuing faculty members, who are more diverse in terms of fields and demographic backgrounds than their predecessors. As the fields of liberal arts knowledge have expanded, so too the faculty have increased the number of majors and minors available to students. Fields such as Computer Science, Public Health, Africana Studies, and various modes of data and digital studies are now integral parts of our curriculum, alongside long-standing areas of strength across the Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences. Our strategic work must continue to recruit innovative scholars committed to teaching and developing our curriculum, which educates students for the world in which they will lead and serve. At the same time, our academic facilities, including the library, must meet the needs of our students, faculty, and staff into the future.

Proposals:

- Explore opportunities to make the curriculum and daily schedule more flexible, including prioritizing activities that best enhance the Davidson experience and use student, faculty, and staff time efficiently.
- Continue to support ongoing, proactive curricular reflection and reform undertaken via faculty-led, student-centered initiatives implemented through existing governance structures.
- Expand support for scholarship and creative work by faculty and students via internal resources and infrastructure for externally-funded research—including fields across STEM with particular attention to emerging and disruptive technologies such as generative artificial intelligence.
- Promote teaching excellence, including deploying inclusive pedagogy to reach all students, through the John Crosland Jr. Center for Teaching and Learning.
- Build out the human and technological infrastructure for digital and visual studies in the 21st century.
- Complete a major renovation to [transform the library](#) into the multi-disciplinary center of intellectual life at Davidson College, a dynamic environment for students, faculty, staff, and the broader community to collaborate, explore, experiment, and grow as researchers, creators, and scholars.

2. Reinforce Davidson's strengths in identifying, enrolling, and supporting students who can thrive at Davidson, regardless of their circumstances.

Rationale: The opportunity to learn and grow at Davidson College is extraordinary, and a fundamental component of a Davidson education is learning from the breadth of experience of

one's classmates. We must actively promote this opportunity and extend it to the young people who are most able to benefit from it, regardless of their economic circumstances, social background, or origin, whether domestic or international.

Proposals and existing initiatives:

- Increase financial support to maintain need-blind admission and meet demonstrated financial need without packaging loans—ensuring Davidson is accessible for talented students regardless of their families' ability to pay.
- Build endowments and new scholarships to decrease the share of financial aid allocated from the college's operating budget.
- Intensify the pathbreaking experimental work in Admissions to partner with community-based organizations and add networks to reach low-income and first-generation students, including recruiting Pell-eligible students.
- Build on collaborations between Admission & Financial Aid, Athletics and Arts departments to recruit scholar-athletes and scholar-artists from all backgrounds.
- Expand efforts by College Communications and Marketing to increase visibility and knowledge about Davidson and encourage and support our alums to assist in that work.

3. Build a four-year advising and "learning for life" program that guides students through Davidson in a spirit of exploration and self-reflection, assisting them to develop intellectually, personally, and professionally.

3.A. *Advising and Learning for Life*

Rationale: The Davidson student experience includes access to world-class faculty, experiential learning opportunities and funds to support exploration in the classroom, the community and across the world. The college has all the elements needed for a student to explore their passions and develop their purpose. This reflective work connects academics, student life, and career exploration. We can improve by making it easier for each student to discover and select, thoughtfully and intentionally, from the many options available to them. We can enhance the ways we teach our students to reflect on experiences and seek intellectual and career pathways that appeal to their strengths and goals. We want every Davidson student to graduate with a sense of their own story—including moments that might look like failures or detours—so they can articulate a dynamic narrative about their intellectual, personal, and professional growth.

Proposals:

- Redesign the advising system to ensure that all students can receive high-quality advising, develop a mentor network, and come to recognize their unique abilities and capacities. As we enroll domestic and international students who can thrive at Davidson regardless of their economic circumstances and social backgrounds, we redouble our commitment to supporting each student on their journey to graduation, through career development, and as alums of the college.
- Implement a four-year cocurricular, developmental learning for life program that provides information about available resources and regular exposure to the skills students need, when they need them. Among these skills is the

ability to articulate the meaning of their experiences in a dynamic narrative.[3] The learning for life program will incorporate career exploration as well as strategies for using evolving technologies, including artificial intelligence, and ways to harness those technologies for ethical uses and productive personal and professional exploration.

- Centralize resources for advising, the four-year learning for life program, high-impact experiences, networking, and career development in order to support curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular high-impact experiential learning opportunities alongside a student's academic course of study. The central structure will focus on reflection and mapping to assist students in connecting their passions to their purpose through storytelling – that is, to learn to articulate the meaning of their experiences.
- Combine existing alumni/ae volunteer roles with newly created roles, including mentoring opportunities, to connect students and alums with the network of Davidson alums, parents, and friends—one of the most engaged networks among all colleges and universities.
- Explore a new academic requirement: a First-Year Seminar that reflects on the world's most pressing problems from multiple perspectives and ways of knowing, with a focus on learning with and from their peers as they read about and discuss these problems, articulate their own positions, and plant the seeds of their own narrative of learning and growth.

3.B. *High-Impact Experience Guarantee*

Rationale: Research shows that high-impact experiences have significant educational benefits for all students, and especially for those from underserved and underrepresented backgrounds. Such experiences include research, study abroad and away, fieldwork, artistic productions, exploratory and experiential travel, internships, and community-engaged learning. Davidson currently offers a wide range of high-impact experiences; we can improve how well we ensure that every student can take advantage of at least one such experience and how well we weave critical reflection into each one. While competing on an NCAA Division I team can itself be an intense and formative experience, we intend for scholar-athletes, who comprise one-fourth of Davidson students, to have access to at least one additional high-impact experience.

Proposals:

- Guarantee and make accessible a high-impact experience for every student.
- Use all available resources and channels to encourage every student to take advantage of this guarantee.
- Streamline and centralize the resources and advising for high-impact experiences to reduce the burden on students and employees and to ensure that these experiences are structured with a reflective component that helps students integrate them into their intellectual, personal, and professional narratives.
- Strengthen existing high-impact experiences as needed to ensure their quality and accessibility—including expansion of research opportunities in STEM and across the curriculum as well as funding, networks, and critical reflection to support internships.
- Build new opportunities for curricular and/or extracurricular experiential learning, including through interdisciplinary problem-solving.

4. Deepen and expand our work in institutional history; education and reconciliation; and justice, equality, & community.

Rationale: Our initiatives in these areas reflect our mission in a fundamental way. Davidson College is rooted in the soil of the American South, a region marked – and marred – by slavery and racial injustice. Since 1837, the college’s ideals grounded in the Reformed Tradition have centrally included freedom and equality. However, many of its founders and early leaders and benefactors profited from the enslavement of human beings; the college itself profited from the work of enslaved people. For more than a century after the end of slavery in the US, the college was complicit with structures and practices that maintained racial segregation, exploitation, and injustice.

We have an obligation to the past, present, and future to uncover and educate all members of our community about this history. Inspired by and following from the work of the [Commission on Race and Slavery](#), we will continue to expand and deepen this work.

Proposals and existing initiatives:

- Develop Beaver Dam plantation, homestead of the Davidson family, as a site for the study of institutional and local history and descendant outreach.
- Expand our engagement with descendants of people enslaved by college founders, leaders, faculty, and benefactors, alongside ongoing exploration of the college’s history with slavery, segregation, and efforts to promote racial justice.
- Continue outreach and collaboration efforts aimed at using the college’s assets to understand and partner with communities harmed by the legacies of slavery and racism, and expand additional education and racial reconciliation work, building upon prior efforts of the college’s Commemoration and Acknowledgement and Naming Committees.
- Support Dúta Bahisere Kus Rá?here: We Know Corn Together, our multi-faceted educational collaboration with the Catawba Nation.
- Deepen our curricular commitment to justice, equality, and community across the curriculum.

5. Coordinate and build out curricular and cocurricular work in the areas of ethical leadership and public good.

Rationale: According to our Statement of Purpose, our mission is to assist students in developing humane instincts and disciplined and creative minds for lives of leadership and service. The Honor Code and the community of trust that it requires and reinforces are central to Davidson’s identity. The strategic planning process imagines measures we could take to elevate our purpose by more actively embracing and promoting work aimed at building a more just, equitable, and community-minded campus, society, nation, and world. We believe Davidson has an opportunity to fill a void in public life for ethical leadership that forges mutual listening and learning, public understanding of social problems, and positive outcomes.

Proposal:

- Establish an Institute for Public Good. The Institute will coordinate activities to help our students and employees become effective, ethical leaders and citizens in local, national, and international arenas. It will (1) support moral-philosophical discussion

about questions of individual and public good; (2) prepare students to collect and analyze data to answer questions about issues of public concern; (3) develop leadership capacity, including fostering discourse across political and moral divides and building common understandings to solve problems for the public good; (4) identify and analyze opportunities to promote the public good through policy innovation; (5) practice civic service through reciprocal collaboration with and assistance to underserved communities. The activities of the Institute will include leadership initiatives such as educational programs; student fellows and programming; visiting domestic and international scholars, practitioners, and leaders; leaders in residence; leadership programming connected to our distinctive approach to Division I “athletics done right”; student internships and research; and skills- and capabilities-building projects. The themes it considers will include ethics and integrity (including academic integrity and Davidson’s Honor Code), sustainability, social capital, and racial education and reconciliation—among others.

Additional Proposals:

- Establish an incubator for work in Arts and Public Good.
- Explore curricular options in Ethics and Social Change and Policy Studies.
- Expand research commitments to specific social problems such as economic mobility and emerging & disruptive technology.

Departments such as Philosophy and Religious Studies and the Philosophy, Politics, and Economics major offer resources that reflect on the nature of the good and public good. The Departments of Political Science, Economics, Educational Studies, and Public Health offer courses on policy studies, public administration, and specific policy areas. The Departments of Art, English, Theatre, Music, Dance, and Digital, Film and Media Studies have all demonstrated an interest in civically engaged artistic production. Through FIRST, our STEM departments have spearheaded learning on inclusive pedagogies, ethical practices, and community-based research. Indeed, nearly every academic field could make meaningful connections to public-good work.

In addition to academic departments and programs, other existing resources include:

- College Crisis Initiative (C2I)
- Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI)
- Chidsey Leadership Program
- Smith-Davidson Leadership Initiative
- Center for Civic Engagement
- Dean Rusk International Studies Program
- Summer Promise Program (currently in planning to launch June 2024)

6. Strengthen our relationships in the Town of Davidson and across the Charlotte region.
 Rationale: Our location in greater Charlotte is a remarkable asset for Davidson, just as we are an asset for our town and region. We can leverage our myriad relationships for mutual benefit. The Working Group on Engaging Davidson and Greater Charlotte learned that while Davidson has made significant impact through partnerships between various parts of the College and organizations in Lake Norman and Charlotte, overall, we have potential for even stronger engagement in a leadership capacity. We aim for Davidson to be viewed as a natural partner for academic initiatives in Charlotte and to attract many applicants from

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. As an institution focused on helping students lead lives of leadership and service, Davidson has both an opportunity and a responsibility to develop an institution-wide strategy to bring more visibility to the work we are already doing— and to expand our relationships in Davidson and greater Charlotte.

Proposals:

- Enhance structures that help students access opportunities in the greater Charlotte region, build our relationships with key businesses and organizations that hire our graduates, and provide students with related career services.
- Pursue strategic collaborations with other educational institutions that are either located in Charlotte (Johnson C. Smith University, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Queens University, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools) or have satellite campuses (Wake Forest Medical School) to work toward an Academic Neighborhood in Charlotte through which we could share resources and work together to solve entrenched problems facing our communities.
- Access a physical space in Charlotte to use as a launching pad for Davidsonians to engage with Charlotte and secure reliable and accessible transportation to that location. This space will allow Davidson to benefit from opportunities arising from area growth and strengthen and improve our community. We envision a multi-faceted space promoting a living[4]-and-learning community aligned with our commitment to more systematically apply our humanistic, artistic, social, spiritual, and scientific creativity to pursue innovative solutions to community issues.
- Bring more of our neighbors – from our extraordinary community of more than 1,700 local alums to underserved students in our region – to campus through intentional outreach in programming, research, and events.

Next Steps, Implementation, and Evaluation of Outcomes

Year one of the strategic planning process has yielded a rich set of ideas and initiatives, as described above. As we refine and build consensus around this statement of priorities and proposals into the summer of 2024, we will also frame implementation plans for each proposal, with the goal of moving forward to the next appropriate step for each one.

Some of the ideas generated by the working groups have already been implemented or will be realized in the 2024-25 academic year. This spring we named an inaugural Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, who will become a key partner in the work of education and reconciliation and related initiatives. With presidential discretionary funds, an Artificial Intelligence pilot initiative launched in May 2024, offering all faculty and select staff and students access to pro-level AI tools and professional support from Davidson's Technology & Innovation Office and Academic Affairs to explore applications. The library project design—now envisioned as the George Lawrence Abernethy Library at Davidson College—and fundraising proceed apace, based on prior and ongoing consultation with faculty. Possibilities to create an Institute for Public Good have already arisen. We will move forward with proposals as we are able to advance them with the necessary planning and resources.

For many proposals (or clusters of proposals), President Hicks and his senior leaders will form a team of stakeholders to plan next steps. In some cases, this will require a focus on feasibility, and for most, it will involve developing an implementation plan. These planning teams will include colleagues from the faculty and relevant administrative offices and units.

Students, alumni, trustees, and friends of the college will also be asked to serve as fitting to the topic and work. This planning and implementation process will begin immediately, with many teams beginning in fall 2024 with the start of the new academic year.

For each initiative, the planning teams or other relevant leaders will establish metrics for assessing that initiative's success in achieving the outcomes named in this strategic plan.

During the 2024-25 year, senior leaders will consider the possibilities and progress on each proposal, including the resources needed to initiate and to maintain it, and the source(s) of those resources. Ideas that are determined to be feasible with existing resources will be pursued through normal governance processes on whatever timeline is workable; ideas that are feasible with additional resources will become opportunities for fundraising. As each initiative is implemented, senior leadership will work with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, and other offices to develop quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate progress and outcomes. The evaluation planning and results will be reported to the Board of Trustees at least once per year, beginning with an update at the April 2025 meetings, and continuing as initiatives reach their scheduled evaluation date(s) until 2030 or the Board determines the objectives have been met. Note: we have not (yet) named a firm end date for the plan.

At its April 18-19 2024 meeting, the Board of Trustees passed a motion affirming the direction of this strategic planning vision and process. The faculty, who also received this document at the same time as trustees in April, are invited to provide input to the Strategic Planning chairs, Dean Byron McCrae and Dean Shelley Rigger, and to President Hicks. This revised document is being shared in May with the trustees, faculty, and staff. In response to the feedback we receive, we will continue to refine the document over the summer and request from the Board, in August, approval of our strategic plan in the form of a revised version of this document. We are grateful for the significant, constructive and creative input of many people across the college community in moving this planning process forward and helping Davidson to realize its purpose into the future.

[1] Davidson's "fundamentals" are among the strongest of any college in the country. Our financial resources create a firm foundation thanks to the generosity of alumni, family and friends of Davidson and the extraordinary stewardship of our in-house investment team and the trustee investment advisory committee. Our alumni are among the most engaged of any U.S. institution. We have little deferred maintenance beyond the library, and our endowment performance has been excellent. With those fundamentals in mind, Standard & Poor's recently reaffirmed our global rating at AA+ with a stable outlook. Our identity and demand are rising, with a 25% increase in applications over the past two years and one of the higher yield rates in the country: nearly 50%. Our discount rate is stable, even with an admissions policy that is need blind and a financial aid model that meets calculated need without packaging loans.

[2] See, for example, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Competencies: <https://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined>.

[3] By "living" we mean coordinating housing for Davidson students pursuing summer internships or service work in Charlotte, as we have already piloted in recent summers.