

# **Context Statement for the Strategic Plan for 2008–2013**

*Strategic planning at Calvin College for the years 2008 through 2013 is not only an exercise in vision and hope but also a process that requires an honest appraisal of challenges and inevitable limits. The strategic planning task force presents this analysis of our current situation and our plans for the future with a profound sense of gratitude to God; our heritage; the faculty, staff, and students; Board of Trustees; and supporters of the college.*

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**Strategic Objectives.....** (currently separate document)

# THE CONTEXT OF CALVIN COLLEGE

## 1. GENERAL CONTEXT

### THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT OF CALVIN COLLEGE

- The structure of higher education is undergoing rapid change, with the entrance of for-profit colleges, extensive distance education, and reduced student loyalty to a single institution. Liberal arts institutions and four-year traditional colleges are threatened in this context.
- Christian colleges are growing in size and influence. This is a welcome development, but it suggests that we will compete for both students and faculty who support our mission.
- Calvin compares favorably to other colleges, but too many people don't know this. We have been placed in a new, national Carnegie classification, which has moved us to a much lower ranking.
- The nature of scholarly communication is changing, and Calvin has multiple new venues for influence in addition to scholarly associations and research conferences.
- Calvin has a unique emphasis on professional education within a liberal arts context—a strength that can be emphasized and embraced more strongly.
- There is a strong movement for more public accountability in both public and private higher education. Planning cycles, assessment, and accreditation may strengthen our work, but they also require substantial resources that must be diverted from other areas.
- Costs related to technology and information are growing significantly, with substantial increases in “leased” intellectual property, subscriptions, licenses, and so on.
- There is more emphasis on the practices and “industry” of higher education. Calvin may be able to play a leadership role in these areas as well as in the traditional areas of faith/scholarship integration.
- Higher education is also emphasizing community engagement and local partnerships related to both education and scholarship. Calvin has historic strengths in these areas.

### THE GLOBAL CONTEXT OF CALVIN COLLEGE

- Calvin College has greater global possibilities than we could have imagined even a decade ago. Reformed churches and Christian colleges are growing across the globe and are asking for leadership in scholarship and learning. Our faculty have international opportunities for research partnerships, and our students are able to use many areas of the world as settings for their learning. We have increased our recruitment of international students, and we have a growing reputation that brings students from many countries to us. These opportunities have resource implications and call for strategic decisions.

- In the next decades the college is likely to face several challenges related to global issues:
  - Possible health crises such as a flu pandemic
  - Movement of national resources into war and security issues
  - Global terrorism
  - National and global economic challenges
  - Environmental issues
  - Political challenges that have implications for international travel

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## THE LOCAL CONTEXT OF CALVIN COLLEGE

- Calvin College is an important player in Grand Rapids. The city, in turn, provides a rich context for our educational mission. This context includes significant educational resources:
  - A “higher education city” with ten colleges and universities, and branches
  - A new health sciences emphasis, including medical research facilities and increased clinical placement options
  - Rural, suburban, and central-city environments
  - Multiple internship sites and community partners
  - Diversity, including significant African-American, Latino and Asian populations
  - Strong and diverse religious groups
  - Environmental diversity
- However, the city of Grand Rapids experiences challenges that threaten the health and stability of the college:
  - Persistent poverty
  - Ethnic and racial tensions
  - Comparatively low literacy and education rates
  - Environmental sustainability challenges
  - Recent trends toward rental properties rather than owner-occupied homes in the area of the college

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## THE DEMOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF CALVIN COLLEGE

- The national population of eighteen-year-olds will decrease after 2008. Students of color continue to be a growing percentage of all eighteen-year-olds. Our “traditional” recruiting population will decrease.
- As tuition costs increase, a majority of students are from the top economic group. Every year we analyze the relationship between “sticker price” and recruitment, but no clear relationship is evident.
- Learning styles have changed, with a greater emphasis on active learning, technological reliance, and collaborative work. This means that new pedagogies must be used to enhance learning.
- Our experience confirms a national trend that students need more supportive services in order to stay in school: mental health services, health services, and learning support.
- The competition for students based on facilities and services is real.

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## THE RELIGIOUS AND ECCLESIAL CONTEXT OF CALVIN COLLEGE

- The postmodern context has made religious standpoints both more acceptable and more irrelevant in current cultural conversations.
- Within our larger context, “Reformed” is experiencing an identity dilemma. On the one hand, the concept is, for many, too nuanced to distinguish easily from a broadly evangelical position. At the same time, some of the traditional, perspectival strengths of the Reformed tradition are influential in a wide range of Christian circles.
- In a cultural and religious context that is increasingly polarized, Calvin is a lightning rod for controversial issues (e.g., issues related to sexual orientation and politics). These lightning-rod issues have potential effects on the financial support of the college.
- Calvin is a confessional college, responsible to the Christian Reformed denomination, in a time of decreasing denominational loyalty and stresses within the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). The health of the CRC will have a substantial effect on the college.
- The center of the Christian church is moving further to the global south and east, and the global network of Reformed churches provides valuable partners for the college.

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## THE FINANCIAL CONTEXT OF CALVIN COLLEGE

- Calvin has always been able to fund its mission, but there are economic constraints on its creativity.
- The state and national economies will result in continuing financial hardship, and the next decade may create a markedly different economic context for the college.
- The state of Michigan continues to experience economic hardship due to its reliance on manufacturing. Its economic future is uncertain. State funding for private higher education (through student grants) is continually at risk.
- The college’s relatively low discount rate and relatively high yield on applicant are fortunate circumstances, but both bring with them potential risks for the future as these proportions change.
- Our endowment is comparatively modest. We are tuition-dependent. As we are challenged by demographics to maintain our enrollment, we are likely to experience growing financial limitations.

## **2. FOUNDATIONS FOR MISSION**

### **2.1. MISSION AND FAITH**

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#### MISSION ARTICULATION

- The denomination is changing, and its Reformed identity is also changing. Our “Reformed identity” is difficult to articulate in the context of both the secular culture and the evangelical subculture. We desire

to keep this tradition and its theological warrant for education alive and vibrant at the college and within our constituency.

- We have multiple mission statements (*ESM, FEN, CORE, PECLAC*). Although they are consistent with each other, they are complex. We need a single, succinct statement of mission that unites our various mission statements and serves to orient new faculty, staff, and students.
- Our documents emphasize the perspectival nature of our mission but are limited in their emphasis on the “practice” elements of our mission.
- It is difficult to market our complexity adequately and appropriately.

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#### MISSION ALIGNMENT

- Internally, we are larger and more diverse in purpose. This can be a strength, yet the focus of the “college” model is at risk.
- We can strengthen alignment between departments or units and the overall college mission.

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#### FACULTY AND STAFF

- The mission is difficult to articulate internally as well as externally, and more development for faculty and staff around the Reformed mission of the college is always a need. This is especially true because we will experience significant turnover of faculty in the next ten to fifteen years.
- We continually face the issue of faculty membership requirements. On the one hand, these requirements serve as a gatekeeper for faculty membership; on the other hand, the requirements are limiting the pool of potential faculty, even faculty from other Reformed traditions.

### 2.2. PEOPLE FOR MISSION

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#### STUDENT RECRUITMENT

- Demographic trends over the next decade, combined with changes in the church, mean that we will continue to work harder for the same number of students. If we want a wait list, we will need even more effort.
- Cost per student enrolled continues to escalate.

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#### FACULTY RECRUITMENT

- Over the next ten years, 29 percent of current faculty will retire, and within fifteen years, 46 percent of faculty will retire.
- We experience significant faculty hiring challenges, related to faculty membership requirements, egalitarian pay structure, and desire for racial and ethnic diversity.

- Recruiting the right faculty is central to the direction of the college. We must build a wide network of potential faculty.

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## STAFF RECRUITMENT

- How do we develop and support our staff, honor their contributions, and pay a just wage?

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## THE NATURE OF OUR COMMUNITY LIFE

- Community life is central to the effective operation of a college. We are larger and more complex than ever, which brings challenges for the “purposeful, just, compassionate, and disciplined” community life that both our mission statement and *From Every Nation (FEN)* call us to pursue.

## 2.3. RESOURCES AND INFRASTRUCTURE FOR MISSION

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### LEADERSHIP

- How do we prepare for the leadership needs of the next decade?

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### GOVERNANCE

- We describe ourselves as faculty governed, but we also have a strong administration that intersects with the faculty governance process. We need a clearer model of our mutual roles and responsibilities.
- We have a non-faculty professional staff, and it is not clear how they should or do participate in college governance channels.
- Informal decision may work well for people who are “in the know” or “in the network,” but unspoken rules make it difficult for newcomers to know how things get done.

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### PLANNING AND REVIEW

- Planning would be improved by drawing together various types of institutional data into a widely available common reservoir.
- Assessment data have not found their way into the planning process for every department and unit.

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### SPACE AND FACILITIES

- Many facilities need renovations if we are to maintain a competitive edge. We have a fifty-year-old campus and \$15 million in deferred maintenance.
- Ahead of us are two large building projects that will use significant resources.
- We have specific facility needs: art department spaces, administrative offices, and classrooms.
- How do we make decisions that are supportive of the environmental sustainability of the campus?

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## FINANCIAL STABILITY AND INTEGRITY

- Most of the budget is salary, which is difficult to decrease in difficult economic times.
- 85 percent of Calvin's annual operating budget is from tuition and room and board charges. A larger endowment will provide financial stability and decrease reliance on tuition.
- We must broaden financial support of the college beyond the current dedicated group of donors.
- Questions about strategic tuition pricing continue to surface.

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## INFORMATION

- What are the implications of a digital library? of the escalating costs of journals? of licensing rather than ownership?
- The percentage of the budget going to the library is lower than the percentage at our peer institutions. What is an appropriate benchmark in this area?
- Current practice in library management emphasizes the library as place—a place that sets scholarly expectations on the campus. What are our goals in this area?

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## TECHNOLOGY

- Technology needs are very expensive. We need a strategic plan for making wise decisions in this area.

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## CONSTITUENCY SUPPORT / GOODWILL

- What is the place of reputation and marketing? What stakeholders do we need in order to enact our mission, and how do we enlist their support?

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## CRISIS AND SIGNIFICANT EVENT PLANNING

- Are we preparing for a possible senior leadership transition?
- Multiple crises are possible, and planning is needed to help us manage these crises appropriately.

## **3. OUR MISSION**

### **3.1. OUR MISSION IN EDUCATION**

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## LEARNING GOALS FOR STUDENTS

- We have excellent sets of goals for our core curriculum, for the academic majors, and for co-curricular learning. We are using our curriculum to address a broad range of learning outcomes (e.g. cross cultural competency, sustainability, virtue formation, civic engagement, writing, thinking, and communication)

skills across the curriculum, faith, and so on). We need more efforts to foster alignment across the curriculum and co-curriculum. We need stronger efforts to assess how well we are doing and to use this information for continual improvement of learning.

- We have made a commitment to bring the *FEN* vision into our curriculum, and we should strengthen our practice in this area.
- Integrative learning is a mark of excellent liberal arts programs. We should work on enhanced interdisciplinary learning and experiential learning.
- Approximately half of our students participate in off-campus study programs. Expanding this number is worthwhile but expensive.
- How do we address the tensions inherent in providing professional programs at a liberal arts institution?

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## COLLEGE AND CURRICULAR STRUCTURE

- Our academic structures are departmental, making strategic planning and program delivery across departmental boundaries a challenge.
- Many offices are working to enhance the learning process (e.g., Service-Learning Center, CIT Teaching and Learning Team, Office of the Dean for Instruction,, Student Academic Services, and others), but these offices are in different divisions. This is a strength if these offices are working in similar directions, but more coordination may further enhance educational improvement.
- Our core curriculum is a marked strength of the college, but its size and complexity often conflict with the demands of professional programs. Professional programs are a strength, but their mandated size lives in uneasy tension with our aims for a broad education for all students.
- We have several graduate programs but send mixed signals about their value, both to professors and to students in these programs.
- As the number of activities and agendas from other divisions increases, faculty worry about the importance of the classroom and academic departments in students' lives.

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## ASSESSMENT

- The need for assessment of learning outcomes and evaluation of educational programs keeps increasing. We want to have assessment practices that are useful to us and helpful to our constituencies, but are not overly complex or expensive to administer.

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## ECONOMIC VIABILITY

- Although cost is not the primary factor in evaluating current programs and considering new programs, it remains a very important factor as we deal with resource limitations and the "opportunity costs" of both current and new programs.

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## FACULTY ROLES AND REWARDS

- Our faculty are involved in scholarship at a “university level.” But universities are not our model for investment in student lives. Many exemplary faculty choose to teach at Calvin rather than at a major research university because of their commitment to undergraduate students. We must guard against a model of faculty excellence that does not value involvement with students and colleagues.

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## CO-CURRICULAR EDUCATIONAL GOALS FOR STUDENTS

- Experiences outside of the classroom are very significant sources of learning; we are intentional about our learning goals for these experiences. In this area, too, we can do more to assess results and improve the processes for education.
- Occasional tensions exist between members of the student life division and members of the academic division related to the nature and extent of these learning goals. We may be missing opportunities to work more effectively together.

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## FACILITY AND TECHNOLOGY NEEDS

- Most classroom spaces are built on the assumption of a lecture-style presentation.
- We continue to need enhanced spaces for art and art history, alternative testing, group study, and student research.
- Given goals for community learning, we should engage in a broad campus discussion about a possible move to a more residential campus or to more intentional off-campus living.
- Educational goals should be central in any discussion of additional buildings—for example, in planning for a new campus commons building.

## 3.2. OUR MISSION IN SCHOLARSHIP

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## RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

- Cultural conversations about the role of faith (e.g., in science, in politics, in art) are increasing in intensity, and the need for Christian voices is strong.
- A distinctive Reformed voice is difficult to sustain. We must continually renew the Reformed tradition as new intellectual questions come to the fore.

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## FACULTY RECRUITMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

- We have more competition for high-quality Christian scholars; we compete for faculty with both Christian and secular institutions of higher education.
- Developing a diverse faculty is crucial for significant scholarship, so that we have the right mix of people to study and speak about important issues.

- Development of a faith-based voice in scholarship continues to be a need for new and veteran faculty alike.

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## FACULTY ROLES AND REWARDS

- Faculty continue to experience tensions between teaching and scholarship. Faculty have relatively high teaching responsibilities compared with schools that are doing the same level of scholarship.
- Faculty also experience tensions between the teaching/scholarship expectations and college service and administrative functions.
- More kinds of scholarship (e.g., the scholarship of engagement, the scholarship of teaching and learning) are valued in the academy at large and can be fostered at Calvin as well.

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## RESOURCES

- Our internal support for research, although strong, is limiting. We have more requests for research time and travel than we can fund.
- Contextual, interdisciplinary research is more complex and takes more work on the part of the institution—which demands greater administrative time.
- Technology/equipment needs for research in many fields continue to escalate.

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## COLLABORATION

- Many global and local networks for collaborative work are available for faculty.
- If opportunities for scholarship are increasingly interdisciplinary, it is a challenge to develop faculty who have found their intellectual home within the methods and models of a single discipline.
- Does the college have the right number of centers and institutes? When new opportunities appear, how do we make decisions about them? The current institutes that we have take significant administrative time. Is this the best method for expanding or supporting scholarship in targeted areas? How does the center/institute model support laboratory research?
- Multiple centers and institutes provide opportunities for faculty and visibility for their work, but this tends to fragment faculty time and attention between departmental agendas and institute agendas.

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## DISSEMINATION

- There are new definitions of scholarship and new venues for influence.
- There are many new venues for scholarship—related to media, place, and type of activity. How do we decide what venues are the most appropriate?
- Our intellectual voice is hard to hear among the sheer volume of voices at play in the world. How should our voice be heard in academic, church, and popular circles?

- How should the college have a “public voice” on issues of importance to our culture and church? What is the relationship between faculty scholarship and the public voice of the college?

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## STUDENT LEARNING GOALS

- Undergraduate research is becoming a recognized best practice in higher education—expected by our top students and needed for admission to graduate schools. This intensive mode of education is time consuming and therefore expensive to deliver.

## 3.3. OUR MISSION IN PARTNERSHIP

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### MISSION

- We do not have a clear mission statement in this area. The *Expanded Statement of Mission* addresses our internal community but says little about the role the college plays in service to other communities (besides the church).
- Our existing mission statement makes it difficult to say no to any good partnership idea. We must keep our focus on how we serve as a learning institution.

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### FACULTY ROLES AND REWARDS

- Public teaching is a kind of service as well as scholarship, but it occupies an ambiguous place in the faculty roles and reward structure.

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### REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

- How do we become more known in Grand Rapids as a welcoming and hospitable community of Christians, rather than as a distant and separatist community?

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### CHURCH PARTNERSHIPS

- What does it mean to be responsive to the church? What does the church most need from the college? We seek to provide some leadership and guidance to our partners at the CRC, given our own limited resources.
- A significant challenge is to open our minds and our doors to various dialects in the “Reformed accent” while remaining faithful to God’s word and God’s work in the CRC and in the church at large.
- We continue to train women for church leadership. For many faculty, staff, and students, it is difficult to stay in partnership with the CRC, given its inconsistent stance on women in church leadership.

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### HIGHER EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS

- Several large universities have assumed leadership roles in Grand Rapids, and Calvin must be both cooperative and vigilant as we work alongside these universities.

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## GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

- We need to continue to work to communicate who we are and the impact we already have globally.
- We need to decide how our determination to be more a part of the global environment should be executed (i.e., Do we franchise overseas? Do we send our students out to discover the world? Do we weave a global influence into all parts of the campus and have students do that here?).
- We need to get a higher percentage of students off campus, out of the United States, and into other parts of the world.