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## KENYON 2020: BACKGROUND AND PROCESS

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Kenyon in 2015 is in an enviable position among private liberal arts colleges. The educational program and student experience are widely admired, earning national recognition. The College continues to attract a talented pool of students from around the country and the world. The campus is strikingly beautiful. And the College has maintained a four-decade record of balanced budgets and financial stability.

From this position of strength, looking toward its third century, Kenyon has concluded a process of self-examination and is charting a course for the future. More than 500 alumni, faculty, parents, staff, and students have participated in conversations over two years, addressing the challenges facing Kenyon and the opportunities they bring. The findings of these focus groups were discussed by leadership groups on campus and refined by a 2020 steering committee, composed of faculty, staff, and students.

This work, as we look to 2020, identifies the path that Kenyon may take to meet the challenges to residential liberal arts education by enhancing its core strengths and establishing the College as a national leader. The Kenyon of 2020 will:

- continue to attract a diverse group of academically talented students, regardless of demographic trends;
- prepare students for post-graduation success, equipping them with the skills to navigate a rapidly changing cultural and career environment;
- encourage lifelong friendships and a passion for lifelong learning.

The Kenyon of 2020 will build on the core values and characteristics that have distinguished the College since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including a commitment to rigorous education, open discourse, and compassion. Graduates in the year 2020 and beyond will take their places as leaders and innovators in the twenty-first century.

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## HONORING OUR PAST: KENYON'S TRADITIONS AND VALUES

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For over 190 years, Kenyon has educated students who have gone on to have a positive influence on the lives of others and on the culture at large. Comprehensive education in the liberal arts tradition has prepared each class to adapt and innovate in the context of global events and advances in knowledge and technology. The community on the Hill has fostered lifelong bonds that have defined the Kenyon experience for generations. Curiosity about the world, a commitment to excellence in self-development, and a sense of compassion are profound and reliable outcomes. These core values have three essential dimensions:

***The ability to identify and pursue one's passions.*** Intellectual self-discovery is a central component of the Kenyon experience. Our curriculum exposes students to a range of disciplines and methods by which those disciplines can be understood. Close collaboration with faculty ensures that students master the essential skills of analysis, communication, creative thinking, and problem-solving. The continuum from discovery to mastery to application provides the preparation needed by students to achieve great success.

Our success as an institution will be measured, in part, on how well we facilitate students' identification of their passions and their ability to succeed.

***The ability to lead and positively impact a community.*** A complete education goes beyond one-dimensional self-development. A Kenyon education and the experience of four years prepare our students to thrive within their home communities and set an example of making a positive difference in the lives of others. The tight-knit residential community at Kenyon encourages friendships that last a lifetime, models social interaction, and fosters leadership. This happens in the classroom, in the residence hall, on the athletic field, in the studio, and on the stage.

***The ability to question and reflect upon one's place in the universe.*** An education is incomplete without attention to the "big questions" that define our humanity and nourish our spirits, from understanding the workings of the natural world to reflecting on classic existential questions. This broader perspective takes shape in the classroom and beyond, where dinner discussions or late-night sessions in residence halls inspire students to find connections between grand ideas and daily life.

Kenyon sets the stage for this intellectual and philosophical growth by gathering talented students, a faculty of committed teacher-scholars, and a dedicated, supportive staff – all studying or working on a beautiful residential campus with outstanding facilities. Our challenging curriculum is complemented by an array of expansive experiences available to every student. Opportunities in athletics provide a sense of fitness and well-being. Opportunities through collegiate organizations provide real-world experience in fields as diverse as publishing (*Kenyon Review*), the museum world (Gund Gallery), ecology and land preservation (Brown Family Environmental Center, Philander Chase Corporation,), and political issues and international experience (Center for Global Engagement, Center for the Study of American Democracy).

The resources exist, primed to prepare our graduates for the future that awaits them. Our task through this strategic plan is to ensure that the Kenyon education is exemplary, keenly relevant, and nimble enough to respond to the challenges facing higher education.

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## **LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: EXTERNAL CHALLENGES AND THE PROMISE OF LIBERAL EDUCATION**

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While Kenyon's current position, built on a foundation of enduring values, is a strong one, there are several external challenges that must be faced in order to continue to thrive into the future.

***Rising Costs, Changing Demographics.*** College tuition has been rising faster than the rate of inflation, making the listed comprehensive fees at even state universities out of reach for many families. With these rising costs, expectations of families about the return on the investment of a college education have understandably increased. The cost of a private, residential college education, especially institutions like Kenyon that emphasize low student-to-faculty ratios and personal contact between faculty and students, are high and relatively fixed. Online learning and distance education opportunities have competed for prospective students' attention, promising educational credentials at lower cost. For most of its history, our constituents have assumed that prospective students readily recognize the intrinsic value of a Kenyon education. We will need to articulate this value with more clarity and emphasis.

The challenge of rising costs is coupled with a sea change in American demographics. U.S. colleges find themselves at a time during which the number of high school graduates is declining, especially in the Northeast and Upper Midwest. Census information tells us that the pool of the nation's most promising students will be more ethnically diverse, more likely to be the first in their families to attend college, and more likely to need financial assistance. Colleges and universities must build pathways for talented students and must provide aid and resources to ensure successful recruitment and retention.

***Challenges to the values of liberal education.*** Scrutiny from cultural critics and elected officials calls into question the value of higher education in providing career credentials. This line of thinking is closely tied to increasing global economic uncertainty as well as to rising tuition costs. As the full cost of four years of a Kenyon education approaches \$250,000, many families understandably have high expectations that the Kenyon experience will advance a student towards an independent and fruitful life after graduation. Liberal education is now called upon to differentiate and defend its value proposition amidst an unprecedented expansion of post-secondary, online and vocational education options.

Some critics call for revamping of curricula to provide vocational training in order to produce the work-ready college graduates demanded by the increasingly volatile, complex, and ambiguous global economy. Yet the dichotomy put forward in the national discussion – vocational education weighed against the liberal arts experience of developing intellectual and critical capacity over job training – is a false one. Comprehensive new research has supported the value of liberal arts education in the marketplace. A 2014 study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, drawing on interviews with more than 30,000 college graduates<sup>1</sup>, has demonstrated that liberal arts graduates experience higher employment rates and greater lifelong earnings and sustain skills that remain valuable throughout their careers. Employers identified the cornerstones of a liberal education (such as critical thinking, analytical writing, and communication skills) as valuable characteristics of employees and key elements of career success.

The case for the liberal arts value goes beyond the workplace, to making lasting contributions to a meaningful adult life. A 2014 study by Gallup<sup>2</sup> found that undergraduate experiences such as connection with a mentor, relationships with faculty, and a project that requires more than one semester to complete are correlated with stronger engagement with work and a more positive sense of well-being. The values of Kenyon, then, are transformational on both a professional and a personal level.

While the evidence supports our position, the challenge remains: We must be able to clearly articulate to our students and prospective students how a Kenyon education empowers them to step forward with confidence into the world of work and post-college life. We must, moreover, seek out and clearly identify opportunities within the Kenyon experience for students to integrate real-world experiences within the liberal arts program, beginning as early as a student's first year in Gambier.

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<sup>1</sup> Debra Humphreys, Patrick Kelley, *How Liberal Arts and Science Majors Fare in Employment: A Report on Earnings and Long Term Career Path* (Washington DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Gallup, Inc. and Purdue University, "Great Jobs, Great Lives: A Study of More than 30,000 College Graduates Across the U.S.," *The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index Report*, (Washington D.C., 2014) p. 10, 14.

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## PRIORITIES AND ACTION PLANS FOR ACHIEVING THE 2020 VISION

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Effective solutions spring from the drive to understand and address challenges. The 2020 process, which sought the advice of hundreds of alumni, faculty, parents, staff, and students, helped us articulate the issues at our doorstep and affirmed that compelling solutions are within reach. Our 2020 participants remain united in their belief that, at its best, a Kenyon education is a transformational experience that enriches intellectual, social, and professional lives. The College's most important priorities for the future have been articulated. The findings provide us with a road map to the enhancement of the educational program, the building of resources to support the student body of the future, and the strategies to foster the community experience.

**PRIORITY I:  
Focus on an integrated, comprehensive experience that  
prepares students for post-graduate success.**

The Kenyon education has, at its core, a rigorous classroom experience: close interactions between faculty and students, strong emphasis on writing in all disciplines, development of critical thinking and analytical skills, and exploration of knowledge about human culture and the physical and natural worlds. This traditional, yet powerful, form of liberal education is most often delivered in a four-year course of study: a major that gives students depth complemented by a series of general requirements that provide breadth.

Yet when looking at the skills needed for students to be successful in careers and as engaged citizens and well-rounded people, the traditional depth and breadth are not fully adequate. Kenyon students also may participate in a rich range of co-curricular activities including athletics and community service that develops leadership and problem-solving skills. They may practice civic and personal responsibility by living side-by-side with others in an active residential village, a community that can extend around the world through the international experiences offered through our Center for Global Engagement. This grounding in life skills is not fully captured in the traditional conceptualization of a major coupled with general requirements, but it is essential.

Our challenge for the next five years is to fully articulate a third complement to the major and general requirements: helping Kenyon students apply their learning, in extended opportunities we will term high impact experiences, which will illuminate and extend the academic program.

High impact experiences – first described by George Kuh of Indiana University in his 2008 study<sup>3</sup> – are extended, intensive opportunities for students to apply their studies as they complete their majors. These opportunities are characterized by demonstrable outcomes in academic performance and retention during the college years and in successful entry into post-graduate life. A student might begin with an intensive first-year experience, then extend to options such as student research, internships, study abroad, and community-based or collaborative projects. This culminates in a capstone project, such as our existing Senior Exercise. The systematic integration of such experiences within the curriculum also provides a kind of rehearsal for future callings, allowing students to anticipate how their unique interests, skills and training might result in a

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<sup>3</sup> George D. Kuh, [\*High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter\*](#), (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2008)

career. We intend for this set of opportunities to begin with the student's initial months on campus and occur at strategic points during four years on campus. To make this possible, we will:

**(A) Strengthen the first-year experience to establish a firm foundation for success at Kenyon.**

- (1) Build a comprehensive first-year learning experience across campus, deepening collaboration between academic and student affairs programs and services.
- (2) Expand and strengthen the first-year orientation to ensure students are fully prepared to take advantage of their first semesters at Kenyon.
- (3) Establish goals for student learning (both academic and co-curricular) in the first-year; review current courses that may fit in the curriculum.

**(B) Make high impact experiences part of every student's learning program**

- (1) Ensure that every student completes at least two high impact experiences (such as study away, internship, community-based learning, and research opportunities) before graduation.
- (2) Connect these applied and integrative experiences outside of the classroom to the student's academic program through comprehensive advising that develops links between that experience and academic courses and opportunities for the student to reflect, interpret, and integrate it with the major and related independent projects.
- (3) Amplify resources for internships, community-based learning, and research by strengthening what is now offered by Kenyon organizations (such as the Brown Family Environmental Center, Center for the Study of American Democracy, Gund Gallery, *Kenyon Review*, Kenyon Institute, and Philander Chase Corporation) and by building opportunities with partners in Knox County, the Columbus area, local and regional businesses, and non-profit institutions.

**(C) Collaborate across the Kenyon community to position students for post-graduate success.**

- (1) Incorporate consideration of post-graduate possibilities within a new first-year experience that builds connections to campus services, including graduate school and fellowship planning and career development.
- (2) Create individual and group mentoring programs that connect students and alumni and develop College programming that uses alumni expertise to expand opportunities for students.
- (3) Integrate internships and other high-outcome practices into the academic program and provide students with opportunities to engage in meaningful reflection after these experiences to help prepare them for post-Kenyon work.

**(D) Use technology to help students construct individual learning programs drawing from the full range of resources Kenyon offers.**

(1) Help students envision a four-year course of study that incorporates experiential learning by developing an online planning tool to tag courses, events, study-away programs, internships, and mentoring opportunities within a given major or field of inquiry.

(2) Integrate databases for curriculum, study-away opportunities, internships, alumni mentors, and other campus resources into a single searchable resource available to the new online planning tool.

(3) Use this new platform to support advising, facilitate the search for internships and jobs, and give prospective students and families a sense of the rich experiences that Kenyon offers.

**PRIORITY II:**

**Strategically use Kenyon's resources to attract, retain, and graduate an academically excellent and diverse student body.**

The academic excellence of our student body and peer-to-peer interactions attract prospective students, for whom the rigor and quality of our academic program signal institutional prestige. For Kenyon, in turn, to capture a representative sample of the academic talent among high school graduates, we must be an institution that is attractive and accessible to students from diverse backgrounds, including a range of socioeconomic groups. This diversity strengthens the learning environment by creating a campus and classroom environment where ideas are asserted, contested, and challenged from different perspectives. For these reasons, maximizing the academic profile and diversity of incoming classes must be a top institutional priority.

Kenyon must find creative tools to reach these students of tomorrow, both within the U.S. and globally. While the College is now enjoying unprecedented success in admissions, it is crucial that we build relationships that will help us identify, recruit, and retain a student body that reflects the changing demographics of our nation and the potential of an international community. Organizations within the Kenyon sphere and our devoted alumni base are key resources, as are the potential new schools, consortia, and organizations that can introduce Kenyon to students around the world.

Financial aid and scholarship programs will be essential to attract deserving students who reflect our goals of continued academic excellence and diversity. The highest priority and best tool in this quest will be the growth of Kenyon's endowed resources for financial aid, along with developing tools to help families predict their future college education costs.

The College has an historic commitment to fully fund the financial aid requirements of the students it admits. Kenyon devotes significant resources from its relatively small endowment of about \$200 million and its operating budget to ensure both the quality of our student body and unimpeded access to a Kenyon education for our future students. Building dedicated financial aid endowment assets will be crucial to our ability to maintain this commitment as our applicant pool changes along with the country's demographic character.

We must also control our costs and focus on making our resources – including our physical plant – as efficient as possible to be able to devote as much as we can to our academic program and student

aid. This means maintaining our current size to optimize our facilities and attending to needed restoration and upgrades to preserve the longevity, quality, and service of our built environment.

We will:

**(A) Aim to make Kenyon more accessible for students from a range of socioeconomic groups, including making the total cost of Kenyon more predictable and clear for families.**

(1) Research has shown that families find Kenyon more appealing if expenses are as simple and predictable as possible. We will review and streamline our aid calculators, fees and costs beyond the comprehensive charges, and year-to-year charges and aid packages to make the cost more predictable and clear.

**(B) Reduce tuition dependence through building the endowment and employing prudent, strategic spending patterns.**

(1) Make increasing the endowment a primary priority in the next comprehensive campaign, including funding for scholarships, endowed chairs for faculty, and endowment for program support.

(2) Focus operations spending on the academic program, student support, and financial aid.

(3) Maintain the enrollment at or near 1,660 students, with a buffer of  $\pm 30$  students to optimize our facilities and sustain strong annual financial operations.

**(C) Build partnerships and pathways to bring students from diverse groups to Kenyon.**

(1) Build on the success of the Kenyon Academic Partnership and the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop to attract academically talented students from diverse groups to our application pool.

(2) Explore partnerships with other organizations to bring students from diverse groups to Kenyon, including strengthening our international network.

(3) Smoothly connect these partnerships to support and retention programs such as the Kenyon Educational Enrichment Program, building pathways from recruitment to graduation.

**PRIORITY III:**

**Intentionally build community on campus, in our local region, and in the world-wide Kenyon family that enhances the learning environment and strengthens lifelong ties with the College.**

The friendships and lifelong connections that are encouraged in Gambier are Kenyon hallmarks. The power of the educational experience is complemented and enhanced by the deep personal ties forged among alumni, faculty, staff, and students. We share more than common experience with life on the Hill – we share a true fellowship.

The strains on and challenges to our sense of community and fellowship on campus must be faced. Everyone copes with the internal demands of limited time and challenging workloads as well as the external pressures brought by changes in technology and the pace of culture that threaten to devalue person-to-person contact. Kenyon's success depends on the energy, commitment, and talent of our faculty and staff. Supporting their development is a prerequisite for future success. In the next five years, we will give attention to preserving and advancing the sense of fellowship that is encouraged at Kenyon. We will:

**(A) Support and sustain an outstanding faculty and group of employees who together contribute to the quality of the academic environment.**

- (1) Affirm and promote a commitment to attracting, retaining, recognizing and competitively compensating an elite and diverse faculty to match and reflect the elite and increasingly diverse student body.
- (2) Help faculty remain engaged and energized in the classroom and in their scholarship over the course of their careers at Kenyon.
- (3) Review faculty governance and citizenship, maximizing effectiveness of faculty service while finding balances in the many demands on faculty time. Review ways to recognize and reward faculty work (teaching, scholarship, advising, mentoring, and institutional citizenship).
- (4) Sustain and develop a strong administrative and staff community by enhancing professional development opportunities, a more transparent and competitive compensation system, effective review processes, and recognition of excellence and achievement of their work on campus.

**(B) Work to create a diverse and inclusive community of faculty, staff, and students.**

- (1) Reaffirm commitments to diversifying faculty and staff, incorporate best practices for employment searches, and leverage successful programs such as the Marilyn Yarborough Dissertation/Teaching Fellowship, which is designed to support scholars in the final stages of doctoral work.
- (2) Support the diversity of political views on campus, including but not limited to efforts of the Center for Study of American Democracy, and create an environment where students and faculty can engage in challenging discussions on potentially divisive and polarizing topics.
- (3) Create an inclusive learning environment, following the leadership of the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, through programming that recognizes and embraces the diversity of a community in which all students are given an opportunity to excel.

**(C) Foster a strong community on campus and among our alumni and parents.**

- (1) Improve ways to make information timely and easily accessible on campus and within the alumni and parent community and continue to foster online and in-person settings for our various communities to share ideas, discussions, and plans with one another.

- (2) Provide and support times for communal learning by making campus-wide programming (such as Common Hour) a priority; respect our colleagues' time and dedication to student service through streamlined and focused events programming on campus.
- (3) Recognize and celebrate excellence and achievement on campus and among our alumni.
- (4) Incorporate community spaces for students, faculty, and staff into facilities across campus.

**(D) Strengthen our ties with our local community**

- (1) Improve marketing and outreach for Kenyon events to encourage attendance by residents in Knox County and in the central Ohio region.
- (2) Develop Kenyon's profile in Mount Vernon and Knox County through participation in community initiatives and service by Kenyon students.

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**NEXT STEPS**

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These concepts are stakes in the ground, signaling our most important ambitions for Kenyon to which we will devote our time, resources, and philanthropy. We heard from our students about the skills and training they believe will be most important to them in 2020; from our alumni about what Kenyon has been and could be; and from our faculty and staff about how they believe our goals can take tangible shape on campus and beyond.

Some of our priorities can be addressed by working with what we have: good news for a thrifty college that has prided itself on financial discipline. We will coordinate effective programs on campus to focus on priorities, especially the further development of our first-year programs and high impact experiences. We must organize the strong support of alumni to open opportunities to our students and graduates. During the next twelve months, we will shift our on-campus efforts to develop and share specific plans for implementation.

Our highest aspirations – those that will continue to ensure the excellence of our student body, faculty, and academic experience – can be addressed only with new resources, particularly those that help us build Kenyon's endowment. We will continue our conversations with alumni and parents about the priorities outlined in this plan and what will be required to realize them. Together, we will move forward to develop a united fundraising initiative that will set forth and achieve our most important goals.

In this ambitious vision, there is work for all of us to help make Kenyon its best self. Together, we can make possible an even more promising future for this great College as its third century approaches.