

Fall Conference Remarks, 2012

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By Jill Tiefenthaler, President

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Welcome to the 2012-2013 academic year. I know that it was a hard summer for many of us. The Waldo Canyon Fire brought stress, worry and displacement to many of our community and two of our community members actually lost their Mountain Shadows homes. In addition, over the summer months, we tragically lost beloved members of our extended CC community.

But, as is often true in hard times, we learned a lot about ourselves, about our community. As a relative newcomer to CC, I saw first-hand what I had heard about over and over again during my listening tour last year. I saw what this community can do. During my Year of Listening, I heard from our students and alumni that CC faculty and staff are dedicated and committed; that you are wonderful role models to our students. As I often quote from one student in my listening document, "much of what I have learned from professors at Colorado College has been through example." I also heard during my faculty and staff listening sessions that the people- students, faculty, staff - are the best part of CC. That while we have had some rough years during the downturn, at its core, the CC community is a caring and warm place.

We have a saying in Iowa: the proof is in the pudding. I saw this community do its thing.

Hundreds of you offered support to those who needed it in hundreds of different ways. You felt each other's pain deeply and did whatever you could for those grieving the most. We get things done at Colorado College. When the fire started and we needed housing and food, it was Sunday morning. Still, countless numbers of you came forward to do what needed to be done and offer your support.

Over the summer, I saw this bonding and efficiency in good times, too. We had three work days to prepare for President Obama's visit (they called us on Saturday night to ask about coming on the following Thursday). Talk about efficiency, collaboration, and pitching in. We did it and extremely well. I saw our community at its best, again, just this past weekend as we welcomed our new students and their families.

This weekend reinforced my conclusions from my year of listening; this community is student-focused, warm, friendly, efficient but--most importantly--we are also a community of learning.

We can see this today: Fall conference is all about our spirit of community and love of learning. When I asked staff last year during my Year of Listening what we did right and what we should protect and grow, Fall Conference came up again and again as a wonderful example of who we are at CC. People expressed their appreciation of a day set aside for learning and community building.

In response, we are not only preserving Fall Conference but adding both First Mondays to create additional opportunities for a shared intellectual experience as well as In the Loop to improve campus community building.

I learned a lot in my Year of Listening but, most importantly, I learned a lot about this community. It is a community that rallies to support one another in hard times and in good ones; it is a community committed to creating a place of learning for our students but also for faculty, staff, and alumni; it is a community that is strong but is always looking for ways to be even better.

Last year, I stood before you at Fall Conference and spoke about the need to improve our morale. I talked about being drawn here by CC's strengths and ambitions and being surprised about the campus climate. I talked about the necessity of being a strong and unified community and challenged all of you to embrace this community and make it better.

I was worried. Would we be ready for strategic planning after a Year of Listening? Could this community come together and find some agreement about our ambitions? Could we find the enthusiasm to think about our future and embrace change to improve CC? Could we talk to each other and work collaboratively across the institution to implement the great ideas that emerge and to improve the way we do our work?

Now, I know that I didn't need to worry since we really didn't need to build a community. It was there all along, just below the surface. I saw the strength and unity of our community so many times in recent months.

So, we are ready to move! I am so happy to stand alongside all of you this year as we think about CC's future.

As all of you understand, it is a time of change in higher education. We will likely see more change in the next 10 years than we have seen in the past 50. We will likely see colleges fail. We have seen some purchased by for-profits.

I see higher education becoming increasingly what economists call a "Winner-take-all market." This is a market in which some institutions become increasingly prosperous while others struggle. I see a line in the sand – about 50 colleges and universities have never been more prosperous while hundreds of others can't fill beds.

My job – our job - is to make sure that we are on the right side of the line and that we are one of those institutions that will not only survive but will thrive in the years ahead.

What are the keys to ensuring this? I think two things will determine which institutions will thrive and which will fail.

The first of these things is rigor. I know that you have all read the papers and the criticism of higher education over the last few years. The high cost has increased accountability of colleges and universities. Is it worth it? We hear this question over and over again. You may have heard

about a book called “Academically Adrift” which has received a lot of press for its claim that a majority of college students are learning very little during their time in college. They propose that a rigorous liberal arts education is an exception. I believe that the institutions that will flourish in the future are those that provide value. Value that is not measured by what jobs students get or how much alumni earn but value that is measured by what students learn. As we know, knowledge and skill development (writing, critical thinking, public speaking) come from a demanding curriculum and demanding faculty.

What makes an institution rigorous, a place where students are learning inside and outside the classroom? It is the caliber of the student body, the quality of the faculty and staff, the liberal arts and the curriculum. These are all things that we have here- these are the strengths of CC that I heard about over and over again in my listening sessions.

In addition, I believe that distinctive institutions, those that are mission-focused and offer a clear choice rather than trying to be all things to all people, will thrive in this new environment. Again, we have much to build on. CC is one of the most distinctive institutions in the country.

In my class on Economics of Higher Education last year, I gave my students an assignment to gather the mission statements from different types of colleges and universities. It was shocking to see how hard it was to tell them apart despite the fact that they were very different institutions. They were proud to find that CC was one of the few institutions that they could identify from its mission.

Although the culture of CC is truly distinctive, our more tangible distinctions are, of course, the block plan and our place.

So we have the right foundation in the sense that our core is very strong. Why do we need a plan? Why can't we just continue to do things the same way? Well, as our Trustee and CEO of the El Pomar Foundation Bill Hybl said a few days ago when we were touring the El Pomar Sports Center, “if you aren't moving ahead, you are falling behind.” Protecting your strengths requires action, nurturing, and attention. Change is necessary to hold on to who you are. Continuing to do the same things in a changing world means you will change but that you will change unintentionally. Our job is to be intentional and to plan on how we will protect and elevate our core strengths.

As I outlined in my email to all of you yesterday, the board has charged me to lead a strategic planning process in the coming year that will do just that: gather input from the community and propose goals and initiatives that will help us be a stronger CC.

The Engaged Teaching & Learning Committee's charge is to think about how will we improve and keep current our block plan and our dynamic environment of faculty-student engagement. In a recent national survey, our students' responses put us #1 in the country in terms of classroom discussions. How do we best nurture that interaction?

I believe that place will be even more important in the lives of our future students who spend so much of their time in the digital world. As I heard over and over again last year, our campus

community, our place of learning, and our location are so important to our identity. Our Place of Learning Committee will examine how we can use these strengths of Colorado College to best educate our students.

While much of our plan will focus on nurturing and building on our strengths, many of our community members also asked if we might do one or two new things that support the core mission by increasing revenue, providing other resources, or enhancing our reputation. The Extending Our Reach Committee's charge is to identify a few promising ideas.

Finally, as I heard over and over again during my staff listening sessions, we must look at how we run the college. We must question what we do and see if we can work smarter in order to control costs, avoid burnout and free resources (time and money) for our great new ideas. The Institutional Effectiveness Committee's charge is to find ways for CC to be more nimble and flexible and at ease with change.

We had our first retreat last week. There was so much energy and enthusiasm in the room. However, this process will only achieve its purpose – of identifying the right goals and initiatives for realizing our ambition at CC of providing the finest liberal arts education in the country – if everyone is engaged. There will be many opportunities for all of you to get involved, including a community-wide retreat at the Half Block.

So, in advance, I thank you for your energy, ideas and enthusiasm. But, most of all, I thank you for making Colorado College the community that it is and for all that you do for our students and each other. I am honored to be a part of this community.