

The Future of Liberal-Arts Colleges

New York University

October 21, 2008

*William G. Durden,
President, Dickinson College*



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Liberal-Arts Colleges

A Distinctively American Approach
to Higher Education



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Good evening. I have been asked to talk to you about the future of liberal-arts colleges and to comment a bit about how Dickinson—p my liberal arts college—has positioned itself for success in the 21st century.

The central theme of my remarks: Residential liberal-arts colleges are unique American institutions that were created to fulfill a distinctively American approach to higher education. The challenge facing our institutions today is to successfully adapt their historic purpose to the complex global world of the 21st century.



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When I became president of Dickinson College in 1999, I experienced a pivotal moment that made me realize that my college—and perhaps many others—needed to do a much better job of intentionally articulating our historic purpose *and* our contemporary relevance.

Shortly after I arrived at Dickinson, I took part in a daylong hike with a group of students. I spent a good portion of the time walking beside a senior. Our conversation ranged across a host of topics, including my perceptions of Dickinson when I was a student from 1967 to 1971.

That evening, I received an email from the student that, in retrospect, became a defining moment of my administration. The student wrote that she thought of herself as a successful member of the campus community, having held a variety of leadership positions. Yet, despite all her engagement, she was hard pressed to define to herself and to others what it was to be a Dickinsonian. She knew Dickinson was “a very old college,” but what was distinctive about its history? What distinguished it from other institutions?

I was taken aback and more than a little alarmed. It seemed as though the college had lost its distinctive edge by forgetting the importance of continually articulating and refining our identity for ourselves and our students. We had slipped into a passive acceptance. We had forgotten the power of our history, and we did not realize how that history could inform and inspire a distinctive identity for the 21st century.

It was clear to me at that moment that we needed to adopt a more activist and aggressive approach. We needed to directly take on those issues that clouded the identity of liberal-arts colleges in the past. We needed to “brand” and “sell” the benefits of a distinctively American liberal-arts education to ourselves, our alumni and prospective students.

The vehicle that gave us our story was none other than our founder, Dr. Benjamin Rush. A signer of the Declaration of Independence and an amazingly progressive thinker, Dr. Rush was Dickinson’s own historic asset waiting in the wings for more than 200 years to bring identity, vision and a sense of purpose to his own institution.



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Before we return to Dr. Rush and the inspiration he offered to Dickinson, let us spend a little time exploring the historic definition of a liberal arts college and, perhaps, more importantly, the challenges these institutions currently face.

Several years ago, the Carnegie Foundation classified 225 American institutions of higher education as “Baccalaureate-Liberal-Arts” colleges. Taken as a percentage of the more than 4000 institutions of higher learning that exist in the United States today, this small group of colleges is clearly a minority. What characteristics do these institutions share?

Mission Focused Solely on Undergraduate Education

- Small size
- Small classes
- Individualized learning
- Faculty with a strong commitment to and love of teaching
- A balanced and distributed academic program
- Residential



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Mission Focused Solely on Undergraduate Education

- Student life experience that complements the academic
- Commitment to create a community of serious discourse
- Expectations of strong student engagement in and out of the classroom
- Appreciation of lifelong learning for personal and professional satisfaction



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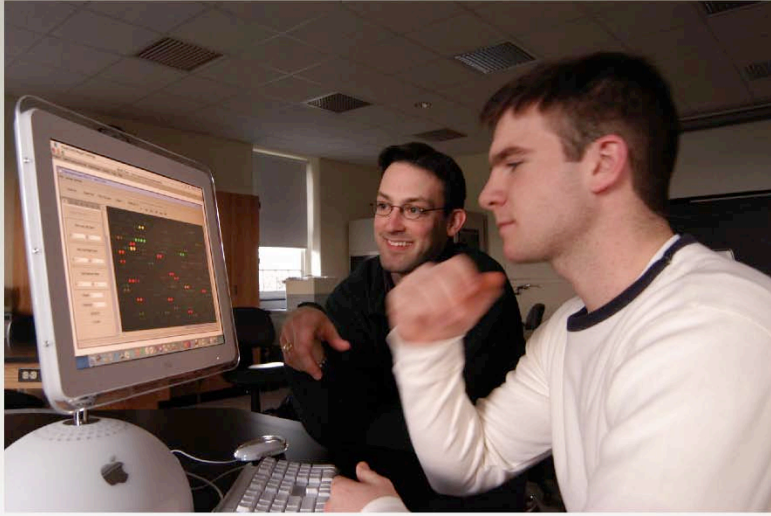




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Historical Roots of Liberal-Arts Colleges

“The business of education has acquired a new complexion by the independence of our country. The form of government we have assumed, has created a new class of duties to every American. It becomes us, therefore, to examine our former habits upon this subject, and ... adapt our modes of teaching to the peculiar form of our government.”

Benjamin Rush
founder, Dickinson College



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Liberal-arts colleges share one other absolutely fundamental characteristic: They can trace their origin to the earliest days of our republic. Founded largely in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, these colleges were established specifically to prepare students to become the engaged citizens and leaders of the new democracy.

Useful Education vs. Learning for Learning's Sake

“Be it therefore enacted, ... that there be erected ... a
College for the education of youth in the learned and
foreign languages, [and] the useful Arts, Sciences and
Literature.”

Dickinson College Charter
1783



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The founding fathers were unyielding about the importance college education would play in the future of the new nation. And their debates on the subject were passionate.

Many—like Rush, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and George Washington—argued for a “useful” liberal-arts education. This approach was in stark departure from that offered in Europe, which valued learning for learning’s sake and celebrated the “ivory tower,” monkish environment in which it occurred. This was to be a distinctively American liberal-arts education that instilled in students the practical, philosophical and moral qualities necessary to ensure the success of a democratic form of government.

“Useful,” however, was not to be confused with a vocational education, such as that advocated by Alexander Hamilton. This distinctively American liberal-arts education was not intended to prepare individuals for specific occupations, but rather to give students a rigorous exposure to traditional and emerging disciplines so that they might apply them creatively to those professions and public service that would shape the new nation. It was to give them the foundation for lifelong learning, contribution and fulfillment.

An individual educated in the liberal arts possesses the ability to:

- engage in critical and creative thinking
- pursue complex inquiry and analysis
- cross disciplines to push the frontiers of knowledge
- communicate effectively—both in writing and orally
- work in collaboration to advance society as engaged and productive citizens.



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The founding fathers, in other words, valued and articulated those qualities we expect from an individual educated in the liberal-arts tradition.

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Unfortunately, the unique characteristics of this distinctively American higher education were almost immediately forgotten by these institutions. The focus on a *useful* liberal-arts education took a back seat as the emphasis shifted to giving students broad exposure to the arts and sciences without any conscious effort to relate it to active engagement in society.

The challenge before us—and I assert, the future of liberal-arts colleges in the 21st century—lies in reclaiming our distinctive historic purpose and adapting it to the needs and opportunities of contemporary society.

Contemporary Challenges to Liberal-Arts Colleges

- Cost/Price
- Location
- Competition
- Changing Demographics
- Branding/Prestige
- Sustaining the Residential College
- Balancing Business with Mission



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Despite the fact that liberal arts colleges have been around for more than 200 years, these institutions today face some significant challenges as we move into the 21st century. Some challenges—such as cost—are shared by all higher education institutions, although I would argue that the concern over price is heightened for private liberal-arts colleges. Other challenges, more uniquely apply to residential liberal-arts colleges.

The Accountability Challenge

- Articulating Benefits
- Assessing Learning Outcomes
- Measuring Value



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Perhaps the greatest challenge we face can be captured in the term “accountability.” There is growing pressure on our institutions to explain and justify the tuition we charge. The education we offer is extremely expensive because it is extremely labor intensive.

We are facing equal pressure to articulate the benefits of a liberal-arts education. Why, we are continually asked, don’t our schools prepare students for *specific* occupations? Why do students need a broad-based education when a more focused technical training will get them a higher paying job immediately upon graduation?

At the end of the day, we are being asked to measure our worth based only on that which can be quantified. Qualitative evidence is dismissed as too imprecise as we are increasingly pressed to measure our results only numerically.

These questions challenge the fundamental premises upon which our institutions were founded, and we need to find effective and aggressive ways to respond to them.

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The Future of Liberal-Arts Colleges

“Residential liberal-arts colleges ... provide the most important kind of undergraduate education for the twenty-first century. ... They not only properly concern themselves with the appropriate ends of education ... but so, too, ... what it means to be fully human and humane, and what it means to be a good person and a good society.”

Richard H. Hersh, former president Hobart and William Smith Colleges



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I firmly believe that the future success and health of liberal-arts colleges demands that we stay the course of our initial but forgotten historic mission by adapting it successfully to the pressures and challenges of the 21st century.

We must remain passionate and confident in our assertion that a liberal-arts education is not an anachronistic relic of the past. On the contrary, in the extremely complex and multidimensional world of the 21st century, our society demands the leadership and participation of individuals who are deep thinkers undaunted by intellectual challenge.

A Distinctively American Education for the 21st century

- Rediscover, revitalize and rearticulate what is meant by a “useful” liberal-arts education
- Explore new ways of communicating the value of a liberal-arts education
- Clearly delineate the expectations of a liberal-arts graduate to our students and alumni
- Eliminate the artificial divide between the liberal-arts and business, entrepreneurship and other professions



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The key to our future, it seems, lies in embracing our past by offering a distinctively American higher education for the 21st century. Rather than apologizing or justifying those qualities that separate us from other institutions of higher learning, we must celebrate those unique characteristics. Above all, we must return to the notion of a “useful” liberal arts education and articulate why students educated in this tradition are especially well-positioned to lead in our contemporary world.

“Singapore understands the connectedness of liberal education, innovation, economic growth, and prosperity. This understanding offers a ... lesson for the United States.”

Greg Prince
Teach Them to Challenge Authority



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While liberal-arts colleges are uniquely American creations, we run the risk of relinquishing our leadership if we do not reconceptualize the education we offer.

As Greg Prince recently pointed out, emerging economic global powerhouses—like Singapore—“get it.” And it is no coincidence that nearly 50 percent of international students enrolling in Dickinson this fall are from China. They are travelling thousands of miles to receive a useful American liberal-arts education.

The Dickinson Story **Asserting a Useful Liberal-Arts** **Education for the 21st Century**

Protagonist – Dr. Benjamin Rush

Set of Ambitions – a distinctively American approach to higher education

Foil – institutions that rejected the engagement of liberal knowledge for a useful purpose



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Let's return to Dickinson and our progressive founder, Dr. Benjamin Rush. Based on my eye-opening conversation during my hike with students, I knew that I needed to find—and quickly—something that would define Dickinson as a unique liberal-arts college with a contemporary mission.

I turned for guidance to the Harvard educational theorist, Howard Gardner, who strongly advocates that leaders achieve their effectiveness chiefly through the stories they relate. What I needed was a compelling leadership narrative for Dickinson College that would capture our distinctiveness by celebrating our historic mission *and* convey a contemporary sense of urgency.

Dr. Rush proved to be the perfect package. His creative advocacy of a distinctively American higher education provided a broad historic sense of purpose, just as it provided the rationale for distinguishing ourselves from those institutions that did not share a commitment to a useful liberal-arts education. The story, moreover, would link the very purpose of Dickinson College to the advancement of our democracy—a timeless endeavor that can and must be refined and adapted by successive generations.

In Rush, I had found Dickinson's protagonist, from which naturally evolved the two other elements necessary for a successful leadership narrative: a set of ambitions, and a foil.

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Implementing the Leadership Story

- Developing a Strategic Plan
- Celebrating Points of Distinction
- Articulating Expectations
- “Branding” the College



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We had identified a compelling leadership story for Dickinson. We now had to weave it throughout the fabric of the institution. We needed to give it relevance and urgency for the 21st century. We needed to make it real by fully embracing and living the narrative, relying upon it to guide our daily decisions and our future direction.

We pursued this in these four interrelated ways.

Strategic Plan

Defining Characteristics

- Community of Inquiry
- Global Perspective
- Useful Education
- Citizen-Leaders
- Diversity
- Accountability



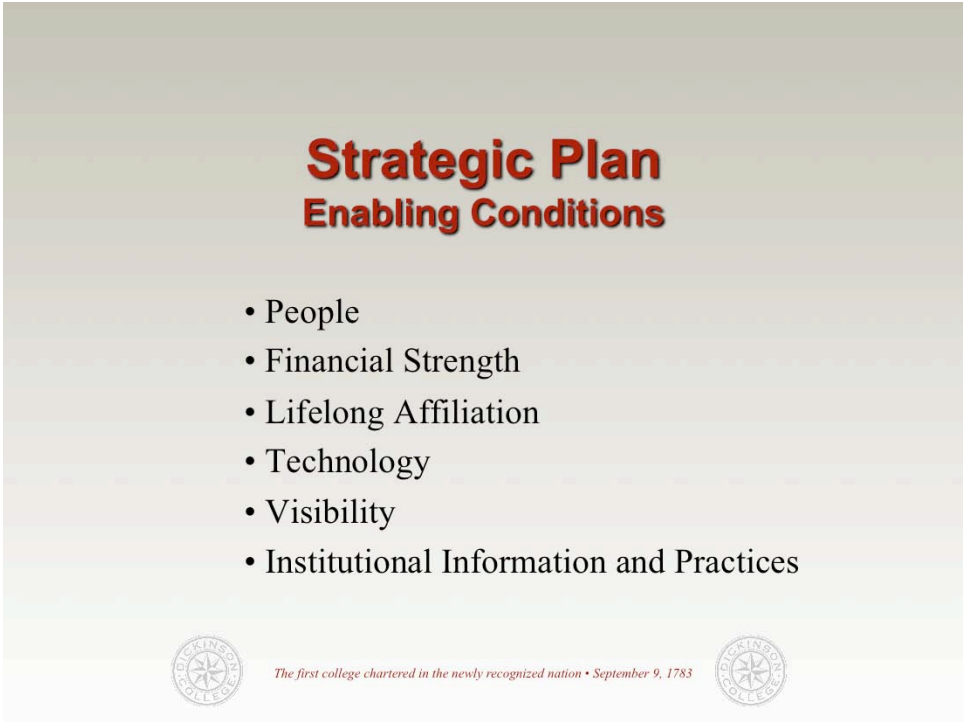
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With the three essential elements of the leadership narrative identified, my staff and I turned our attention to developing a strategic plan that would provide both long-term guidance and daily direction for the institution. The drafting of the plan—which was accomplished in just six short months—fleshed out the leadership narrative and gave it tangible specificity.



We organized the plan around six defining characteristics derived from Dr. Rush's original vision ...

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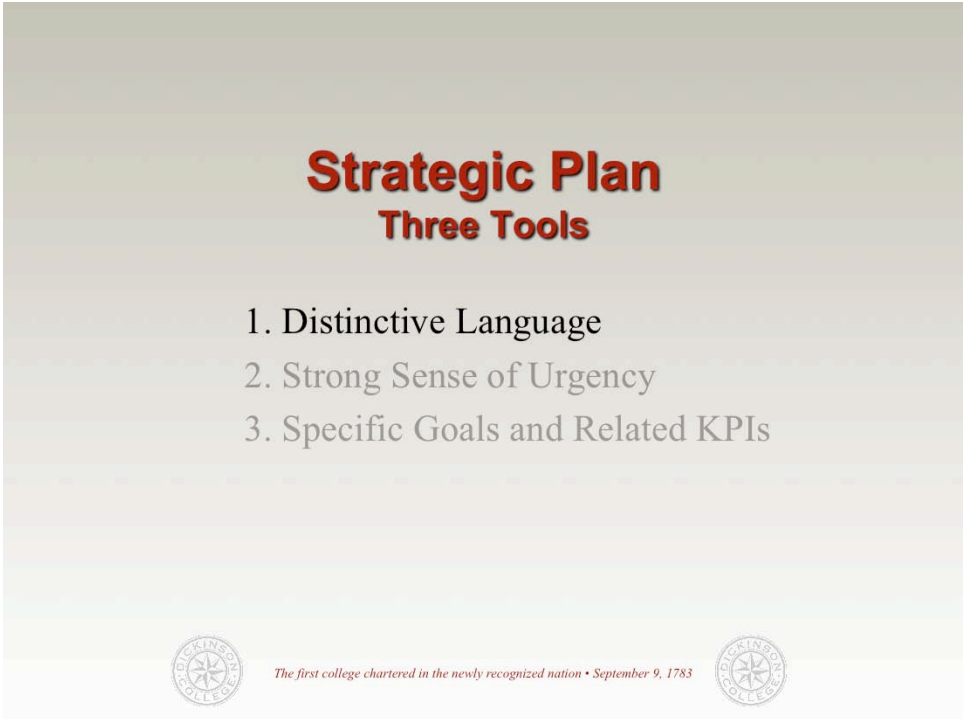
Strategic Plan
Enabling Conditions

- People
- Financial Strength
- Lifelong Affiliation
- Technology
- Visibility
- Institutional Information and Practices

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... and six enabling conditions necessary to support and fully realize the defining characteristic of a Dickinson education.

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Strategic Plan
Three Tools

1. Distinctive Language
2. Strong Sense of Urgency
3. Specific Goals and Related KPIs

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The plan gave us three essential tools that allowed us to implement the leadership narrative and strike that balance between the business side of the house and the academic program.

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Key Words & Phrases

Global	“Petulant brat”
Engaged	Intentionality
Useful	Crossing borders
Revolutionary	Bold
Transparent	Energetic
College with attitude	Distinctively Dickinson
Entrepreneurial	Turn up the volume
Sustainable	Sense of humor
Citizen-leader	Engaged citizen
Connectivity	Spunky
Outrageous	



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Strategic Plan

Three Tools

1. Distinctive Language
2. Strong Sense of Urgency
3. Specific Goals and Related KPIs



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Strategic Plan

Three Tools

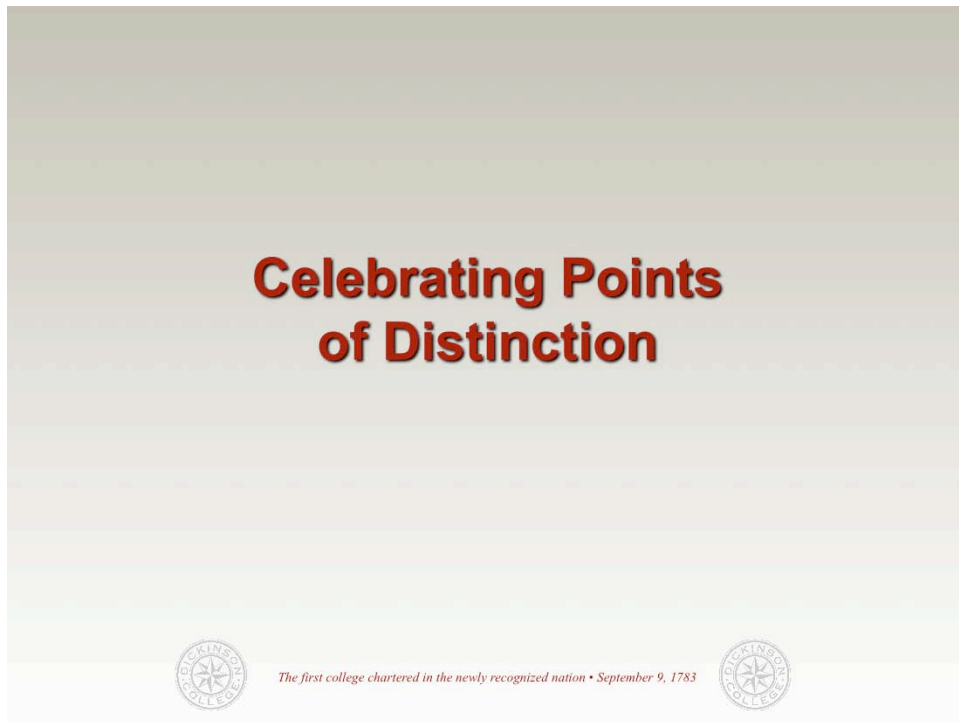
1. Distinctive Language
2. Strong Sense of Urgency
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The strategic plan and our branding efforts led us logically to focus on those academic strengths that distinguished Dickinson from its peers. This was a departure from the way liberal-arts colleges traditionally presented themselves. Typically, the emphasis had always been on the balanced curriculum, and institutions had avoided touting one area of academic strength above another.

But to remain competitive in the 21st century, we needed to identify those points of excellence, celebrate them and use them for marketing and fundraising purposes.

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Celebrating Points of Distinction



Global Education



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The first point of distinction—**global education**—was a concentrated effort in 1980s to develop comprehensive global education program.

Celebrating Points of Distinction



Hands-on Science



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The second point of distinction, launched in 1990s, was a focus on making science—and, more specifically, **hands-on science**—a defining characteristic of a Dickinson education.

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Celebrating Points of Distinction



Environmental Sustainability



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The most recent point of distinction is a campus-wide focus on **environmental sustainability** that infuses our campus operations *and* our curriculum. With assistance from a \$1.4 million grant from the Mellon Foundation, we have established a Center for Environmental and Sustainable Education to guide this effort.

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THE COLLEGE SUSTAINABILITY REPORT CARD

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Dickinson makes the grade
Dickinson College in Pennsylvania is 1 of just 15 schools to earn an A-.

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Maps

- United States: East
- United States: West
- Canada

Dickinson was one of only 15 institutions to receive an A-, the highest overall grade given in the 2009 Green Report Card, administered by the Sustainable Endowments Institute (SEI), a nonprofit, independent organization engaged in research and education to enhance sustainability in campus operations and endowment practices.



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Articulating Expectations



DICKINSON DIMENSIONS

Who are Dickinsonians? We are those who have the habits of mind and action that are formed here and in the houses of Providence as we strive to be better than we were. We hope this set of dimensions—crafted from the writings of college founder Dr. Benjamin Goddard and from the reflections of Dickinson graduates—will take on meaning during your education at Dickinson—and beyond.

DEVELOP GLOBAL SENSIBILITIES

Develop a global perspective and an understanding of the world's diverse cultures, languages, and histories. Be able to communicate effectively across cultures and languages.

ENGAGE THE WORLD

Engage with the world and its challenges. Be able to identify and analyze global issues and to propose effective solutions. Be able to work effectively in a diverse and multicultural environment.

SEEK CONNECTIONS

Develop a global perspective and an understanding of the world's diverse cultures, languages, and histories. Be able to communicate effectively across cultures and languages.

PRACTICE CIVILITY

Practice civility and respect for all individuals. Be able to communicate effectively across cultures and languages.

STRIVE FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Practice civility and respect for all individuals. Be able to communicate effectively across cultures and languages.

Develop Global Sensibility

Engage the World

Seek Connections

Practice Civility

Strive for Accountability



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Finally, we recognized that we needed to be much more intentional and specific in articulating our expectations to our students. Again, relying heavily on Dr. Rush's original vision—adapted to contemporary opportunities and challenges—we developed a set of "Dickinson Dimensions" that set forth those habits of mind and action acquired through a Dickinson liberal-arts education.

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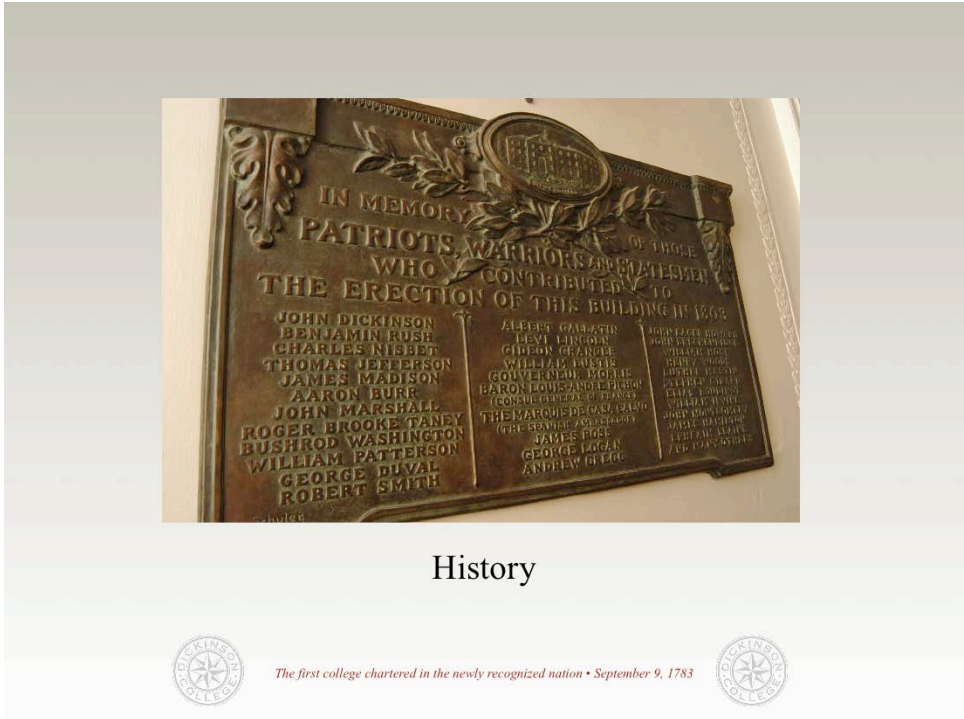
“Branding” the College



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At same time, we moved intentionally to “brand” the institution. We needed to articulate and celebrate Dickinson’s historic distinctiveness *and* give it a contemporary appeal to attract the right students and to reengage alumni with the college by conveying a strong, unequivocally confident sense of identity as an institution that embraces:



History



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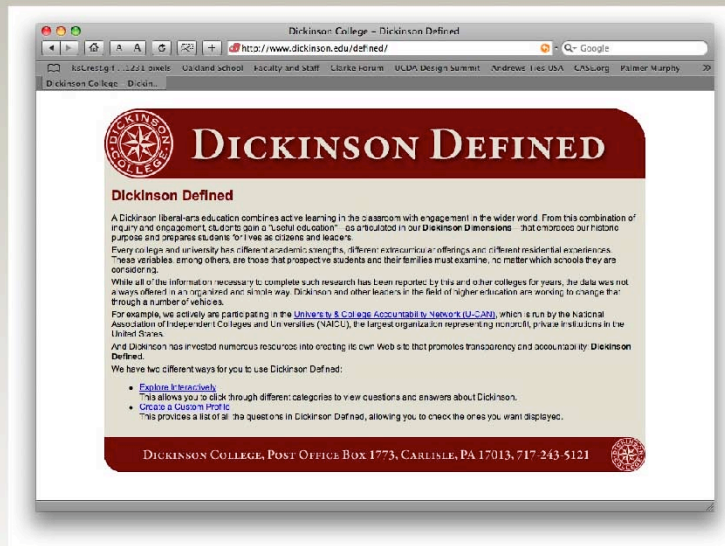


Entrepreneurship



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Transparency



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Why funny glasses?



Sense of Humor



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Official seal

1996 – 2000



Dickinson

Dickinson

Dickinson

Dickinson

1996



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We also needed to “brand” ourselves visually for our students, our alumni and the broader public.



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Dickinson

Things you can learn at Dickinson

1998

2001

Think for yourself.

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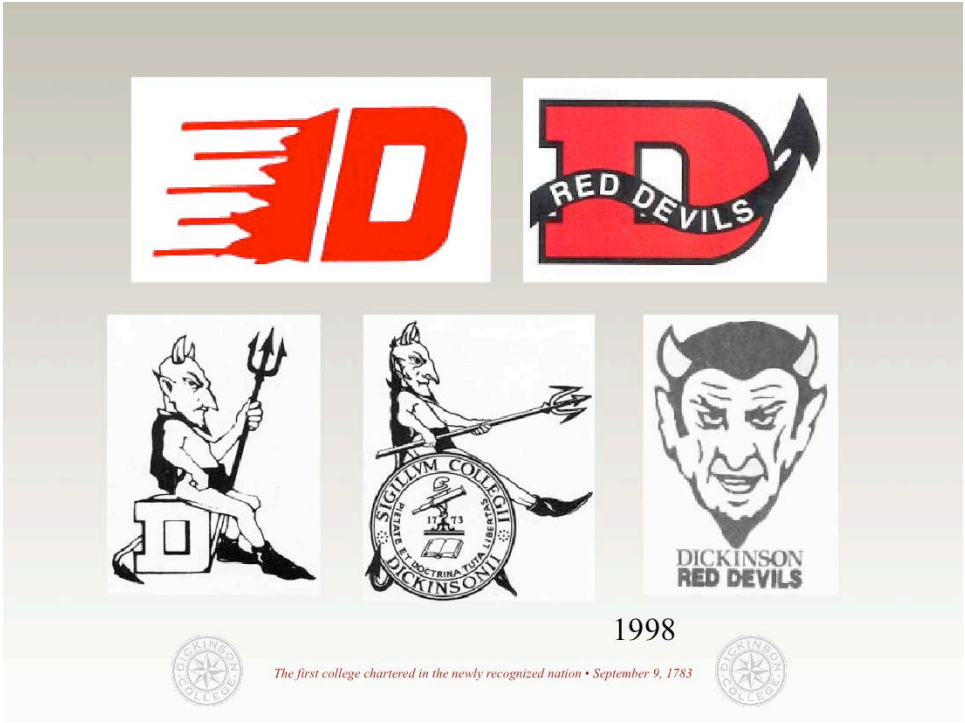
The Red Devil



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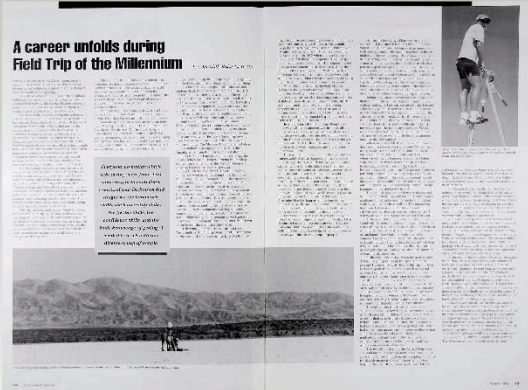
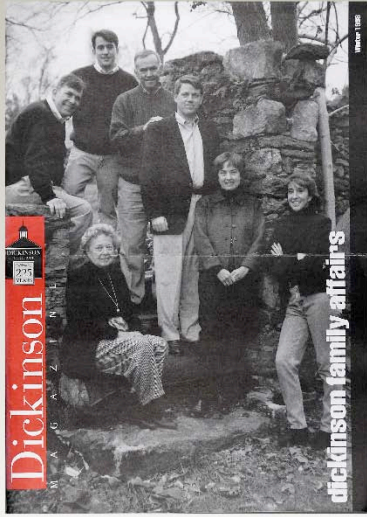
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Magazine



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1998



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The Death of Regular Time
 UNDERSTANDING THE MILLENNIALS.
 THE MOST WIRED GENERATION IN HISTORY

DICKINSON
 Night & Day
 The most wired generation in history is on the go. 24/7

2007

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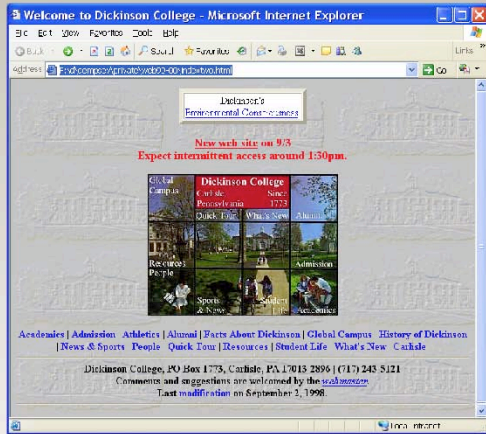
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Web Redesign



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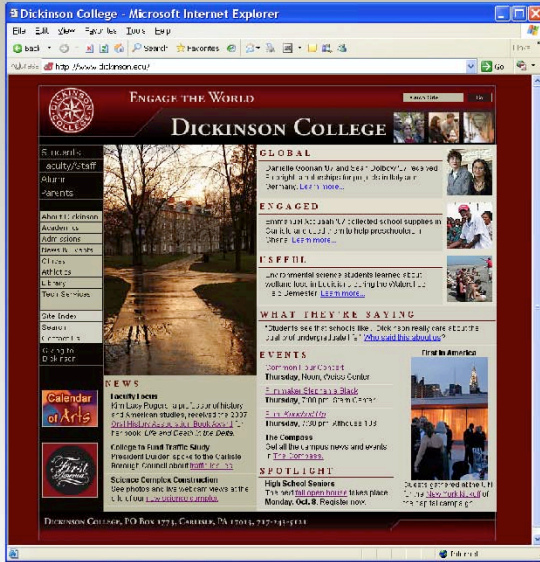


1998



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2008



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Physical Changes to Campus



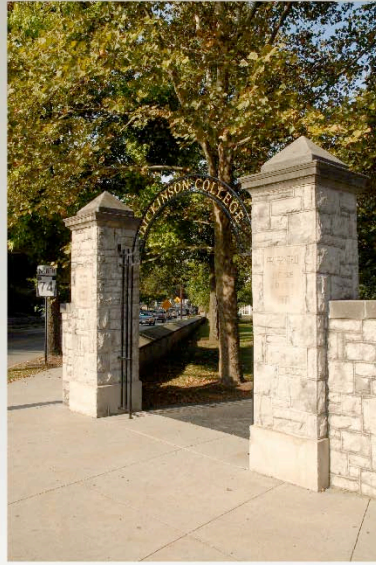
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Before



After



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Before



After



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Before



After



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Before



After



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Before

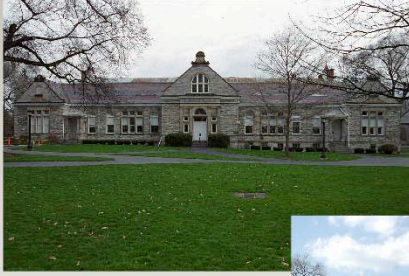


After



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Before



After



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Before



After



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How well have we done? Look at some of the transformational behaviors and resulting key performance indicators (KPIs).

Transformational Behaviors

- Campus-wide Engagement
- Business-like Administration
- Timely Decisions
- Integrated Management
- Improved Communication
- Effective All-college Committee system
- Prompt Responses

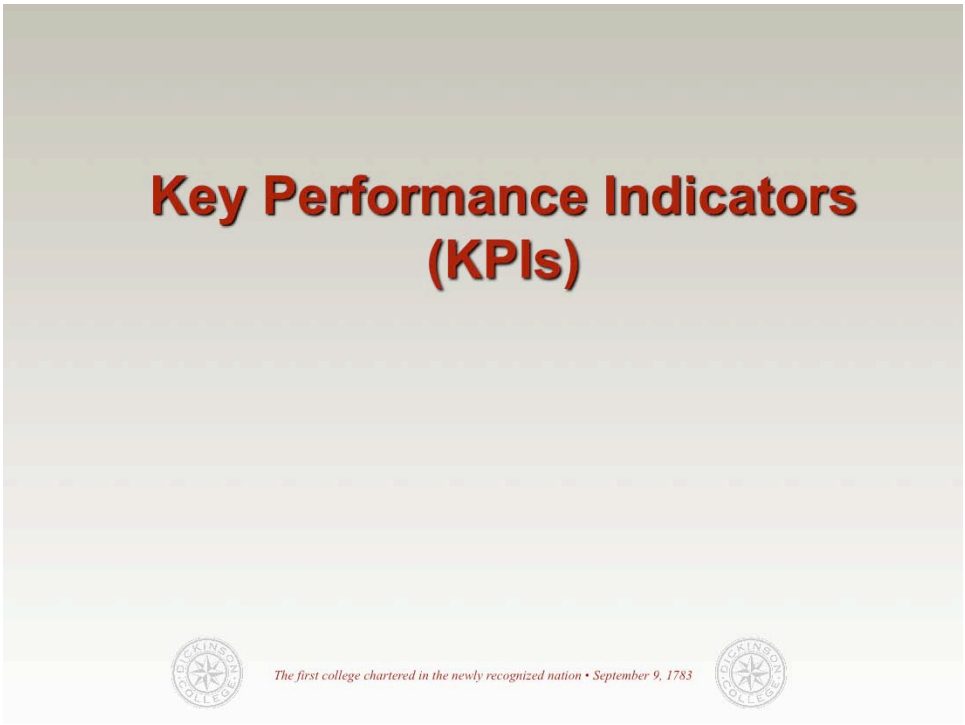


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Throughout our journey over the past nine years, the College has changed its culture. We have adopted a different approach to our daily business, and we can now identify key “transformational behaviors” that, I believe, are responsible for our success and our momentum.

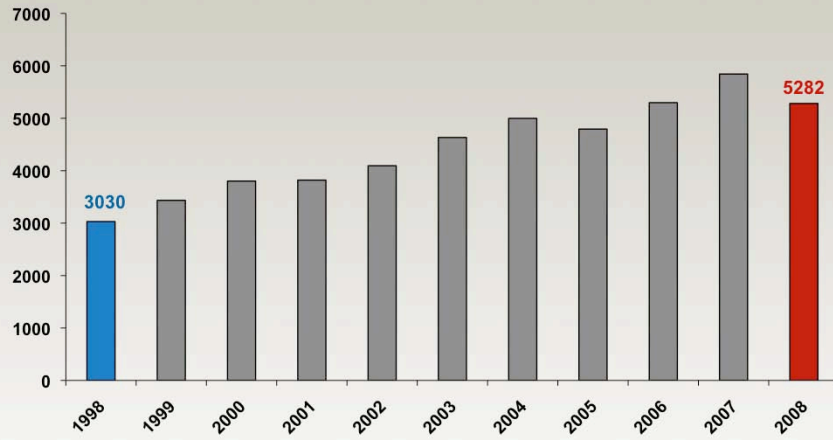
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These behaviors have translated into demonstrable effectiveness on a wide array of key performance indicators. Look at just a few:

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Applications for First Year Admissions Fall 1998-2008



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Crossover Applications

1999

1. Gettysburg
2. Franklin & Marshall
3. Muhlenberg
4. Penn State
5. Lafayette
6. Susquehanna
7. Bucknell
8. Skidmore
9. American
10. Lehigh

2008

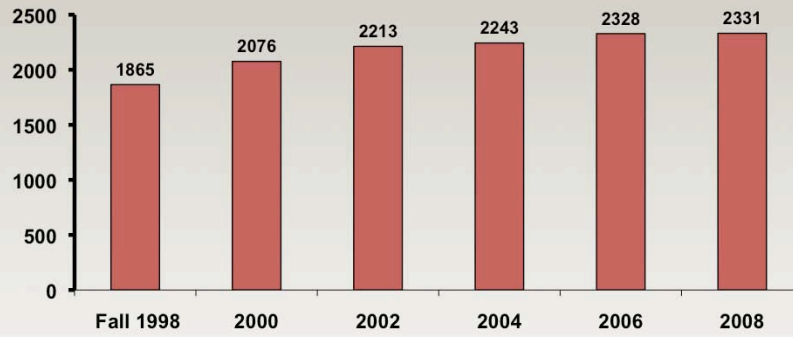
1. Franklin & Marshall
2. Gettysburg
3. Colgate
4. Brown
5. Middlebury
6. William & Mary
7. Bucknell
8. Tufts
9. Hamilton
10. Lafayette



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Enrollment Trends 1998-2008



Includes FTE matriculated students on-campus and studying off-campus on Dickinson programs.

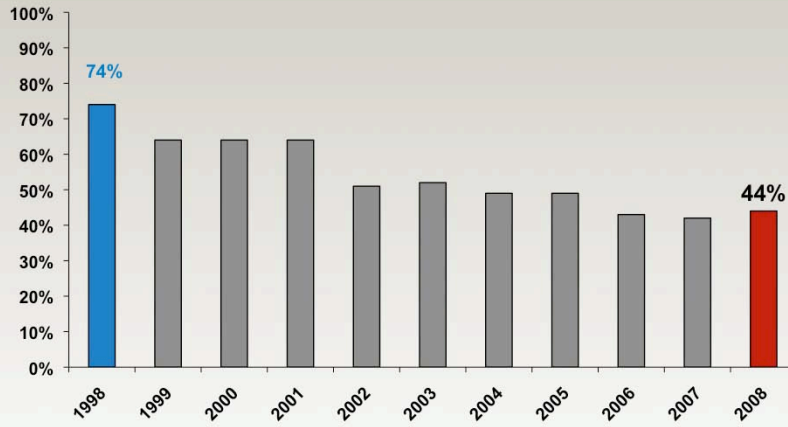


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Acceptance Rate Fall 1998-2008

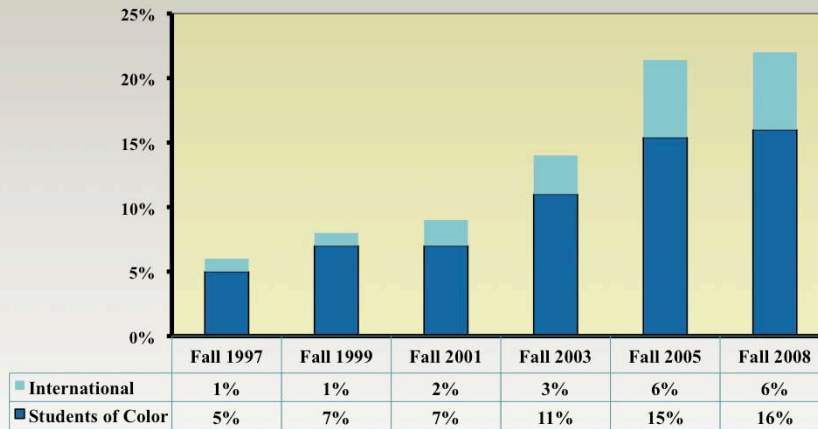


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Diversity in the First-Year Class 1997-2008

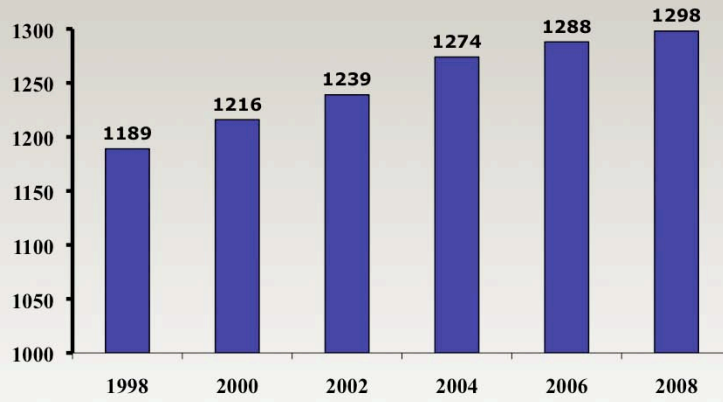


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Average SAT Scores of Enrolled Students 1998-2008

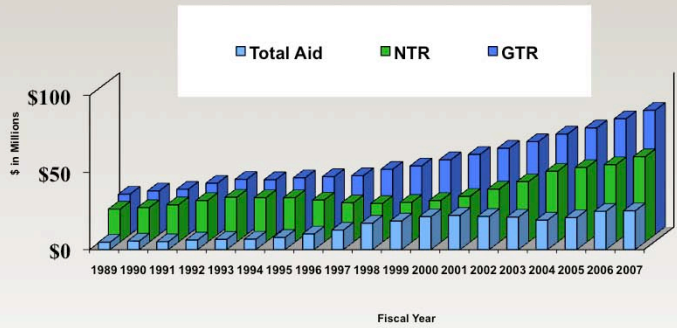


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Gross and Net Tuition and Fee Revenue compared to Institutional Financial Aid Expenditures FY 1989-2007



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Media

National and International Impressions/Hits

1997-2001

Impressions 154,926,182 Hits 971

2002-2007

Impressions 483,722,808 Hits 2,398



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“Out There” on the Issues

- Males in College
- Alcohol
- Cost/Price
- Alternatives to Rankings
- Early Decision

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



TIME

The New York Times

The Washington Post

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

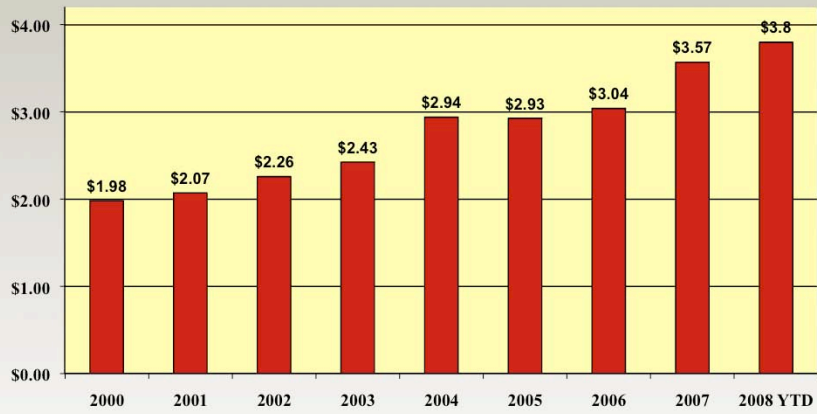


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□

Annual Giving FY00-FY08 YTD (in \$millions)

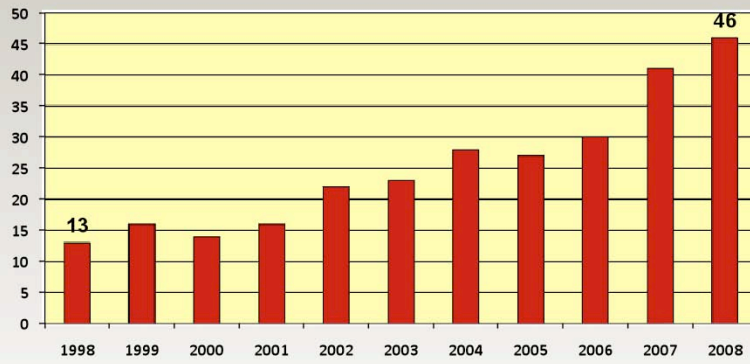


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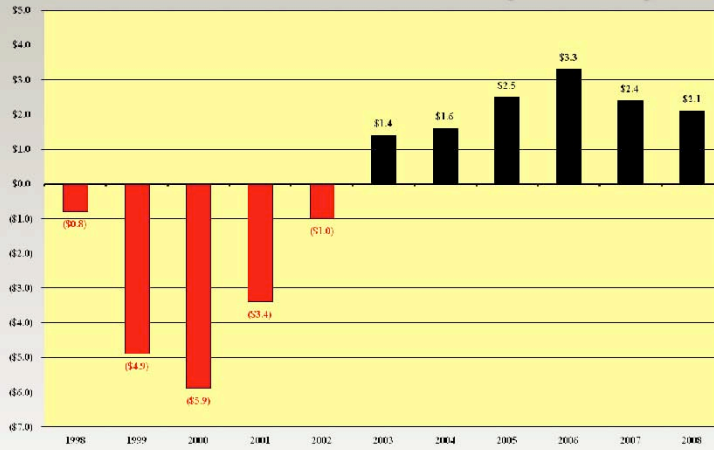
Annual Number of Gifts and Pledges of \$100,000+ FY98-FY08



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Results in Current Operations Fiscal Years 1998-2008 (in \$mill)



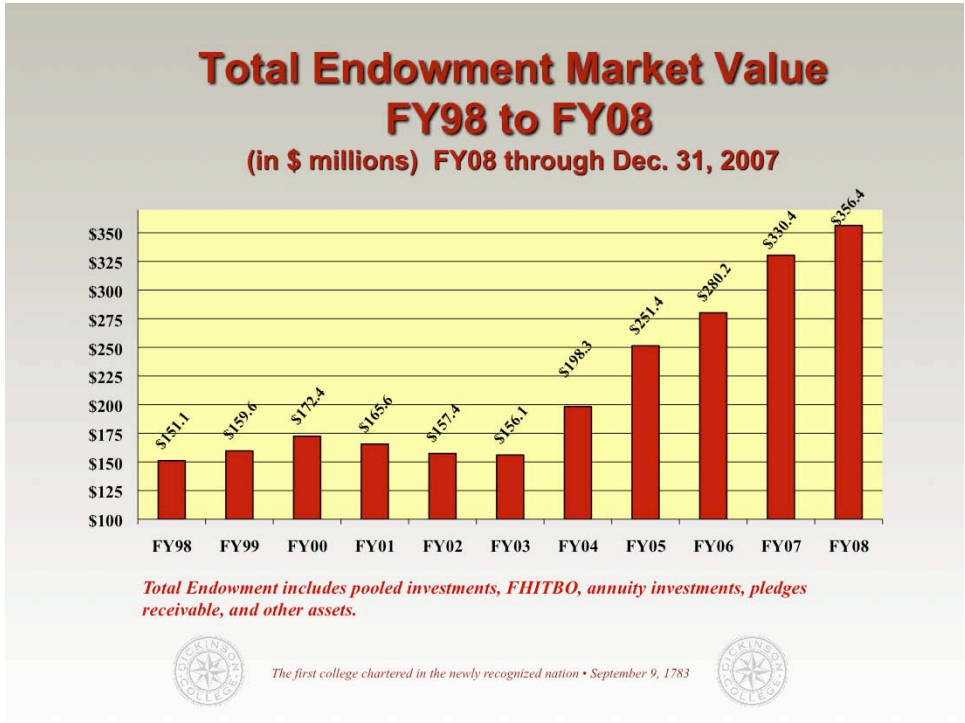
Results are net of debt service principal payments and program transfers.



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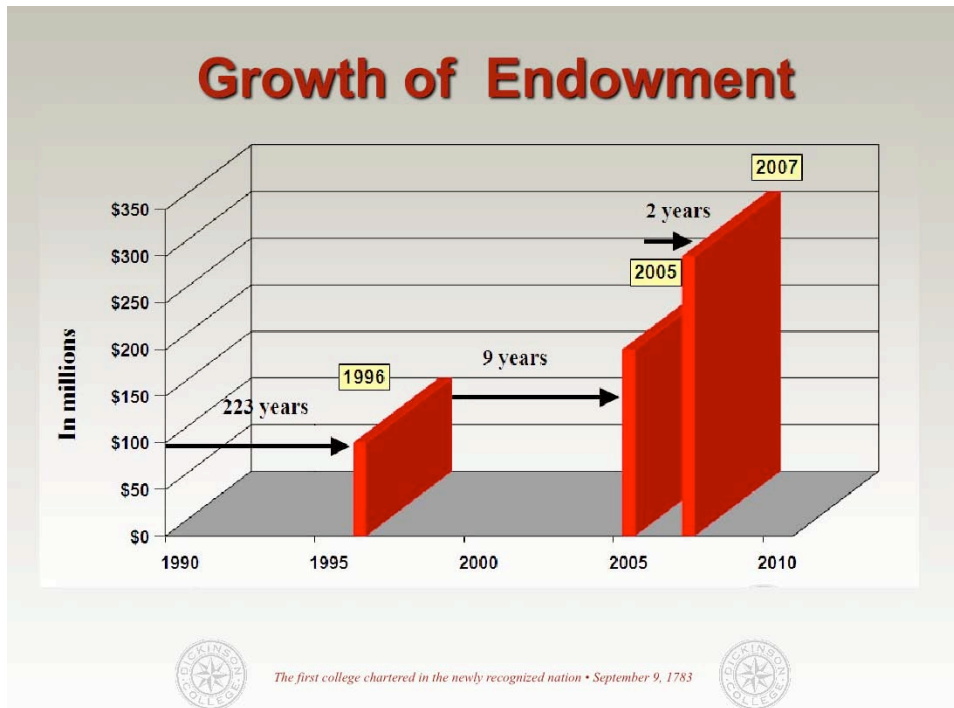


□



Of the 42 schools reporting year-end figures in the S.T.A.F.F. FY`01 Results report, 29 increased their overall giving (we were one of those); and only 17 had participation increases (we were also one of these).

□



I have chosen to put this information about the endowment and annual giving at the end for a very specific reason. I passionately believe that a liberal arts education, such as that delivered at Dickinson and our peer institutions, is an incredible value. Because of our relatively small size, our focus on faculty-student interaction, and our commitment to engaging our students in the classroom and through the residential experience, we are able to reach students and accomplish things that larger institutions simply cannot.

The education we offer is and always has been by its very definition an expensive and labor-intensive one. As we seek to attract a student body that represents our society's global diversity, we devote increasing resources to student financial aid—nearly \$30 million annually at Dickinson. We remain extraordinarily committed to what we do, and that commitment in the contemporary world means finding the resources to continue our mission.

This means that we must devote an extraordinary amount of time and effort to maximize net tuition revenue and to meet our programmatic needs through philanthropy.

Two years ago, Dickinson publicly launched the most ambitious capital campaign in our history. Our progress, to date, has been remarkable. And it should come as no surprise to you that the campaign hits the now familiar themes of our historic mission, a useful education, and a sense of contemporary urgency.

□

The Liberal-Arts College Value Proposition

1. A useful, personally crafted liberal-arts education for the 21st century
2. A proactive alumni network that delivers
3. A historically grounded narrative that provides lifelong guidance for:
 - meaningful civic engagement
 - professional success
 - personal fulfillment



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Return to idea that residential liberal arts colleges are unique American institutions created to fulfill a distinctively American approach to higher education.



A useful, personally crafted liberal-arts education for
the 21st century



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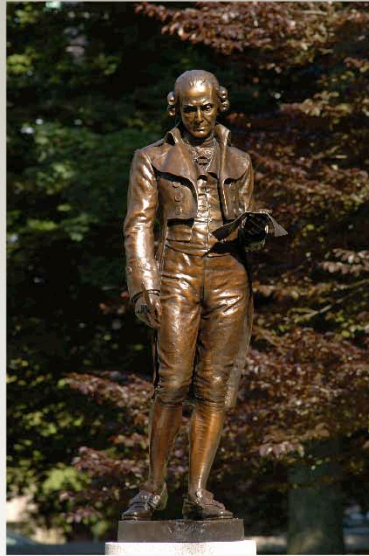
A proactive alumni network that delivers



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□



A historically grounded narrative that provides lifelong guidance



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