

The College of New Jersey Strategy Framework

Stakeholder Feedback to CSPP's Focus Group/Survey Questions

March 3, 2021

In September 2020, President Foster charged the Committee on Strategic Planning and Priorities (CSPP) with the task of developing a new strategy framework for The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), one that will establish a clear set of priorities and evaluative metrics, in addition to defining an annual review process. The committee retained the services of Ms. Laurie Schulte of The Clarion Group to facilitate the campus in the first stage of this effort.

With the help of over 50 faculty, staff, and student volunteers, CSPP conducted 39 focus groups in December 2020 and January 2021 that solicited the community's feedback about TCNJ's strengths, challenges, and potential areas of strategic emphasis. The committee held special focus group sessions for members of the Student Government and the Faculty and Staff Senates, as well as the Deans, President's Cabinet, Board of Trustees, alumni, and external stakeholders. Nearly 300 people participated in these conversations or submitted their thoughts through an online survey.

Another set of volunteers analyzed the rich content from the survey and focus groups, sorting responses by stakeholder group (students, faculty, staff) and theme. Laurie Schulte compiled the results of focus groups conducted with the Board of Trustees, the President's Cabinet, the Deans, and the alumni/external stakeholders. (We have abbreviated this group as TAES: Trustees, Administrators, External Stakeholders).

This document has three parts: 1) a summary of key themes and prominent responses; 2) a discussion of the higher education landscape; and 3) a detailed synthesis of responses to the focus group/survey questions organized by stakeholder group.

I. Summary of Key Themes

College Identity: There is significant consensus about what TCNJ does well and what it should build upon in the future. All stakeholder groups agree that TCNJ offers a high-quality, rigorous education built on the teacher-scholar model, student engagement, undergraduate research, and a commitment to academic excellence. Although faculty generally do not use the term "public ivy," the term has currency among students and staff when they try to capture the college's academic environment, which they describe as "high achieving," "ambitious," and "driven." Students frequently refer to TCNJ as offering an "Ivy League education," without "the connections and resources" but at a public-school price. Respondents from all stakeholder groups take pride in the liberal arts core, commitment to community engaged learning, low student-faculty ratio, distinction among its state and regional peers, and reputation as a "leading public liberal arts college." Previous strategic plans have described uncertainty about TCNJ's identity and dissatisfaction with the slow pace of gaining more national recognition. The 2020-21 responses were no different. Significant tension exists between the college's status as a "hidden gem" with connections to the state and local community and its desire to expand its "brand" nationally. Another area of concern is how TCNJ can extend its personalized, student-centered, and rigorous education to a new generation of students who may not be as "college-ready" as

previous generations have been. To put the matter differently, how does the college balance the desire to be more “student-ready” with the awareness that academic rigor and prestige motivate many students to attend TCNJ?

Physical Plant: Faculty, staff, and TAES participants frequently commented on TCNJ’s “beautiful campus” as an important part of making it a premier institution in the state. As with its academic reputation, the buildings, grounds, and layout of the campus motivate students to come to TCNJ. More so than faculty and students, staff and TAES participants, were conscious of problems with the infrastructure, noting that the student housing needs to be updated and renovated, especially West Hall, the Towers, and Centennial Hall. These renovations need to happen even as the college is trying to keep housing costs low. Respondents were concerned about the deferred maintenance on campus buildings and worried about the dwindling resources to maintain them. Students addressed the quality of food service, housing, and parking. The staff and TAES participants commented on the advantageous location of the campus near Philadelphia and New York City.

Financial Sustainability: The financial well-being of the college is a concern for all stakeholder groups, although the nature and intensity of the concerns vary among faculty, staff, and TAES respondents. All groups recognize that the financial condition of all but the wealthiest institutions of higher education is not strong. They recognize the challenges and the need for additional resources if we are to continue to support the labor-intensive personalized model that we offer and attract students who need financial aid. Increased fundraising from external sources, participants argued, is vital to maintaining the college’s financial sustainability. More than other groups, staff mentioned facilities costs as a significant financial threat. Faculty fear both that financial issues will result in less money to hire tenure-track faculty and that increases in spending on administrative and other functions happens at the expense of direct academic functions. They also see the diversification of programs—such as expanded certificate and graduate programs—as a way to bring in additional revenue. The TAES respondents also expressed concern about the cost to attend TCNJ and the fact that our financial stability faces serious threats from state funding that does not always recognize our distinctive nature. While recognizing the financial potential of diversification through partnerships and mergers, they feared that the college does not have the flexibility to address such options.

Welcoming and Caring Community: Internal and external stakeholders alike generally view TCNJ as a welcoming, caring, spirited, and supportive community. The campus environment is widely viewed as engaging, nurturing, and considerate; a place where “everyone knows each other” as one faculty member commented. Many describe the community as inclusive, spirited, and special, not unlike a family. Faculty appreciate the institution’s commitment to cultivating meaningful “student-faculty relationships,” though this view was shared by staff and students as well. Staff trumpeted TCNJ’s promotion of the college as a “community of care” in and outside of New Jersey. They also praised the relationships students establish with multiple offices and departments. A long-time staff member cited a shared sense of pride and attitude that “we are all in this together.” Students laud the individual attention they receive from faculty and staff, proclaiming this personalized approach as an “asset for recruitment.” Small class sizes and personal feedback from professors strengthened their connection to TCNJ. Similarly, students prize relationships developed with peers and staff beyond the classroom. Numerous students

view the community as inclusive, citing evidence of positive interaction among diverse populations. However, some caveats were expressed about the extent of our community's inclusivity. Students believe administrative leaders should pay more attention to the student body's perspective and be more receptive to constructive criticism. Deans and external stakeholders called for deeper alumni engagement to promote giving and facilitate supportive corporate connections and funding. While faculty acknowledged "the greater diversity of students," they recognize that not everyone experiences the "sense of community" that others find on campus. This concern was echoed by staff and students. A staff member seemed to capture this shared concern in stating, "For those who fit into the family, it's great, but for others it's not."

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: All of the stakeholder groups commented on the importance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). They noted that while the student body is growing more diverse and the Accessibility Resource Center (ARC) has helped to support students academically, progress must still be made so that everyone can feel that TCNJ is a place where they belong. The importance of DEI overlaps with numerous issues raised in the surveys and focus groups. Some respondents think DEI is especially important because of the decreasing number of traditional students available. Others contend that by positioning itself as a prestigious institution delivering a rigorous education, TCNJ implies a sense of elitism and exclusivity that opposes the desire to be inclusive and welcoming to all. Some faculty and staff participants comment that not everyone fits in or feels like part of the community, and it is urgent for TCNJ to become anti-racist in every way. All want to enroll a more diverse student body, and most want to be able to give every student a quality education, regardless of preparation. Some faculty noted that there will be faculty resistance to working with less well-prepared students, and faculty and TAES participants commented that more resources and training will be required. Students praised the sense of community and family at TCNJ, and were encouraged by the efforts already made towards diversifying the student body, even as they want more diversity moving forward—diversity in race, ethnicity, class ability, age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status, and thought. Students see DEI as being at the heart of academic life, advocating for the curriculum to become more race conscious and for all academic departments to talk about race. Members of the staff urged TCNJ to be inclusive in hiring practices and to provide more financial and institutional support for its employees.

Student Access and Academic Readiness: Respondents across the spectrum acknowledged institutional efforts aimed at increasing student access and academic readiness for success at TCNJ. Offices such as the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) are seen as vital to advancing access, but many believe the program alone is insufficient to address the college's obligation to provide greater access to more diverse, non-traditional, first generation, economically disadvantaged students, especially from Trenton. Faculty, staff, and students generally endorse admitting students with more varied levels of preparation and supporting them in achieving success in rigorous curricula. "Changing our student profile," one faculty member responded, will "make us a stronger and more inclusive environment." Another asserted, "We are our own worst enemy," arguing that if we don't "figure out how to make our campus and curriculum more accessible we won't survive." Some staff wondered whether TCNJ was prepared for students who are not "college-ready" and whether it can adequately compete for those students when other institutions can offer more resources and better financial packages. Like the faculty

and staff, TAES respondents believe that diversifying the student body is one of the most important issues the college needs to address in the next 2-3 years. They, along with some faculty and staff, also envision innovative pathways and delivery modes for graduate, post-graduate, and continuing education cohorts. Echoing a point made by some faculty, students would like to see a more diverse range of academic programs, but they do not want that to come at the expense of the college's "rigor and prestige." Some faculty expressed this concern, as well.

Student Support Services: Faculty cited support services such as Accessibility Resource Center (ARC) as vital, with added qualifications. They observe that some students feel well supported in the classroom, but not as much across campus. Staff praised "The eradication of silos and the increasing collaboration between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs" as supportive to student success. Students endorsed this holistic approach, arguing that "students should be considered as a whole, not just by their majors." Students, faculty, and staff universally support the college's student-centered focus, but staff and some faculty see the need to expand attention to non-traditional, transfer, and graduate students. Suggestions include enhancing or developing appropriate support systems, such as counseling for non-traditional students; career advising and networking for professional students; and possibly graduate student housing, as examples.

Community Engagement and Mattering More: All groups encouraged more community engagement moving forward. While some were impressed with TCNJ's Community Engaged Learning (CEL) program, all expressed an eagerness to do more outreach to the Trenton community, including developing more academic programs for adult learners, first generation, and other non-traditional students, accepting more students from Trenton, and having faculty work more closely with institutions in the city, including community colleges. Staff also wanted TCNJ to have more collaboration with business and community leaders and more partnerships within the city. TAES participants were most vocal in commenting on the desire that TCNJ graduates become change agents who impact issues related to social justice and the environment and encouraged more engagement with New York City and Philadelphia.

The Four Strategy Pillars: As outlined in a series of campus presentations, the pillars are: 1) Diversification of TCNJ's campus, community, and culture; 2) Differentiation of TCNJ's programs to achieve distinction; 3) Impact of TCNJ with our external communities; and 4) Success of TCNJ's students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The campus presentations included examples of potential strategic objectives and specific initiatives for each pillar. It is not clear, however, that participants were aware of these examples. (See [slides #9-16 here](#)). While a handful of faculty objected to the image of pillars itself, respondents across the stakeholder groups argued that the themes were too general or contrived to be of much use. Nonetheless, there was widespread support for *Diversification* as a strategic priority, which most respondents interpreted to mean not only increasing the diversity of students, faculty, and staff, but bringing new attention to equity and inclusion through the development of support programs. Many respondents did not recognize the broader meanings implied by Diversification, which include the college's developing new revenue streams. The pillar of *Impact* was widely read as an endorsement of community engagement and prompted many respondents to urge the college to be more proactive in creating programs in Ewing and Trenton, purchasing a building in Trenton, and offering more resources to the local community. Respondents tended not to discuss impact in national terms nor see it as being applicable to TCNJ's role in higher education. Staff

respondents especially supported *Success*, hoping that such a priority would lead to more training and opportunities for advancement. Success, to others, meant a culture of academic rigor and high achievement, especially as it recognized individual achievement. *Differentiation* was the most widely misunderstood pillar. Some respondents read it to mean distinguishing TCNJ as a unique institution among its higher education competitors. Others saw it as elevating some departments and programs over others. The TAES respondents were unusual in that they embraced differentiation as an essential tool for creating internal priorities that will enhance an external brand and position in the highly competitive higher education marketplace.

The Desire for Action: Respondents from every stakeholder group expressed eagerness to move into the implementation stage of the strategy framework. This feeling ranged from stakeholders who want to see specific inclusion and anti-racism initiatives to others who are impatient for action items that can be evaluated and assessed. How effective can a framework be, they asked, without a means of measuring our progress? For faculty and staff employed at the college during the last strategic planning process, the “Bolder, Better, Brighter” plan set lofty goals that lacked the institutional follow through to take TCNJ to the “next level.” Respondents seem more interested in learning about the specific action steps that would support each strategy pillar than the pillars themselves, often noting that the key question is “How do we define and measure success?” Faculty and staff often paired the desire for action with a desire for innovation, a concept that members of both stakeholder groups believed should have been included in the pillars. Respondents identified a number of ways that TCNJ’s culture impedes innovation. Faculty identified unnecessary bureaucracy as getting in the way of new and valuable programs and hoped that TCNJ would create an environment in which they feel empowered to innovate without facing “red tape.” TAES respondents viewed innovation as including new delivery modes and “new partner and merger models.” Stakeholders across campus see shared governance as being vital to campus decision-making, and they want more transparency about policies that are adopted outside that system. People value the opportunity to provide input on matters pertaining to policy, programmatic changes, and planning. They also value the opportunity to engage with stakeholders who are ordinarily not a part of their daily interactions. At the same time, however, a significant number of respondents believe that shared governance can slow progress, arguing that the slow-moving nature of TCNJ’s system threatens its ability to act and innovate when new opportunities rise.

Hard Choices: Like many institutions of higher education, TCNJ faces some hard choices. Respondents from all stakeholder groups recognize that in order to be effective, the strategy framework must establish a set of priorities that will determine what the college does in the future and, just as importantly, what it will no longer do. The new strategy framework will have to define a path forward that guides the college in how to choose between competing (and oftentimes equally desirable) priorities. As one TAES respondent explained, the “strategic planning process should be preparing the community to signal that we need to be more flexible and make difficult financial decisions.” Hard choices lie ahead, another replied. The situation is “urgent,” but it is not “doom and gloom.” TCNJ is “well positioned to take up the challenge.”

II. The Landscape of Higher Education

The landscape of higher education is a complex, turbulent one, and the pandemic has only accelerated long-term shifts that affect how institutions of higher education operate. Crucial shifts are occurring in areas such as the *purposes* of higher education, the *costs* of attending college, *access* to higher education, and the *accountability* of colleges and universities. These shifts have assumed a new urgency as the importance of education for individual success increases, the resources for higher education become more scarce, social justice concerns become appropriately more salient, and the need for well-educated, qualified professionals grows. The key question for TCNJ is how to develop a strategy that will allow us—and, therefore, our students—to thrive in this shifting landscape.

For many students, their *purposes* for going to college have become more vocationally focused—education as a direct path to a professional job and economic security—and less about education for its own sake. Even as the importance of an education has grown, the number of traditional-age college students from the northeastern United States who will be pursuing a college education is shrinking, including those looking for a residential college experience. The competition for this reduced demographic will be fierce. Those students will have more offers from equally desirable institutions, and many will focus their attention on colleges that can best deliver that kind of “practical” education. There are also many alternative approaches emerging—such as certificates, badges, and competency-based programs—to delivering this practical education, offered by both traditional and new non-traditional educational providers. So, TCNJ must define and articulate an educational experience that is compelling to those students while we think about offering different kinds of educational experiences to other groups.

The *costs* of higher education are increasing at the same time that the mix of sources of revenue to pay those costs is shifting. Student demand for services, both to meet academic and other needs, is increasing, so the costs of human, physical, and technological resources to meet those needs is increasing too. Declining public appropriations for higher education means that colleges must increasingly rely on students to pay the costs, reduce costs, or find alternative sources of revenue. Raising prices to students that have attractive alternatives will push those students to competitors or to protest the rising costs of a public education to legislators. Given the years that institutions have spent seeking (and finding) efficiencies, continuing to do the same things in the same way will not reduce costs sufficiently. Finally, finding new sources of revenue that are not already being pursued by other colleges is difficult. So, TCNJ must consider how to do different things, how to do the things that we currently do differently, and what distinctive new educational experiences we can offer to both our traditional students and other groups.

As the importance of higher education for individual success increases, it is even more important for low-income students and members of underrepresented and marginalized communities to have *access*. Cost is a key driver of access—if students cannot afford to pay they cannot go to college—so all levels of government and institutions themselves grapple with ways to provide sufficient need-based financial aid in times of declining resources. In addition to cost, however, factors such as a challenged P-12 education system or a lack of knowledge about appropriate options make higher education inaccessible to students who would benefit from it. And even if there were equal access, is there equal opportunity to persist and earn a degree? So as a public

institution, TCNJ must consider how wide to make initial access for underrepresented, marginalized, and low-income students and how much to focus on support for these populations during their time on campus.

Accountability comprises all of the ways that institutions of higher education address the purpose, cost, and access issues. Students expect to learn what they need to know for their own purposes and to contribute to the communities in which they live and work. Employers seek graduates who have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to be successful in the workplace. Enormous private and public resources are devoted to higher education: students and their families scrimp and save to pay for it; government, at all levels, still spends significant amounts of money to support it; and businesses, nonprofits, and foundations contribute large sums to institutions of higher education. In return, all these individuals and organizations expect that institutions of higher education will operate effectively and efficiently—that they will be accountable. TCNJ has had enviable success in meeting these accountability measures in the past. As the state government moves towards an outcomes-based funding model, however, one that rewards colleges for the total number of graduates overall and, more specifically, from underrepresented and low-income households, the college faces an accountability measure it is not used to facing. So, as expectations for purpose, cost, and access shift, TCNJ must ensure that it is continuing to demonstrate that its work is shifting appropriately.

III. Detailed Synthesis of Stakeholder Feedback

This section represents a synthesis of responses to the focus group and survey questions. The responses are organized by stakeholder groups in alphabetical order: Faculty, Staff, Students, and Trustees, Administrators, External Stakeholders (which we have abbreviated as TAES). Variations in the questions will be noted below.

Describing the College: CSPP asked the participants to offer a brief word or phrase to describe the college. Several prominent themes emerged. (TAES focus groups were not asked this question.)

- **Faculty** repeatedly described the college as being “student focused,” “student centered,” “collaborative,” and a “committed, engaged, generally collegial place.” They described the “rigorous academic environment,” the way “student-faculty relationships” are valued, and a campus where “everyone knows each other.” TCNJ offers a “high quality education.” Some faculty described the college as being perpetually “in transition” and uncertain of where it was headed.
- **Staff** respondents offered many of the same descriptions, touting the “highly engaged group of faculty, staff, and students” and the “commitment to excellence in all that we do.” Staff described the college as being “welcoming,” “engaging,” “academically focused,” and “highly regarded.” TCNJ, according to staff, has “dedicated employees” with a “commitment to success.” Staff members were more prone than faculty to describe the college as “high achieving/ambitious/driven” and to be a “public ivy.”

- **Students** frequently used the phrase “public ivy.” Student respondents repeatedly referred to the “quality education” they received at TCNJ, something they associated with an “Ivy League Education” grounded in the “Student Faculty Ratio,” the “welcoming environment,” and the “Accommodating,” “Community Oriented,” “Friendly,” “Tight Knit Community.” The “unique thing about TCNJ is it’s striving to be inclusive in various ways,” one student commented. The “Inclusion of all groups is important.”

Question 1 asked participants about the one or two things that have made TCNJ successful and that the college should build upon.

- **Faculty** identified TCNJ’s success in offering a “high quality, high value education,” which has positioned us within the state as one of the premier institutions.” TCNJ’s “small class sizes,” “rigorous attention to students,” “commitment to research” and “beautiful campus” are the basis of its reputation and should be the basis for its marketing and recruitment strategies: “a high-quality undergraduate education and campus experience at one-quarter the price of prestigious (and not-so-prestigious) private colleges.” Faculty touted the “distinctive undergrad programs with a very personalized education,” the “focus on undergraduate teaching,” “the ability of professors to perform research and expand their knowledge,” and the potential for collaborative, interdisciplinary work between schools. Noting the college’s origins as a normal school, numerous faculty praised its public mission, especially its commitment to Community Engaged Learning (CEL). The college has “very community service oriented” students and should build on its CEL programs in the future. “We have a culture of faculty and staff,” participants stated, “a critical mass of really smart, committed faculty great at their jobs and meeting the ‘sweet spot’ of teaching and engaging students and incentivizing research and scholarship.” Faculty spoke at length about equity and inclusion, noting that “TCNJ is more interesting now that there is greater diversity of students,” but not everyone experiences the “sense of community” that others find on campus. Faculty applauded offices such as the Accessibility Resource Center (ARC) but added qualifications. “Students feel well supported in the classroom, but they don’t feel well supported in the college.”
- **Staff** participants praised TCNJ’s “sense of community,” its “great job hiring faculty and staff,” and its capacity to promote itself as a “community of care” in and outside of New Jersey. The college has “built its reputation around academics and done a great job at receiving and retaining students because of our strong programs.” Students come to the college with the “mindset that ‘I chose TCNJ’ and with that mindset they know what they’re getting even when we don’t have the resources we need and then run into pitfalls.” Staff members touted the beautiful, welcoming campus and the relationships students establish with multiple offices and departments. The eradication of silos and the increasing “cross collaboration between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs” received repeated praise in that it “allows students to be successful” and reach their goals. One staff member who has spent a career working in higher education suggested the college promote its strong sense of community: “There does seem to be an attitude of ‘we are all in this together’.” Staff pointed to our “quality admissions process,” “high rankings,” and reputation among employers” as traits to build upon. TCNJ’s success, it was noted, can

also be a “double-edged sword” in creating “a sense of exclusivity.” The college faces economic challenges, and while it has learned to “do a lot with very little,” it “can’t keep cutting funds for services and materials.” Those challenges come as the college recognizes that it is a “work in progress.” TCNJ is “successful as a family community if you fit into the family,” one staff member explained. “For those who fit into the family, it’s great, but for others it’s not.”

- **Students** praised the high-quality education they receive at TCNJ, arguing that, along with merit scholarships, the individual attention they receive at the college is an “asset for recruitment.” Noting the small class sizes, personal feedback, and connection with professors, they repeatedly mentioned how, from student organizations to the classroom, they found the community welcoming. A characteristic statement was that “Faculty made the student experience better and . . . are accessible outside teaching hours.” “Professors can be supportive in times of stress,” a trait that seemed especially notable during the pandemic. The college as a whole provides “a well-rounded support system – from incoming freshman through career support post-graduation,” according to one student. Numerous students highlight the tight-knit TCNJ community. “The community at TCNJ is what I fell in love with the first time I toured,” one student remarked, concluding that “this sense of community is derived from the great academics the college has to offer.” The visit “made me feel as though I already went to school there and belonged to a part of a special, spirited, committed family.” Some student respondents singled out the college’s diversity and commitment to inclusion as a quality to build upon in the future. “For me, when choosing a college, it was crucial that there was a diverse population,” one student wrote. “Not only that there was a diverse population but that the college had specific, concentrated efforts at making inclusion very important.” Another described the “inclusive, positive, family environment where everyone is valued no matter their race, gender, etc., with all people intermingling.”
- **The TAES participants** attribute TCNJ’s success to academic excellence, citing the teacher-scholar culture, commitment to signature experiences, recruitment, retention, and support of “great students and faculty,” and its high graduate and medical school acceptance rates. The responses echoed some of the same themes found in the earlier groups: the “pride and passion” of the college community, the relationships among people and groups, the student-centered educational environment and the emphasis on personal development and mentorship. TCNJ has a beautiful campus with a “quintessential college feel,” one that “feels like a small liberal arts college” that “distinguished itself from the other state and regional institutions.” TAES respondents mentioned that the college’s residential life gives it a “competitive advantage” as do the “storied winning tradition” of its Athletics program and the “wonderful” Gitenstein Library and STEM building. TCNJ has a distinct and consistent brand – “High quality, high touch.” Some would describe the college as a “hidden gem,” a phrase that rankles others. The Board of Trustees praised the excellence of the faculty, staff, and administration and described how stability in the presidency contributed to the college’s success in that its presidents were able to build on what preceded them rather than start anew. The President’s Cabinet and Deans touted the way that, while it may seem to

impede our flexibility at times, the shared governance system creates a sense of belonging in which all stakeholders are embedded in the institution.

Question 2 asked participants to imagine that it is ten years from now and TCNJ has moved to “the next level.” What has the college done to make that change? Standard follow ups to this question were “What might TCNJ be doing better? Have stopped doing? Have begun to do that is new?”

- **Faculty** identified numerous ways in which the college can better its position over the next ten years. Many associate this with achieving national recognition. “We sell a degree with our institution’s name on it,” one faculty member said. “If that name doesn’t help them get a job anywhere outside central Jersey, then we are failing.” We need to become “uncomfortable” with being a hidden gem, another participant stated, though others point out that TCNJ cannot achieve that recognition until it spends more time identifying and communicating its position in the marketplace to its individual schools. Some faculty would like to become more involved in recruiting students, using their expertise and creativity in communicating the value of their academic programs. There is widespread faculty consensus that the college needs to address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. “We need to make a change toward being anti-racist,” one faculty member said. “Race relations success should be our “North Star!,” another commented. Faculty want the campus to commit to “a more diverse student population” and create programs that “take any student with any level of preparation and turn them out with a degree that is rigorous and leveled across the student population.” Faculty envision fully supported, collegewide academic programs that prepare students in writing and math that can support them throughout their college career. (This could replace the Honors program, one faculty member commented.) Faculty would like to see changes in the curriculum and pedagogy employed at the college, using the lessons learned during Covid-19 to develop more flexible modes of delivery and expand our reach to non-traditional students and the local Trenton community. TCNJ should develop programs at the continuing education and masters and post-graduate levels that can serve community leaders and organizations, and it should develop a closer relationship with Trenton by accepting more students from the city and having faculty work directly with its schools. Other faculty focus on the current curriculum, urging the college to maintain its liberal arts core, do a better job explaining the value of liberal learning, and build on its reputation as a “leading public liberal arts college with the addition of 5-year (4+1) programs in targeted areas.” Faculty recognize that many of the college’s aspirations depend on developing new revenue streams to protect academic programs, support underprivileged students, and continue the focus on personalized learning. This will require more engagement with alumni and better fundraising.
- **Staff** members want the college to make a similar commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, arguing that they should be “interwoven into everything we do.” In ten years, TCNJ should be a “destination employer,” attracting its diverse staff with increasing amounts of financial and institutional support. Part of this entails the college’s becoming “more involved in the local community” by listening to its needs and investing in its success. In ten years, staff members would like TCNJ to have a physical presence in

Trenton and be working with community and business leaders to offer resources to and create partnerships with the local population. One respondent envisioned a “start-up incubator for forming business partnerships.” Staff members believe TCNJ would benefit by offering more graduate programs and increasing the rigor and expectations of its current programs. TCNJ should offer continuing education and adult learning programs and broaden its view of the “‘student experience’ to include working adults.” As did the faculty, staff participants see opportunity in blended learning and other hybrid programs and the potential to create reciprocal agreements with international colleges. Staff were more inclined than faculty to talk about the college’s need to fix its infrastructure problems by modernizing student housing and renovating (or replacing) its tired buildings. (One respondent pointed out that the college has done a good job of making sure housing costs remain fair and equitable.) Staff also saw the need for better student support by mentoring transfer students and improving academic advising. Like the faculty, staff see the need for a firmer financial footing and increased fundraising, especially as it supports marginalized populations who have difficulty participating in internships, leadership training programs, and Global Engagement.

- **Student** respondents focused on the on-campus experience, envisioning facilities improvements (such as better parking, food service, and dormitories) and having more buildings accessible during the weekends. In ten years, they would like the college to be a more inclusive environment. This means both “long institutional change” with regard to “race, ethnicity, class ability, age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status.” It also involves graduate students and commuters who would benefit from better parking and a more accessible scheduling grid. A similar theme appears in student desire for an expanded career fair that represents all majors and a better alumni network that helps with internships and job placement. Students would like the campus to be more connected to the community (a Bonner-style program made available to all) and can envision the college opening another campus to extend its reach. Students believe administrative leaders should pay more attention to the student body’s feelings and be more receptive to constructive criticism. While they would like advisers to receive “proper training and be more helpful,” students believe the college has a “competitive advantage” in keeping its average class size small and maintaining a good student faculty ratio. They would like to see a more diverse range of academic programs, but they do not want that to come at the expense of the college’s “rigor and prestige.” It is notable that students did not see online and hybrid learning as something they would want to become more a part of the TCNJ experience.
- **The TAES respondents** identified many of the themes addressed by faculty, staff, and students. Despite the changing demographics, they want the college to achieve financial security/stability, knowing how to make strategic enrollment decisions and attract the students it wants. In ten years, they want TCNJ to have diversified its revenue by expanding its reach beyond traditional undergraduates and creating more flexible and tailored graduate programs, “pathways for paraprofessionals and other non-traditional students,” and community college relationships. This innovation includes considering “new partner and merger models” and expanding the college’s footprint with new delivery modes. The TAES focus groups hoped that in ten years TCNJ would be more

open to change and more confident in its capacity to make hard decisions and try new things. Ideally, respondents said, we would be “focused on a limited number of strategic priorities” and be “more nimble to respond to market-driven needs.” Talking about the need for financial security, another described our lack of flexibility to the difficulty of “moving a couch upstairs.” The TAES respondents also talked about the need to improve our reputation and branding, hoping that in ten years, “we are doing a good job of describing why the experience of TCNJ is valuable” and we are known for what we are best at. Our graduates should be “recognized and respected as change agents” who impact social justice and environmental issues. Employers should recognize that TCNJ graduates “have a foundation in these issues.” As did the other stakeholder groups, the members of the TAES focus groups want to create more access to first generation students, making all parts of a TCNJ education (study abroad, research, etc.) available to them. They envision partnerships that would create a “pipeline of students from diverse populations” both entering the college and leaving it for graduate school or employment. The Trustees are committed to making sure that Black and Brown students graduate from the college in four to five years instead of more. Recognizing that the current system rewards the privileged, the Deans want to change the way students register for courses and the GPA requirements for progression in a major. The college’s external stakeholders would like the college to strengthen its engagement with New York City and Philadelphia “to grow career and networking prospects of students and graduates.”

Question 3 asked focus groups to consider the many challenges facing higher education (limited state support, inequities in access and outcomes, a declining number of traditional-age applicants, rising costs, and more competition for talented students.) In this environment, we asked, “what are the biggest threats to TCNJ as an institution? Which ones do we need to address over the next 2-3 years?” (Students were not asked this question.)

- **Faculty** identified the declining number of traditional students as a primary threat to TCNJ, suggesting that the college needs to diversify the kinds of students it attracts (e.g., transfer, non-traditional) and make the case to government officials that TCNJ has something important to offer the state. How does the college communicate the value of the liberal arts and develop a vocabulary to describe how its service-based mission benefits from a grounding in the liberal arts? Faculty question whether we want to work with all kinds of students or just academically successful students with some advocating that we need more funding to recruit talented students and others arguing that we need to dedicate more resources to support equally talented, but less privileged students who are neither well-prepared nor confident when they arrive on campus. Some faculty envision that learning how to be more supportive and less rigorous will be a significant challenge for their departments. According to faculty, these challenges are exacerbated by financial concerns and shifts in state funding model. Is the relatively high-cost TCNJ model of higher education sustainable in the current climate as it depends on students who can pay full tuition and room and board? As the college indulges in “administrative bloat” and increasingly relies on Student Affairs to balance the budget, some faculty charge, it will become more difficult to hire tenure-track faculty, thus eroding the core mission of excellent teaching. A number of faculty expressed frustration with the college’s lack of direction, complaining about a “lack of ambition,” a “limited scope of vision,” and an

“inability to imagine” a path forward. “We are our own worst enemy,” one faculty member commented, arguing that if we don’t “figure out how to make our campus and curriculum more accessible we won’t survive.” Members of the faculty expressed a strong desire to “operationalize strategic planning.” Respondents expressed enthusiasm for expanding the graduate offerings by offering certificates, developing articulation agreements with community colleges, and automatically accepting alumni into graduate programs. Covid-19 has threatened the core of TCNJ, some faculty believe, and might offer the college an opportunity to open satellite programs and partnerships it would not normally consider. This will require more faculty support and a recognition that we have an aging professoriate and thus need to “recruit more faculty with a vision of 10 years from now.”

- **Staff** also identified the declining number of traditional students as a primary threat, linking it to the need for new revenue streams. Pointing to recent success of Rowan and Ramapo, they worry that TCNJ may have priced itself out of the public market, while it does not have enough funding to compete with private schools and universities. Staff respondents suggested numerous opportunities to meet this challenge: among them, establishing partnerships with corporations, hospitals, and businesses to provide co-op programs, marketing our commitment to developing “the whole person,” not just the intellect, doing more outreach programs to local middle and high schools, recruiting outside the state more heavily, pushing up the admissions announcement date, and developing more graduate and certificate programs. Taking advantage of our location, we should develop more internships in New York and Philadelphia, including “micro-internships” to help build resume experience. Staff members remain enthusiastic about the college’s “Student Scholar focus,” but they see the need to extend that focus to non-traditional and graduate students. The challenge of making that shift is developing the support systems needed for such students. Can we develop counseling for non-traditional students or a Career Center that caters to individuals in mid-career? Can the college offer graduate student housing? Staff members feel that they need more management training to do their jobs well, especially as they enter new offices or positions. Finally, in contrast to faculty, staff saw the condition of the college’s buildings and grounds as a significant threat, wondering how it will afford the renovations needed in West Hall, Forcina Hall, the Towers, and Centennial Hall, and commit to a master plan.
- The members of the **TAES focus groups** were also troubled by the deferred maintenance of the college’s physical plant, believing that the college needs to be guided by a strategy in deciding where to invest its resources. The declining state appropriations and the current funding model that “lumps us in” with other state institutions risks our relevance and quality. Like the faculty and staff, TAES respondents believe that diversifying the student body is one of the most important issues the college needs to address in the next 2-3 years. This goes beyond recruitment and extends to serving and supporting diverse students when they are here, offering them networking and mentoring opportunities that give them a sense of community. Respondents envision regional and national partnerships with organizations that drive Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and expanding our admissions process to include students who, with enough support, could do well here. The TAES focus groups named the cost of education as another major threat as it is

closely tied to business decisions. TCNJ is relatively high cost, but it also has a higher value, and respondents believe that the college needs to make the distinction between “cost of tuition” and “cost to degree” compared with its competitors. Covid-19 has changed the way we think about things, one respondent commented, and it has opened opportunities for certificate programs, continuing education credits, and online degrees. Like some faculty respondents, TAES respondents identified fear and complacency as major risks facing TCNJ, fearing that an “inexperience with saying No” and “resting on our laurels” will threaten our future success. Deans and External Stakeholders would like to see more robust alumni engagement and giving and to see more corporate connections for funding and student employment possibilities.

Questions 4, 5, and 6 asked focus group participants to respond to four potential “strategy pillars” that President Foster has mentioned in various campus presentations over the past year. These pillars would guide decisions about how TCNJ identifies strengths and invests in the future.

- 1) Diversification of TCNJ’s campus, community, and culture
- 2) Differentiation of TCNJ’s programs to achieve distinction
- 3) Impact of TCNJ with our external communities
- 4) Success of TCNJ’s students, faculty, staff, and alumni

Although the campus presentations included examples of potential strategic objectives and specific initiatives for each pillar, and participants were encouraged to review these, it is not clear that focus group participants were aware of these examples. (See [slides #9-16 here](#)).

Question 4 asked participants what excited them about these pillars.

- **Faculty** response to the pillars was divided. While some thought the pillars accurately reflected campus conversations and conveyed “lofty and important goals,” others dismissed them as “meaningless jargon.” “The pillars are fine if this is an advertising strategy,” several faculty members commented, “but it isn’t a plan.” There was a general consensus among faculty groups that the pillars had to be backed with a concrete action plan. Some faculty members endorsed the **Differentiation** pillar, urging the college to explain how it is different from other public colleges in the tri-state region and fearing that the School of Education is the only program we are known for. Other faculty suggested that the college advertise its retention and graduation rates, as well as the employment record of TCNJ students. Some faculty interpreted differentiation to mean drawing distinctions between TCNJ programs, and there seemed to be confusion about what differentiation meant. The **Success** pillar received a lot of support from faculty who argued that “our high standards are what differentiates the school from all of the other NJ state public schools.” To emphasize success, faculty pointed out, necessitates the campus developing a better system for “sharing and acknowledging what great things faculty (and students) are doing in other departments. Discussions of the success pillar dovetailed with the **Diversification** pillar, especially in that we need to accept students who would most benefit from “our excellent, supportive education.” Many faculty endorsed the diversification pillar, calling it “essential” and “exciting” and a way to “solve many of

our financial concerns.” “Changing our student profile,” one faculty member responded, will “make us a stronger and more inclusive environment.” Others pointed to the strength of the EOF program and the need for more training to “talk to our students about their circumstances.” Faculty frequently associated diversification with the *Impact* pillar, and there was considerable support for engaging more deeply with external communities, especially Trenton. Faculty commented, however, that to increase our impact, TCNJ will have to become less risk-averse and go beyond the limited programs it already has in place. Some faculty members, in fact, already do work in Trenton “without being identified as members of the TCNJ community” because of limitations the campus would put upon them. Finally, some faculty respondents questioned the uniqueness of these pillars. “This sounds like the same messaging from every other institution of higher ed,” one faculty member commented. “Can you develop a more unique vision?” Others commented that the pillars will be more meaningful when we know the “next level” the college is trying to reach.

- **Staff** participants found the pillars to be “inclusive, expansive, [and] cover[ing] everyone not just on-campus, but those who have graduated, off-campus in the community who want to work with us.” They appreciated the way staff were included in these pillars and thought they revealed the college’s “willingness to review, reflect on, and revise its strategies and operations.” Like the faculty, staff members were particularly excited about *Diversification* as a strategy pillar, noting that the college needed to move “past the workshops and discussions” and into action. They believed that diversification would ensure that “all sectors of the TCNJ community (students, faculty, staff, and alumni) should be supported, with one not at the expense of the others.” Staff believed that *Success* was an important pillar, suggesting that the college needs to promote its retention and graduation rates (including for underrepresented groups) and communicating successes across campus. Staff touted the way that the Impact pillar prioritized community/external relations and focused attention on how we can help the community more.
- **Students** were especially animated by the *Diversification* pillar and added a series of qualifications to what the college means by the term. “Diversification without meaningful inclusion worries me,” one commented. “It is very easy to establish token Black and Brown students so as to claim the school is diverse. How the school advocated for those students is significantly more important.” Other students think respect has to be embedded in diversification and would like a requirement that departments “talk about race and become race conscious” so that whiteness is not perceived as a default. Another student hoped that diversification also included “diversity of thought” rather than just meeting quotas. The *Differentiation* and *Impact* pillars were associated with diversification in some students’ minds, as differentiation meant the representation of different cultures and impact meant an effort to extend its reach to external communities. Some students endorsed the *Success* pillar as a way to ensure all the people who study and work at the college are recognized. “I think the success pillar excites me the most,” one student replied, “because it’s hopeful for after college.” As did the faculty and staff, students were interested in how these pillars could lead to specific goals and a realistic

path for implementation.

- **The TAES respondents** thought the pillars were “good” and conveyed admirable goals. Because they were so broad, the focus groups concluded, they would be “hard to argue with.” *Diversification* was widely seen in a positive light, and *Differentiation* “essential” because it would “require prioritization.” The pillars will encourage the campus to think about what being diversified and distinct would look like. How will these pillars “speak to the development of potential in both students and faculty, how will they lead to excellence? While one respondent noted that the pillars align with accreditation requirements, another said that differentiation would help identify “the most future-focused majors.” It will lead to the question “How is a TCNJ student different from students at other state schools?” Respondents valued the way the *Impact* pillar will lead “impactful partnerships with external communities.”

Question 5 asked respondents to explain any concerns the pillars might raise.

- **Faculty** expressed multiple concerns about the strategy pillars. Some objected to the metaphor itself, seeing “pillars” as being “static,” “imposing,” “threatening,” “performative,” and reminiscent of “the Antebellum South.” Respondents want the pillars to be backed up with action, and based on their experience of previous strategic plans, some were skeptical that anything would come out of this process. Others thought the pillars did not address the desire for innovation and adaptation and lacked a cohesive goal. As did the students, faculty wanted to make sure that *Diversification* was always accompanied by equity and inclusion so that the college would support everyone it brings to campus. Respondents wanted the college to have a more intentional plan for diversifying the campus to make sure that all students can find success here. Some faculty believe that the goal of diversification is not bold enough, and one faculty member suggested that the pillars should use words such as “carceral state,” “prison abolition,” “restorative justice” to capture the urgency of the nation’s racial situation. These issues directly impact BIPOC and disabled faculty who are “targeted by the same students who target students of color.” While faculty applaud the idea of community engagement, some question *Impact* as a way of describing that priority, as it is “not clearly positive” and forecloses the learning opportunities in community engagement. Others expressed concerns about populations that might be left out of programs that emphasize community relations – faculty who feel the moral imperative of diversification and community engagement but whose academic fields do not lend themselves to these priorities and others who are concerned that people with disabilities will be left out of such programs. Some respondents noted how transportation issues make impact/community engagement difficult to achieve. The *Differentiation* pillar created significant confusion. Some read differentiation as promoting siloes across campus that will create inequality and fracture the TCNJ experience. Others see differentiation as largely a problem of marketing and call for more communication between academic departments and the Admissions office. Other respondents view differentiation as being primarily grounded in the learning environment and the creation of academic programs with distinction. “Perhaps, in the next few years, we should focus more on the learning environment and less on individual research,” one faculty member commented. TCNJ

will have “to grow up to survive,” according to one respondent. “It will be difficult to achieve distinction within current state schools as an undergraduate only institution.”

- **Staff** wondered about how effective the strategy pillars would be in the wake of Covid-19 when community members have not been on campus. One respondent commented that during the last two rounds of strategic planning, CSPP did not request data from the Center for Institutional Effectiveness (now Institutional Research and Analytics), which made no sense. Pointing out that innovation is not represented in the strategy pillars, others argued that TCNJ needs to be less risk averse; others thought the pillars were “almost too much for both cost and people resources.” An already overworked staff wonders how they will be able to meet these new goals without any of their other responsibilities being taken away. Staff members endorsed *Diversification* but pointed to the many ways in which the community needs to change to make this priority successful: among them, stop co-opting the focus on BIPOC students to include other marginalized groups; allow the head of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to focus on that position rather than combining it with HR; create better mental health care resources for students; stop “tokenizing” hires and assuming they will address the problems of underrepresented groups. Respondents hoped that the *Success* pillar would lead to more promotion opportunities for TCNJ staff who, unlike faculty, often feel “unseen and overlooked.” Like the faculty, staff interpreted *Impact* to be community engagement and see opportunities similar to Campus Town if the college would take advantage of public-private partnerships. Others remarked that TCNJ needs to become a better listener when it engages with the external community rather than forcing its way into their space.
- **Students** thought the pillars were so vague that they would be misinterpreted and that they suggested “profit-based” motives rather than an effort to help “certain demographics.” Like the faculty and staff, they were interested in implementation and how the college would develop specific forms of structural support for BIPOC students. They believed that *Diversification* meant that “everyone should understand the significance of diversity” rather than simply see it as a prerequisite and that help should be distributed in an equitable way. Their understanding of *Differentiation* included the development of new academic programs, especially more concentrated courses of study within a major, with one student adding examples such as Cell Biology, Biochemistry, Crisis Trauma, and Sexual Abuse. Students conveyed a similarly broad understanding of *Success*, commenting that students should be considered as a whole not just by their majors, an idea that dovetails with their hope that a 5th pillar – Transparency – might improve the line of communication across the community. At the same time, success needs to include those students who simply want to get their degree and not be part of student life.
- **TAES focus groups** faulted the pillars from being “generic,” “uninspiring,” “abstract,” and “historical relics.” As one participant responded, “Everything we do can fit under here.” Like the other constituent groups, they struggled to assess the pillars without an overarching vision or point of focus. Members of the TAES groups suggested that the pillars need to be ranked and can’t all be addressed simultaneously. Others cautioned that *Diversification* would be expensive and that the college would need to dedicate funds to

this priority to address it adequately. One participant asked how the college could achieve *Differentiation* and *Diversification* while maintaining its same standards.

Question 6 asked participants if there was anything missing from the pillars that they thought was important. (CSPP received no student comments for this question.)

- **Faculty** expressed numerous concerns about missing elements from the pillars. These included sustainability, transparency and shared governance, assessment, the need for flexibility and agility, interdisciplinarity, the importance of faculty-student relationships, and faculty input into business decisions. Faculty pointed out that education and learning are not immediately apparent in any of these pillars and encouraged the college to include transformational growth for faculty and the elimination of bureaucratic, legal decisions that “get in the way of innovation.” Faculty were especially concerned that innovation did not appear in the pillars, as innovation will make change exciting for faculty. Faculty were equally concerned that the pillars did not directly address the question of financing, nor how we define and measure success. Faculty see the possibility for more integration with external communities that would shift our priorities to include areas in high demand such as life science, transportation, green energy, financial services, and technology. Like members of the other focus groups, faculty respondents contend that the pillars are missing “an overarching statement that provides our identity” and that shows the connections between these priorities. Numerous faculty comment that until the campus has a central goal, the pillars will be open to multiple interpretations.
- **Staff** respondents emphasized that the threats to TCNJ “cannot be minimized” and that we have to confront the “projected changes to Higher Education that will be realized in the next few years.” The college needs to be more introspective in “cutting away fat and growing areas where we do well.” One staff member replied that the pillars need to emphasize the sense of pride students, staff, and faculty feel in the institution. Others wondered whether TCNJ was prepared for students who are not “college-ready” and whether it can adequately compete for those students when other institutions can offer more resources and better financial packages. Numerous staff members described the importance of inclusion and of making sure our signature experiences were available to all. Finally, one staff member commented that TCNJ was not mentioned in the state’s NJ Student Bill of Rights. We need to build relationships with the Governor’s Office, the Attorney General, and the Department of Education.
- **TAES participants** cautioned that the pillars do not address financial sustainability and do not convey that difficult decisions lie ahead. “There will be suffering in one area in order to stop suffering in another,” one participant commented. Others want a blueprint for “how these aspirations will be funded” and whether they will be embedded with current budgets or budgeted separately. External stakeholders wanted more discussion about alumni engagement. There was a general eagerness for more details and to see how the pillars connect to this moment and how they will help the college compete with other institutions.