The Council of Independent Colleges

Creating **Tomorrow's Institutions,** Together

2026 Institute for Chief Academic Officers with Chief Advancement, Enrollment, Financial, and Marketing Communication Officers

November 7–10, 2026 ■ Baltimore, Maryland

Noise and Meaning: Storytelling to Build Connection in a Low-Trust World

The Council of Independent Colleges
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2026 Institute for Chief Academic Officers with Chief Advancement, Enrollment, Financial, and Marketing Communication Officers



Presenters

- Cheryl Knauer (Chair)
  Director of Public Relations, McDaniel College (MD)
- Chad Berry
  Vice President for Alumni, Communications and Philanthropy
  Berea College (KY)
- Ellen de Graffenreid
  Vice President of Communications and Marketing,
  Grinnell College (IA)
- Joel Malina
  Partner, Brunswick Group

Noise and Meaning: Storytelling to Build Connection in a Low-Trust World



- Chad Berry, Ph.D., Vice President for Alumni, Communications and Philanthropy; Goode Professorship in Appalachian Studies, Berea College
- Ellen de Graffenreid, MA, MBA, Vice President of Communications and Marketing, Grinnell College
- Joel Malina, Partner, The Brunswick Group

Exercise #1:
Your "Elevator Pitch"

Scenario: You are in an elevator with a key member of Congress.

Challenge: How do you describe your institution in 2-3 sentences?

5 Minutes – Set it Aside (We'll come back to it!)





Our Low-Trust Environment

- ✓ How did we get here?
- ✓ Government Relations is the new front-line reputational threat

New Reality=New Approach to Storytelling

Storytelling that Stands Out

- Intentional curating
- Hyper-localize + Humanize
- Avoid:
  - The predictable
  - Over-reliance on data



CORNELL EXAMPLES

- Hometown Alumni Award
- NYS Impact Initiative
- Town-Gown (TOGO) Awards



Exercise #2:
The Right Message

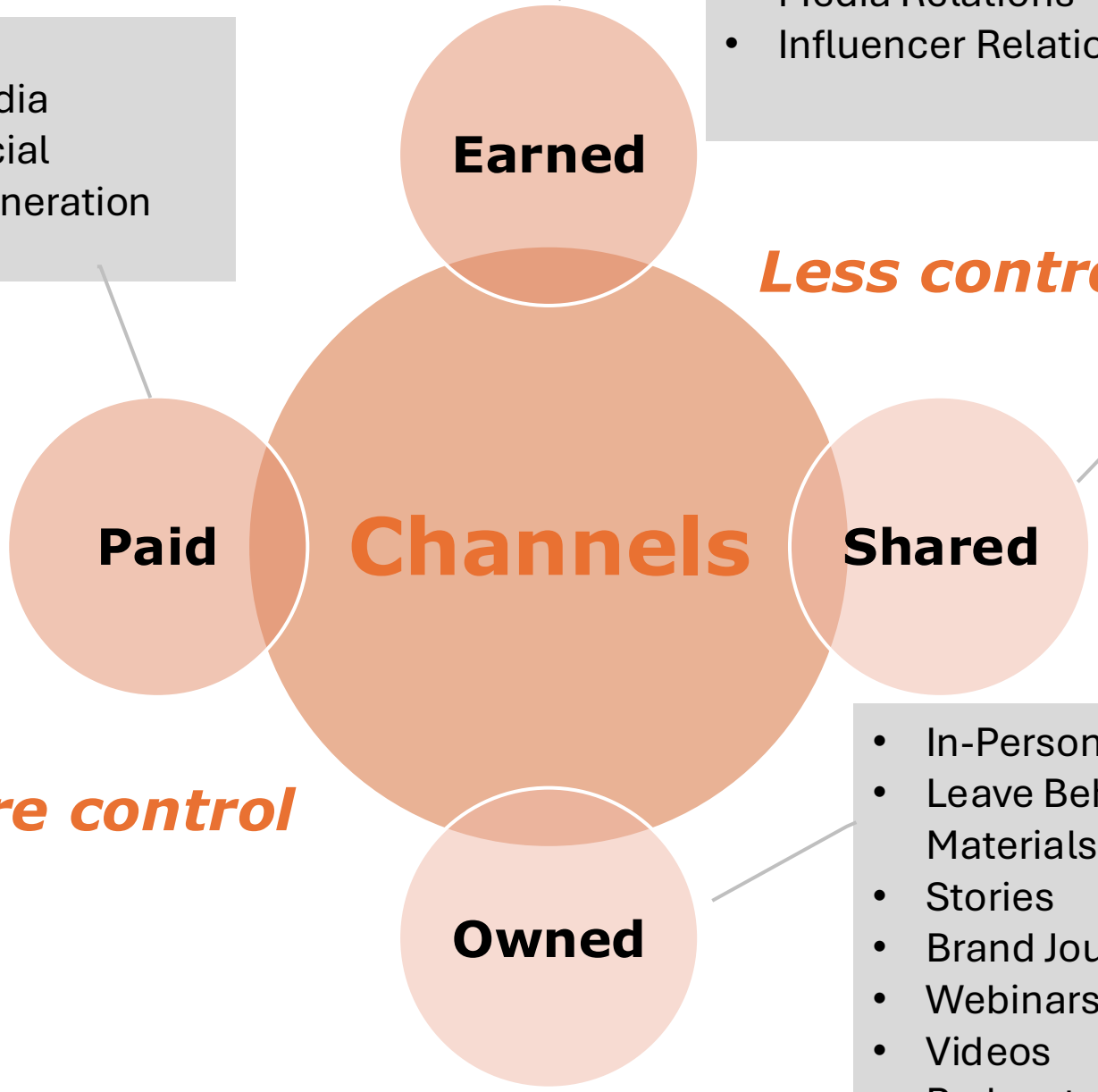
WHO
is your audience?

WHAT should your audience
FEEL?
THINK?
DO?
as a result of your message?

1-3 PROOF POINTS:
Verifiable facts, data and testimonials (*stories*) that back your claims and show value to your audience.

10-15 Minutes

The Right Place



- Media Relations
- Influencer Relations

- Paid Media
- Paid Social
- Lead Generation

Less control

- Social Media
- Word of Mouth
- Referrals
- Influencer Engagement

More control

- In-Person
- Leave Behind Materials
- Stories
- Brand Journalism
- Webinars
- Videos
- Podcasts

The Right Time

Time to decision

Competing priorities

Short attention spans



Making it Memorable

Emotional impact

The "Why"

Vivid details (heart and head)

Smart Brevity

GRINNELL COLLEGE BY THE NUMBERS

A small college with a big impact

A GLOBAL COLLEGE IN A RURAL SETTING

Students hail from **52** states , several U.S. Territories, and the District of Columbia and **42** countries around the world

81% of students are from the United States

19% of students are international

More than **60** languages are spoken at Grinnell

More than **1,700** alumni living and working in Iowa, growing by >125 every four years.

A LEADER IN COLLEGE ACCESS

Grinnell meets **100%** of demonstrated financial need with grants that **do not need to be repaid**. It is the only small liberal arts college in the Midwest that admits U.S. students without consideration of their ability to pay.

$8.7 M awarded this year through multiple scholarship programs earmarked specifically for Iowa students.

$85.5 M in institutional grant aid (2026-27).

WITH A NATIONAL VOICE

- **#5 Best Liberal Arts College** — *U.S. News & World Report*
- **#6 Best Undergraduate Teaching** — *U.S. News & World Report*
- **#8 Best Value** — *U.S. News & World Report*
- **#13 Top Private Schools** — *U.S. News & World Report*
- **#20 Undergraduate Research & Creative Projects** — *U.S. News & World Report*
- **#20 Most Innovative Schools** — *U.S. News & World Report*

AND A PARTNER IN ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

- $250,000 contribution to Grinnell's new elementary school
- $100,000 in support of UnityPoint Health's Grinnell Regional Medical Center's renovation and expansion of maternity care facilities
- $55,000 to fund safety and security upgrades in the hospital's Emergency Department
- Received $400,000 grant from the National Science Foundation's Enabling Partnerships to Increase Innovation Capacity (EPIIC) program to engage external partners and contribute to the innovation economy.
- Attracted $12.7M in research grants over the last 5 years, designated a Carnegie Research College or University.

EACH YEAR, GRINNELL COLLEGE CONTRIBUTES

896 jobs to the local economy

$109.1 M to the Poweshiek County economy

4 out of 5 faculty members live in Grinnell

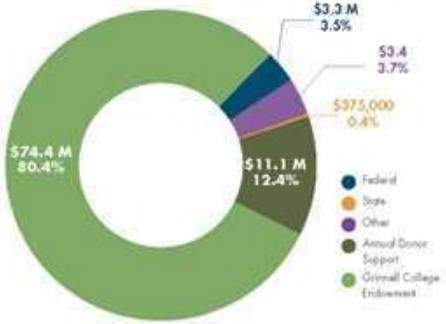
Grinnell College students directly spend **$4.3 M** in Poweshiek County

visitors to Grinnell College directly spend **$2 M** in Poweshiek County

$272 M to the Iowa economy

GRINNELL COLLEGE'S ENDOWMENT AND STUDENT FINANCIAL AID

2026–27 GRANT AID TO GRINNELL COLLEGE STUDENTS



SOURCE: 2025-26 Common Data Set
Total > 100% due to rounding

93.8% of students receive financial aid

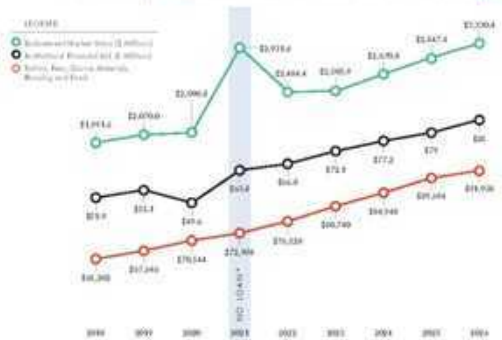
$85.5 M total institutional grant aid

Grinnell Students Receiving Full Tuition Scholarships	620	$37.3%
Grinnell Students Receiving Full Tuition PLUS Room and Board Scholarships	84	5.1%
Grinnell Students in High/Very High Need Category	723	43.5%

NO LOANS REQUIRED AS PART OF FINANCIAL AID PACKAGE

COMPREHENSIVE FEE AND INSTITUTIONAL AID

Since 2018, the comprehensive fee has increased by 53% while institutional financial aid has increased by 57% and the endowment market value has increased by 56%.



* In addition to being need-blind (meaning that a family's ability to pay does not factor into admission) Grinnell College is also a no-loan institution (meaning that loans are not packaged into financial offers from the College).

DRIVING DOWN DEBT

Grinnell provides grants that don't need to be repaid.

Average debt for students with financial need.

Grinnell **$20,519**

US Average* **$39,000**

*Source: Education Data Initiative

Financial Aid Awards as a Percentage of Annual Endowment Distribution

Grinnell	National Average
74%	47%*

*Source: NACUBO US Higher Education Endowments Report 2025

Grinnell College

ACCESS AND IMPACT OF THE GRINNELL COLLEGE ENDOWMENT

For more information, visit grinnell.edu

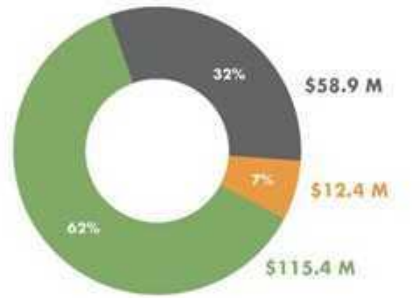
Office of the President
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grinnell.edu/strategicplan

UPDATED 9.28.26

GRINNELL COLLEGE BY THE NUMBERS

Financial Fast Facts

HOW GRINNELL'S BUDGET IS FUNDED



HOW GRINNELL'S BUDGET IS SPENT



RECORD BREAKING PHILANTHROPY 2025-26

$49.7 M gifts and commitments
$32.5 M in receipts
$2.1 M for the unrestricted Pioneer Fund
7,063 donors gave to Grinnell
1,500+ Grinnellians attended Alumni Reunion **(the largest in college history)**

GRINNELL COLLEGE ENDOWMENT

The Endowment's Market value as of June 30, 2026 was $3.3 billion, generating $115.4 million to support Grinnell's mission.

The annual distribution is determined by a hybrid formula that combines a steady growth factor with market value.

DOLLARS IN VS DOLLARS OUT



Grinnell College

For more information, visit **grinnell.edu**

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Turn Over

CREATING SUCCESSFUL FUTURES

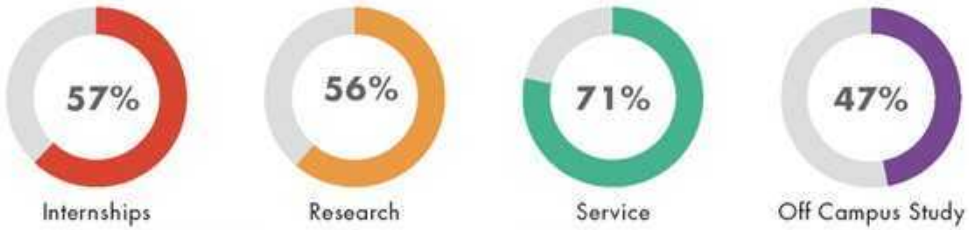
92%
of graduates are working at a job or post-graduate service or pursuing further education six months after graduation

96%
of recent graduates are in positions related to their career goals

80%
of students who apply are accepted to their first or second choice of graduate school and program

THROUGH REAL WORLD EXPERIENCE

Percent of students participating, 4 year average



97% of students engage in at least one

75% of students engage in at least two

AND A PARTNER IN ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

FACULTY AND STAFF EXCELLENCE

- More than **$12.7 million in grants** awarded to Grinnell faculty and staff in the past 5 years.
- **11 national teaching or mentoring awards.**
- More than **26 nationally competitive fellowships and awards** such as NEA, NEH, and NSF Career Grants, as well as Mellon, Guggenheim, and Fulbright fellowships.

SIGNATURE ACADEMIC RESOURCES

The Center for Prairie Studies focuses on community, sustainability, and place.

The Conard Environmental Research Area (CERA) is a 365-acre field station located 11 miles from campus, providing a living laboratory for teaching and research in prairie, woodland, wetland, and riverine habitats.

The Data Analysis and Social Inquiry Lab (DASIL) helps students and faculty members integrate data analysis into research and classroom work.

The Center for the Humanities promotes teaching, learning, and exploration that center human experience as expressed in writing, music, art, performance, cultural practice, and other modes of representation.

The Institute for Global Engagement leads all aspects of international education to prepare students for an intercultural world.

The Rosenfield Program in Public Affairs, International Relations, and Human Rights prepares students for a lifetime of civic engagement and connects the Grinnell community to the broader social and political issues that define the world beyond Grinnell.

The Donald and Winifred Wilson Center for Innovation & Leadership sponsors programs that connect students with mentors, resources, speakers, competitions, and hands-on experiences that enable future leaders to practice and refine innovation and leadership skills.

UPDATED 9-28-26

Repetitive, Themed Storytelling

Academic Excellence



Jul 2

More Than Invested Learning Gives Grin Oppo

This summer, Grinnell than $1.2 million to e meaningful resea community-engaged prepare them for live

Academic Ex



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Civic Engagement



Us Streng

As a summe Council (GA every aspec arts educa nonprofit ac The exper educator w look at wha

Academic Excellence

Aug 13,

Who She Neighbo

Through interviews with Des Moines and Iowa C project examines how lived experiences shape perspectives on neighborhood change, housing affordability, and local politics.

Academic Excellence



Aug

Rethinkin Researc

As generative artific classrooms, work Professor of Compute believes one of the isn't what AI can d continue thinkin

Academic



Sm Research Explores Viruses in Soil

Nathaniel Cremascoli '28 wanted to know how RNA viruses interact with soil ecosystems — so he built and led his own research project to find out.

Academic Excellence



Sep 14, 2026

Summer Research Where Land Meets Water

During her summer Mentored Advanced Project (MAP), biology major Millie Leonard '27 sampled and compared microbial life and antibiotic resistance in soils neighboring streams at two local sites.

Moving from WHAT to



Elevator Pitch

- Explains WHAT
- Focused on Identity
- 1-3 Sentences
- 1-2 Points of Distinction

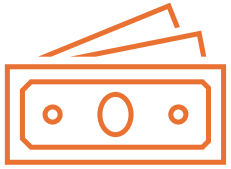
WOW Statement

- Explains WHY
- Focused on Enthusiasm and Excitement
- Can be briefer than an Elevator Pitch

The Goal is for your audience to say:

"Wow! That's impressive. I'd like to learn more."

Funding Priority vs. Philanthropic Priority







Funding

The need identified and the money necessary to meet the need.

Philanthropy

The donor's perspective of how one can be involved and make a difference in a meaningful way.

SAME PROJECT

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

TASK: *Convert the language of the funding priority into the language of the philanthropic priority.*


Moving from Problem
Describe it
CHALLENGE = OPPORTUNITY
To Promise
Describe it

Crafting your WOW! Statement



1. Forward-Looking: what results?
2. Societal: what difference to society?
3. Concrete: simple, tangible terms?
4. Emotive: help the donor feel.
5. Succinct: relentlessly prioritize

10-15 Minutes

My WOW! Statement



Imagine a high school student with out-of-date textbooks, poorly equipped science labs and no access to computers or proper healthcare. Imagine transforming that student through high-quality, affordable education into a caring nurse or physician. Or a committed math teacher, a renowned cancer researcher, or even another Berea Nobel laureate. The Natural Sciences and Health Building isn’t just brick, mortar, and steel. It’s a bridge to the future for all of us.

Now, let’s hear from you!



Takeaways

1. Understand your institution's storytelling channels.
2. Develop content and messaging to help your audiences feel something.
3. Craft and equip your teams with elevator and wow statements to maximize impact.

Thank you for attending this session!