

## **Strengthening Our Commitment to a More Sustainable and Just Future: A Vision to Increase Revenue, Decrease Expenses, and Widen our Mission's Reach**

**In a context of climate change and growing inequity, Northland College is more important than ever. Now, as we find ourselves on a financial precipice, we turn to our mission to guide us through adaptation and innovation. Rather than developing a new Northland, this document provides a plan for a True Northland, one that is mission-centered and responsive to the challenges of our times.**

**Northland College will continue to provide an exceptional environmental liberal arts education, but at a tightened scale and with a deepened commitment to our mission. We will be a living laboratory of what society needs to ethically address the environmental and social consequences of climate change and social injustice.**

### **Northland Mission**

Founded in 1892, Northland College is the first college in the country to fully integrate an environmental focus with its liberal arts curriculum. Located on the south shore of Lake Superior, surrounded by northern forests, we inspire students to explore the fundamental interconnections between nature, place, and people.

Our innovative, interdisciplinary learning approach fosters dynamic educational experiences, research, and partnerships that extend well beyond the classroom. We believe that understanding and addressing complex environmental and social challenges requires inclusion of diverse perspectives, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration.

Together, we empower students and our broader community to act with integrity and courage to create a more sustainable and just future.

At Northland College, environmental resilience and justice sit at the nexus of four key pillars: enhancing scientific and other forms of knowledge about the natural world and ecosystem change; building sustainable food systems; strengthening rural communities; and upholding Indigenous sovereignty and cultures. Northland was founded on these principles. Our task now is to redouble our efforts as we face the realities of a shrinking higher ed landscape while maximizing opportunities to broaden our reach.

### **Current Moment**

Our campus is too large to support a sustainable student population, especially given our current financial resources. At the same time, we possess a critically important mission, richness of expertise, passionate students, and an abiding commitment to our community and region. The keys to our financial resilience are three-fold: bring all operations in line with our mission, streamline our operations to cut costs, and create new revenue generation such as opportunities for the broader community to live, learn, and work on our campus. We will meet community needs by adding workforce housing and inviting regional, mission-aligned organizations to rent office, lab, and studio spaces on our campus. These initiatives will foster mutually beneficial interaction between students, faculty, and external

partners, enhance cross-sector and intergenerational relationships, enrich the student experience, and benefit our local communities.

## **Why Northland**

True Northland will amplify and strengthen the best parts of the education we already provide: applied and experiential learning; opportunities for undergraduate research; relationships between students, staff, and faculty; and field experiences / internships. Moreover, we will offer focused and vibrant skill-building opportunities that students and community members have long requested.

The tight focus on our mission and new synergies with partners will allow us to lower our expenses and attract outside funding. Transitioning from our current model to the True Northland will require trimming and redesigning current faculty and staff positions but will also entail building new, revenue-generating opportunities that will require personnel. Many current Northland employees and contract staff, with their diverse expertise and deep commitment to our mission and community, will be critical in this transformation. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that some employees will be cut, and that this process will be very difficult.

## **Financial Resilience**

The keys to our financial resilience are found in bringing all operations in line with our mission and creating opportunities for the broader community to live, learn, and work on our campus. A well-run institution with a purpose that has never been more relevant will be attractive to anyone looking to find solutions to our most pressing social and ecological challenges.

The Northland campus will teem with robust co-curricular opportunities teaching hands-on skills that will increasingly be needed on a changing planet. Intergenerational housing will connect undergraduates with public service employees, creators, and elders. Our campus will be transformed into an ideas incubator and skills development hub where the broader public is invited in to learn alongside and collaborate with students. Our impact will deepen as our reach is extended, fostering a profound sense of belonging, purpose, and joy in our students and others.

## **The Operational Model<sup>1</sup>**

Under this plan Northland College strategically utilizes our campus by tailoring it for three distinct, complementary, and mission-centric uses: The College and its affiliated research centers, community housing, and an ideas hub.

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<sup>1</sup> This model emerged from three community visioning sessions March 18 - 21, 2024, and it was refined through a series of focus groups and many rounds of feedback March 22 - 25 with campus constituents, alumni, and community members. It is also in deep alignment with the Strategic Plan approved by the Board in 2023.

## The Liberal Arts College: the Heart of What We Do

Stabilizing operations around a target of 350 students—a number that our admissions team says is sustainable—allows us to face the realities of a shrinking pool of college-bound people while building out effective operations across the institution. The faculty will work to redesign our curriculum<sup>2</sup> in a way that furthers our mission, continues to leverage our strengths in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, and fits our smaller student population. A potential Northland College curriculum could be something like a single major with emphases in Natural Science, Social Science, and/or Humanities. This would be a kind of “choose-your-own-adventure” approach where students could follow their passions as they develop over time, culminating in a major that reflects their core interests. Other models exist that can serve as inspiration for faculty as they develop a mission-aligned curriculum.<sup>3</sup> Faculty will be attentive to the need to design programs that ready our graduates for both employment and the pursuit of advanced degrees.

We will provide educational opportunities to our broader community by making curricular and co-curricular courses more explicitly available and accessible for local youth through dual-enrollment opportunities and on a sliding fee scale for community members. In addition, certificate programming and continuing education offerings will complement the core academic program.

### *Skills Courses*

Our region has a wealth of experts in skills and trades that promote climate resilience, adaptation, and the promotion of just communities. Courses will be offered by faculty, local scientists, business owners, tradespeople, and other professionals, while partnership with Northwoods Technical College will be expanded. As with all courses at the College, we will provide and widely advertise these opportunities to Northland students, youth in our community, and anyone looking to build their skills. These elective courses will be credit-bearing for students and available to the public for a fee. Options might include:

- Climate-smart training: renewable energy installation, weatherization, trades skill development, and food production/preservation
- Outdoor recreation: skill instruction, gear rental, guided experiences, and the opportunity for the public to purchase unfilled seats in College field courses (e.g. Lake Superior Circumnavigation, Boundary Waters winter expedition, etc.)
- Land and Wildlife Stewardship: fur-bearer ecology, carnivore tracking, wildland firefighting training, rain garden construction, chainsaw safety
- Natural History: master naturalist courses, plant identification, wild foraging
- [Northland College Folk School](#): teaching traditional crafts such as woodworking, textiles, fiber art, leatherwork, boat building and restoration, timber framing
- Arts and culture: workshops in writing and studio arts, language courses

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<sup>2</sup> Specifics on curricular offerings will need to be determined by the faculty as outlined in the Faculty Handbook, with consultation from our Admissions team and other key campus constituents.

<sup>3</sup> [College of the Atlantic Model](#), [Hampshire College Model](#), [Antioch College Model](#)

- Community-building: trainings in restorative justice, civic engagement, ethical leadership, and community organizing
- Wellness: classes in ecopsychology, nature-based therapy, mindfulness, and spirituality

Our faculty, some of whom might not carry a full load with a reduced student population, will design and deliver curricular and co-curricular courses to a broad audience as a way to add value to the Northland College student experience, as a service to the community, and as a revenue generation strategy.

#### *Place-based Education*

We are uniquely positioned to offer an array of field-based courses and outdoor opportunities. We are the managing entity of and have full access to [Forest Lodge](#); own and manage [hundreds of acres](#) of forests; and are surrounded by tens of thousands of acres of public lands. Most significantly for many in our community, our campus is one mile south of the largest freshwater lake in the world.

#### *Centers and the Institute*

The Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, Mary Griggs Burke Center for Freshwater Innovation, and Center for Rural Communities will maintain their affiliations with the College. The centers broadcast Northland's story to national and international audiences. Closer to home, they provide invaluable research, internship, work experience, and programming opportunities; funding that contributes to the College's operational costs; and direct benefits to our local and regional communities. Their reach, exposure, and impact will only grow within the context of a more coherent, fully mission-aligned institution. Research centers will secure outside funding to support their staffing.

The Indigenous Cultures Center (ICC) will be particularly significant to True Northland as we deepen our commitment to our mission. Critically, the ICC will serve as a liaison between the College and tribal nations and tribal institutions in our region. Tribal nations are uniquely positioned to address issues of environmental sustainability and social justice in our changing world. The ICC will encourage, promote, and strengthen collaborations and connections between Northland and our tribal partners. Specifically, the ICC will play a crucial role in promoting Indigenous cultures on campus, partnering in cultural revitalization efforts, and supporting Indigenous students.

Our campus is located on ceded territory, our history is intertwined with nearby tribal nations, and our mission is deeply influenced by local Indigenous knowledge. While we have often fallen short in our relationships with our neighboring nations, True Northland will become a vocal and tireless advocate for Indigenous sovereignty and cultural revitalization.

#### *Food Systems*

With the Hulings Rice Food Center (HRFC) at its core, our food system and delivery will be transformed so that they are mission-centric, sustainable, affordable, high-quality, satisfy student demand, including foods that enact community care. A clear-eyed assessment of food delivery capacity will be completed, and any partnerships with vendors will be extended only to the extent that they are mission-aligned.

As we develop partnerships with local food providers and maximize the capabilities of the HRFC into a regional processing center and business incubator, our green spaces will also transition into expanded gardens, farms, food forests, animal husbandry, and container hydroponics. Examples of possible

business opportunities and partnerships include hazelnut production, a commercial honey processing center, our student-run Kombucha brand, a mobile meat processing facility, and solar grazing.

### *Sports and Athletics*

Participation in sports builds community and enhances wellness, and physical activity is a key part of a holistic liberal arts education. For these reasons, athletics will always have a place at Northland, no matter our size. However, like all segments of the college, a smaller institutional scale will have implications for what athletics can look like. An assessment of expenses, revenue, and capacity should determine whether the College pursues a narrower range of NCAA options or shifts to intramural and/or club teams. Future athletic programming decisions will be made in a mission-aligned way and will be responsive to the desires and interests of the student body.

### *Community Supports*

It takes resources, care, and attention to help students and the broader community grapple with the complexities of climate change, social injustice, and an uncertain future. Our mission calls us to create structures of support, work to build community, and help all of us to find hope and joy in life, no matter the challenges we face. Northland is already the recipient of a multi-year, multi-million dollar grant that will help us to work toward these objectives, and we have been in the planning stages of developing programming. Living into our mission means that we will aggressively pursue additional opportunities and that we will prioritize student, employee, and larger community well-being.

Students of color in particular have long clamored for more robust support with respect to programming, resources, and college staff who could serve as mentors and trusted advisors. True Northland will live into our mission to support all of our students and community but will be particularly attentive to those who are marginalized by intersectional forces that shape who joins our campus community and how they experience this place. In partnership with those communities who are most affected by these dynamics, Northland College will center and embed into all our initiatives intersectional justice, cultural inclusivity, and anti-settler colonial practices.

Key Takeaways: The Northland College academic experience, with its grounding in the liberal arts and emphasis on applied learning—including research and internships—has always been our strength. This plan scales that model to 350 students; streamlines our academic programs; leverages our centers; aligns our food and housing offerings with our mission; develops a robust skills-focused program of elective coursework; enhances continuing education offerings; brings increased value to and engagement with our broader community; creates sports offerings that are sustainable; and is attentive to and proactive about addressing the concerns of marginalized students in the pursuit of racial justice.

### **Northland Community Housing**

Part of living more deeply into our mission involves recognizing the potential in our institutional capacities to meet our community's needs. As one of the key social problems of our time, a lack of affordable housing constrains people's ability to live meaningful and secure lives; it also harms communities. Under a new housing initiative, Northland's underutilized dorms, apartments, and other properties will be converted to help address workforce and elder housing shortages. This will be funded

by rent-paying tenants and subsidized by grants. Residents will have access to programming and College facilities, including meals in our cafeteria, recreational resources, and curricular / co-curricular offerings. Providing short-term rentals will create synergistic opportunities for collaboration with people traveling to the region to do research or participate in campus programming.

Decisions about residential building usage will emerge from a student-centered process to identify which spaces should remain student housing and which will be retrofitted for the community.

The state-of-the-art [John N. Allen Fitness Center](#) will be opened for community memberships and will attract users from around the region; when not otherwise in use, athletic facilities can be rented to the Ashland School District and other youth and adult sports programs.

Key Takeaways: The opportunity to live and spend time on a well-run, mission-centric, vibrant college campus brimming with dynamic programming will be attractive to many. An extensive array of funding sources will allow us to address deferred maintenance on these buildings, increase energy efficiencies, and provide staffing. Most critically, this model helps us to create a more just community, generates ongoing revenue for the College, and extends our reach.

## **Ideas Hub**

Northland College will offer office, lab, and studio rental space to mission-aligned non-profits, agencies, researchers, and entrepreneurs. Some of these entities will offer experiences that enhance our academic programs and co-curricular offerings for students, including research opportunities and internships.

### Potential Non-profit Partnerships

- Tribal agencies and service organizations
- Clean energy advocacy organizations
- Regional stewardship and conservation agencies
- A local, mission-centric religious organization
- A community childcare facility
- A worker-owned cooperative to enhance food and beverage distribution

The ideas hub will generate revenue, enhance campus-community connections, and serve a need in the community by providing access to our physical and technological infrastructure.

Key Takeaways: Non-profit partnerships will provide educational experiences for students and community members without adding to Northland's payroll. They will also model an invitational, inclusive approach that brings important mission-aligned entities directly onto our campus while generating additional revenue.

## **Leadership and Governance**

Committing to our mission must start with building trust and transparency through new governance and leadership structures. The ultimate goal of leadership and governance at the College is to make the best

decisions possible on behalf of the institution, to ensure our long-term viability, and to defend and promote our mission.

A deeper commitment to our mission also requires that College leadership work directly with tribal leadership, with respect to both consultation and decision-making.

In order to be a living laboratory working toward a more just and sustainable future, Northland College should adopt a collaborative, democratic governance model<sup>4</sup> to ensure that decision-making is truly inclusive, transparent, and rooted in our community. The shared governance plan adopted and affirmed by the College and Board in 2021 rests on “a shared and clearly articulated commitment to trust, collaboration, communication, transparency, inclusiveness, honesty, and integrity.”<sup>5</sup> It is time that we create structures that would allow us to live up to these commitments.

This is our community’s call to all stakeholders to act with integrity and courage to create a more sustainable and just future for Northland College

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This report was compiled by the following faculty as a result of multiple visioning sessions, focus groups, and feedback meetings and at the behest of the Northland College Faculty Council.

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<sup>4</sup> The Community Based [Collective Leadership Framework](#) and the democratic governance work of the [Institute for Educational Leadership](#) provide examples.

<sup>5</sup> *Association of Governing Boards, AGB Board of Director’s Statement on Shared Governance, 2017, page 12.*