

## **Final Report**

### **Block A 2015 Project: Winter Graduation Celebration**

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#### **Project Charge**

Recommendation 1 of the college's Strategic Plan emphasizes that the success of the Block Plan depends on a talented and diverse student body. Honoring the diversity with which our students design and pursue their academic experience is part of that success, which means the college needs to honor and celebrate those students who graduate in December.

The work of the block project team was to generate ideas and doable options for celebrating our students and their families during winter graduation. Through research of other institutions that hold a winter graduation and internal brainstorming or focus groups, the block project team identified options to honor and celebrate our students and their families during winter graduation.

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#### **Team Membership**

Debra Zarecky, *Chair*, Parent & Family Relations Director

Michael Grace, Professor of Music

Kate Holbrook, Chaplain

Heidi Knous, Assistant Director Student & Young Alumni Programs

Rochelle Mason, Associate Dean of Students

Candace Santa Maria, Assistant Director of Registrar Office

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#### **Summary of Team Activity**

Prior to the first meeting of the team, Debra Zarecky researched various other institutions across the nation that also provide mid-year graduation celebrations in order to generate a group of comparable institutions (with regard to size and type) with which we could reasonably compare ourselves and on which we could base our discussion of a possible event at Colorado College. Research consisted of both phone conversations and email contacts with colleagues responsible for planning other institutions' events. The results of this research are in Appendix A.

At our initial meeting, the team:

- Reviewed the charge to the team.
- Discussed the reasons why students might be December graduates and how many typically fall into this category. The team determined that there are many situations, including:

- ✓ Fall start students who don't finish their requirements in 8 semesters and need an extra semester to complete.
- ✓ Winter start students who are unable to finish their requirements in 7½ semesters and need an extra semester to complete.
- ✓ Students (including winter starts and transfers) who are able to finish their requirements in 7½ or fewer semesters because they have taken summer classes or have credits from high school or another college.
- Discussed the reasons why students (and families) might/might not elect to return to campus and participate in May commencement (including employment and travel costs) and how having some kind of recognition in December could contribute to students' sense of personal achievement, as well as a positive affinity towards the institution.
- Reviewed Debra's research on comparable institutions. We compared and contrasted the events held at each school and drew several conclusions:
  - ✓ Any event held at CC will need to reflect our unique culture and take into account already-established traditions.
  - ✓ Language around the event(s) must be chosen carefully to reflect the fact that students invited to participate are not official graduates until February, *i.e.* "celebration of your upcoming graduation."
  - ✓ Timing and location of the event(s) are very important considerations, given that December/Block 4 is an exceptionally busy time of year.
- Decided that, in lieu of on-campus focus groups, which could be difficult to put together in the summer, we would send a survey to recent December grads to gather information about their experience and what kind of celebration might have been meaningful for them had it been offered when they graduated.

To inform our understanding of the composition of December graduate cohorts at Colorado College, Debra Zarecky gathered data regarding the composition of December graduate cohorts for the last ten years. Candace Santa Maria provided data regarding the number of students from recent December cohorts who elected not to return to campus and participate in May commencement activities. The results:

Class Year*	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Total December grads	14	29	29	31	26	21	33	22	19	18	10
Did not march in May							16	11	10	13	

\*Represents academic year, *i.e.* 2015 = 14-15 academic year, December grads finished in December 2014

The data indicated that the average number of students who do not return for May commencement is roughly half of the total December grads each year. The team concluded that this data supports the assertion that there are some students each year

who elect not to participate in May commencement activities who might participate in an alternate form of recognition in December.

Taking into consideration the types of events held by our group of comparable institutions, the team worked together to formulate a survey (see Appendix B) that would gather information to inform the structure and content of a possible event at Colorado College. Debra Zarecky worked with advancement to identify a group of approximately 250 alumni who were coded as December graduates to whom we could send the survey. After the list was reviewed for any exclusions, the survey was emailed to 180 recipients on June 10 (see Appendix C). Recipients were notified of a week-long window in which they could take the survey and were incentivized to participate with the distribution of \$10 Amazon gift cards. A follow-up email was sent on June 15 to remind alumni to complete the survey. The survey closed on June 17, after 23 responses were received. The response rate was about 13%, which is considered reasonable for this type of survey.

The full results of the survey are contained in Appendix D. To summarize:

- The majority of respondents indicated they would prefer a more formal event that has some form of academic ceremony associated with it.
- The majority of respondents felt it would be most meaningful to celebrate the occasion with one or more of the following: parents, a faculty/staff member of their choosing, the college's president.
- The majority of respondents felt that the event should be held on campus.
- The majority of respondents felt that the last day of Block 4 would be the most appropriate timing for a possible event.
- In general, respondents agreed that a December graduation celebration event would be appreciated by December graduates, even though they would still be offered the option, and may also choose, to participate in larger May commencement events.
  - ✓ "I am glad that this is being tackled!"
  - ✓ "What a brilliant idea. Something should definitely be done."
  - ✓ "Creating a more 'official' ceremony or process is a great idea, and is something I would have appreciated at the time of my graduation."
  - ✓ "Glad to hear CC is trying to figure out a way to celebrate December graduates. I, along with a few friends..., all felt very overlooked..."
  - ✓ "I know my parents and I would have appreciated this."

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## Recommendations

1. Beginning in December 2015, Colorado College should provide an event that recognizes and celebrates those students who complete their requirements for graduation in December. This event will contribute to students' sense of personal achievement, provide a means to recognize their parents'/families' support of

their education, and enhance the development of positive affinity towards Colorado College.

2. December graduates should continue to be invited to May commencement activities.
3. The event should be identified carefully to reflect the fact that students invited to participate are not official graduates until February, *i.e.* "celebration of your upcoming graduation" or (*à la* Middlebury) "December Celebration."
4. Survey respondents were in favor of the event being held on campus and formal in nature (see questions 4 and 5). Recommended events in their order of preference for survey respondents:
  - An hors-d'oeuvres reception with a champagne toast.
  - A sit-down, multi-course dinner with china service and wait staff. (The events director at Claremont McKenna offered to share their events plan if we would like to pursue this option).
  - Dinner at the CC Cabin (not quite on campus and certainly informal but an option that interested some respondents).

The committee recommends a sit-down dinner in Bemis Hall, as this option is most formal and would be conducive to an academic ceremony, which survey respondents also favored. The hors-d'oeuvres reception with a ceremony in Bemis would be the committee's second recommendation.

5. The event should have some component of academic ceremony associated with it, perhaps the awarding of a diploma cover and/or a special token item, such as a Colorado College pin. The president should preside over the ceremony. Seating for the ceremony must be taken into consideration when planning the event.
6. Although the majority of survey respondents felt that the event should be held on the last day of Block 4, the committee suggests that an evening on the last weekend of Block 4 would also be a viable option, as it would both increase the likelihood of parents being able to attend and move the event further back from the holidays. For 2015, the last weekend of Block 4 falls on Dec. 11-13. The last day of Block 4 is Dec. 16. In any event, but especially if the event is held on the last day of Block 4, students who are expected to graduate in December should be notified well in advance. The list of invited students must be coordinated carefully with the registrar's office, however, students who fail at the last minute to complete their requirements as expected in December should not be "disinvited."
7. The student should be able to invite parents, as well as one friend, or two friends if parents are unable to attend. The committee also recommends that, following the example of Illinois Wesleyan University, each student should be encouraged to invite a faculty/staff member to be his/her "guest of honor." The committee recommends that, as part of the event, the student should be invited to share why he/she invited that particular person, describing that person's significance to his/her academic journey. Based on recent numbers of students who complete

their requirements in December, the committee estimates that with these guests the total attendance would be somewhere between 80 and 120 people.

8. Once the main event has been established and is thought successful, consideration could be given to developing additional activities for December graduates that lead up to the main event and serve to foster an increased sense of community among the cohort (*i.e.* an informal cookout in Block 2, a group climb up Shove Tower in Block 3, etc...)