

How to Pursue a Good Idea

Kalamazoo College is a place that encourages critical thinking and activism. As such, it's not surprising that many students have ideas for improving our community.

What is a Good Idea?

Good ideas improve things. An example of a student-initiated good idea is the Student Conduct Advisor program. A small group of students had the idea that they could be helpful to students going through the student conduct process. They worked closely with Student Development to pursue and implement their idea. Good ideas almost always involve change and they take time, dedication, and effort.

K is brimming with ideas, and the following information is designed to help students effectively pursue good ideas.

Starting Place

- Assume that the College is amenable to good ideas.
- Be critical about what truly is a good idea. Be open to feedback that will help evaluate, shape and strengthen your idea.
- Understand that personal conviction and passion often fuel good ideas, while attention to practical details, patience, and persistence often brings them to fruition.

Essential Questions to Have Answered

The following questions can help you test and refine ideas. They are fair questions that others will have, and can help clarify ideas and strategy in a comprehensive way.

Questions about the idea:

1. What is the need for this idea? How have I determined this as a need? Who will benefit in what ways? How does this idea improve the work/experience of the College?
2. How does it fit with the values, priorities, and mission of Kalamazoo College?
3. What is the impact on others who don't support my idea or agree with my rationale?
4. How does this fit with competing priorities of which I am aware?
5. What are other institutions like K doing related to my idea/concern?
6. Will the College incur risk or liability related to my idea – health, safety, reputation, financial?
7. What is the cost, both financial and in terms of human resources (staffing, time), and to whom?

Questions about the strategy for getting your idea accepted:

8. Whom do I envision making my idea a reality? Who will actually get it done?
9. Take a personal inventory. What are my expectations for this project? Are they realistic? Who and what will I need to accomplish this goal? Can/will I put in the time and energy to make this goal a reality? If I cannot, then is it reasonable to ask others to take on this task?

10. Identify stakeholders in this issue. Who would be natural allies and who would be resistant to change? Be prepared to spend extra time and attention with those you identify as potentially resistant. Assume they know something that you don't that might help nuance and develop your position. Schedule appointments with as many people as possible and remember that your interest is in learning how people feel/think and why.
11. What will sustain the initiative over time – after I am gone, after my friends are gone?

“How to” Issues

Attending to the following issues will enable you to anticipate and prepare for important practical and logistical matters.

- Seek accurate information about your idea or the area for change. Understand the history and institutional rationale, collect accurate data, and talk to people (many offices on campus are good places to start – go right to the source) who can provide reliable information. Do not assume you have complete information until you know that you do. If you're not sure where to start, Student Development can point you in the right direction.
- Be prepared to answer questions and, if necessary, to collect additional information as you begin to discuss your idea with others. The request for accurate/additional information enables those who will work with you to have the most complete “picture” possible and may also strengthen your case.
- Be aware that there are multiple pressing priorities for the College at any given moment. As you gather good information, ask what other issues are important to the College. Work hard to understand your issue/goal in the context of other College priorities and goals
- If you have identified a specific area/department where you seek change, involve staff/faculty in those areas/departments from the beginning. They can be helpful in identifying needed information, potential snags, and strategies as you develop your idea.
- Be vigilant and accurate with ongoing communication. If working in a group, designate one member as the single point of contact to ensure accuracy and timeliness in communication.
- Be realistic about the time frame. Ask about this as you gather information. Though the K calendar runs on 10-week terms, most ideas are not fully realized in ten weeks. Don't let an “ideal” or urgent time line undermine the quality of thinking, planning, or communication.
- Recognize that people who disagree with your idea or with your interpretation, or who prioritize things differently, are not your adversaries. They can help improve your thinking and planning, and can provide you with a clear sense of the reality in which your idea resides.
- Recognize that there will be times when your idea will not result in the change you seek. While disappointing, understand that such decisions are not personal. If an idea is not successful, what can you learn from the experience? What will increase the likelihood of success the next time?