



COUNCIL OF PUBLIC LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

Strategic Plan

2026-2029

Executive Summary

This strategic plan establishes a clear and compelling identity for the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC). It is organized around four interconnected pillars that together define who we are, what we offer, and how we communicate our value to the world. These pillars are designed to reinforce one another — building a vibrant professional community, amplifying our advocacy, delivering tangible benefits to members, and strengthening our national and international brand.

This document is intended to guide the Board of Directors and institutional leadership as we align efforts, allocate resources, and pursue a shared vision for the future of public liberal arts education.

Our Mission (unchanged) <i>The Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges advances the collaborative aims of its member institutions through targeted internal programming and evidence-based common outcomes that drive public awareness of the value of high-quality, public liberal arts education in a student-centered, residential environment.</i>	Our Vision (a new, pithy vision statement) <i>To be the definitive home for public liberal arts excellence — the go-to source for data, best practices, advocacy, and innovation in our sector of higher education.</i>
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The Four Strategic Pillars

The strategic identity of COPLAC rests on four interconnected pillars. Each pillar represents a distinct commitment and a set of actionable initiatives designed to deliver lasting value to members and to the broader higher education community.

1	Community Building	Expanding communities of practice where best practices, scholarship, and innovation are shared across institutions.
2	Advocacy & Storytelling	Developing a campaign to tell the story of public liberal arts institutions and to champion their enduring value.
3	Tangible Member Benefits	Delivering concrete value through professional development opportunities, shared grants, student research opportunities, and awards.
4	Brand Visibility	Promoting COPLAC as the definitive resource for liberal arts data, insights, and leadership in national media.

PILLAR ONE | COMMUNITY BUILDING

STRATEGIC AIM

COPLAC will become the essential professional home for faculty, staff, and administrators across public liberal arts institutions – a living community where ideas are exchanged, expertise is cultivated, and best practices are elevated.

Communities of Practice

At the heart of this pillar is the creation of facilitated, structured, ongoing Communities of Practice (CoPs) – thematic working groups that convene across institutions to address shared challenges and opportunities in public liberal arts education.

- Establish new discipline-specific and role-specific CoPs (e.g., first-year experience, belonging and inclusion, undergraduate research, librarians).
- Create a Best Practices Repository – searchable, curated shared storage file of successful programs and initiatives contributed by member institutions.
- Recognize outstanding community contributions through annual CoP Excellence Awards to be held at the Summer Summit.

Leadership & Governance Development

The professional community extends to those who lead our institutions. COPLAC will build pipelines for emerging leaders and strengthen connections among senior administrators.

- Continue and possibly expand upon offerings for New Presidents and Chancellors, to include the New Presidents' Club and ongoing mentorship roundtables with seasoned CEOs leading the charge.
- Create peer mentorship pairings across member institutions for new directors, department chairs and deans.

Membership Growth

To strengthen and sustain a vibrant professional community, COPLAC will pursue intentional strategic membership growth across multiple pathways. Recognizing the diversity of public liberal arts institutions and professionals, COPLAC will expand opportunities for engagement through three distinct membership categories:

- **Institutional Membership** will remain the foundation of COPLAC's community. Recruitment will be targeted and selective, as prospective institutions must meet established COPLAC criteria. Outreach will focus on mission-aligned institutions that reflect the values and standards of a public liberal arts education
- **Unit Membership** (pending approval) will broaden access by welcoming Colleges of Liberal Arts or Arts & Sciences within public institutions that do not otherwise qualify for institutional membership. This category will extend COPLAC's reach while maintaining selectivity for full membership.
- **Individual Membership** will provide opportunities for faculty, staff, and administrators to engage directly with COPLAC's professional community, ensuring broader participation in Communities of Practice and leadership development. If an entire department joins with individual membership, additional benefits may be negotiated.

To support these pathways, COPLAC will:

- Conduct targeted membership outreach at key national and regional conferences, including AAC&U and other mission-aligned convenings.
- Empower Membership Committee members to serve as ambassadors, engaging prospective members as appropriate and aligned with COPLAC priorities.
- Develop clear value propositions and onboarding pathways tailored to each membership type.
- Strengthen retention through meaningful engagement opportunities, including Communities of Practice, leadership development programs, and recognition initiatives.
- Regularly assess membership trends and refine recruitment strategies to ensure sustainable and mission-consistent growth.

Through these efforts, COPLAC will cultivate a dynamic and inclusive network that reflects the evolving landscape of public liberal arts education while preserving the organization's core identity and standards.

PILLAR TWO | ADVOCACY & STORYTELLING

STRATEGIC AIM

COPLAC will amplify the strength of the organization by launching a sustained, compelling national and international campaign to articulate and promote the transformative value of the public liberal arts, influence policy, and inspire the next generation of students and educators.

The Public Liberal Arts Story Campaign

COPLAC will develop and execute a multi-channel advocacy campaign that communicates in clear, human, and data-driven terms why public liberal arts institutions matter for individuals and for society.

- Develop a unified campaign brand and messaging framework centered on outcomes, access, and civic impact.
- Call upon the expertise of our members to co-produce a flagship annual report, *The State of Public Liberal Arts in America*, combining institutional data, student stories, and policy analysis.
- Continue and expand upon our compelling alumni video and multimedia storytelling series to feature students, alumni, and faculty from COPLAC member institutions.
- Engage members to write for national higher education media outlets including, but not limited to *Inside Higher Ed*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *The Atlantic*.

Policy Advocacy

COPLAC will engage policymakers to advocate for the resources, recognition, and regulatory environment that public liberal arts institutions need to thrive.

- Cultivate relationships with congressional staff and Department of Education officials.
- Collaborate with the AAC&U, American Council on Education (ACE), Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), Campus Compact, Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR), and other aligned organizations on shared advocacy priorities.

PILLAR THREE | TANGIBLE MEMBER BENEFITS

STRATEGIC AIM

COPLAC must deliver clear, demonstrable value to faculty, staff, students, and institutions. This pillar ensures that every constituent on a COPLAC campus will find concrete benefit in COPLAC membership.

Professional Development

COPLAC will curate and deliver high-quality professional development that addresses the specific needs of public liberal arts educators and administrators.

- Maintain signature professional development programs and launch new workshops, webinars, and certificate programs in areas such as high-impact teaching practices and mentoring student research.
- Develop an online learning library with on-demand modules for faculty and staff across member institutions.
- Create a peer consulting program connecting institutions with expertise they need in areas such as strategic planning, curriculum reform, assessment, and enrollment management.

Organizational Advancement

Shared Grant Opportunities

Collaboration across institutions opens doors to funding that individual colleges could not access alone. COPLAC will position itself as a facilitator of large-scale, collaborative grant work.

- Establish a COPLAC Grants Community of Practice that will identify consortium funding opportunities from NSF, NEH, and private foundations.
- Develop a consortium grant infrastructure that enables multi-institution project teams to apply for and manage federal and foundation awards, positioning critical thinking and liberal arts education as a key grant-raising opportunity, particularly in the context of AI ethics and policy development.

Fundraising

To expand resources and enhance member benefits, COPLAC will develop a coordinated fundraising strategy grounded in relationship-building and community engagement. Initial efforts will focus on cultivating a strong base of supporters.

- Establish an annual **COPLAC Day of Giving**, possibly tied to one of COPLAC's signature events, to unify member institutions and stakeholders around a shared fundraising effort, and increase visibility and participation across the network.
- Engage institutional leaders and advancement professionals in identifying and cultivating prospective donors, foundations, and corporate partners.
- Recognize and steward donors through regular communication and impact reporting tied to COPLAC's programs and initiatives.

Student Study Away/Exchange Opportunities

Students at COPLAC institutions deserve access to student exchange opportunities that rival those at larger research and flagship universities.

- Leverage the existing National Student Exchange infrastructure for specific campus-to-campus exchanges.
- Launch the COPLAC Student Study Away/Exchange — a program enabling undergraduates to study and/or perform research at COPLAC institutions or other partner institutions.
- Explore shared Study Abroad partnerships to expand student opportunity.
- Partner with national research programs (NSF REU sites, NEH summer institutes) to increase COPLAC student placement.

Awards

Recognizing excellence strengthens our community and elevates the profile of public liberal arts achievement.

- Maintain the Dunn and Prior Awards, while expanding recognition to staff as well.
- Develop institutional awards recognizing member colleges for distinctive programs, equity outcomes, and innovative practices.

PILLAR FOUR | BRAND VISIBILITY

STRATEGIC AIM

COPLAC will establish itself as the definitive national voice and data resource for public liberal arts education, becoming the first call for journalists, policymakers, and researchers seeking insight into our sector of the higher education landscape.

Media Presence & Thought Leadership

Visibility in leading higher education media is essential to establishing COPLAC as the authoritative voice of the public liberal arts. We will pursue a proactive, sustained media strategy.

- Develop a COPLAC editorial strategy targeting regular contributions to *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, including op-eds, essays, and commentary.
- Establish a COPLAC Speakers Bureau – a roster of member institution presidents, faculty, and staff available to media outlets, conferences, and policy forums as authoritative voices on the liberal arts.
- Using resources readily available at the UNC Asheville library, launch a COPLAC Podcast: a regular, accessible forum for liberal arts thinking, featuring members and outside guests.
- Host a national COPLAC Press Briefing in Washington, DC each year to coincide with the release of the annual *State of Public Liberal Arts in America* report.

The Go-To Data Resource

COPLAC will build and maintain the most comprehensive, publicly available dataset on public liberal arts institutions in the country, becoming the essential reference for researchers, journalists, and policymakers.

- Work with Institutional Research partners to develop the COPLAC Public Liberal Arts Data Hub — an open-access, regularly updated portal featuring enrollment trends, outcomes data, faculty demographics, program offerings, and affordability metrics.
- Publish an annual COPLAC Benchmarking Report enabling member institutions to compare performance across key indicators.
- Partner with IPEDS, AAC&U, and other data sources to enrich and contextualize COPLAC institutional data.

Digital Presence & Communications

A strong digital presence amplifies all four pillars and extends COPLAC's reach to prospective students, faculty, and partner organizations worldwide.

- Redesign the COPLAC website as a dynamic, resource-rich destination that will be intuitive for prospective students, informative for researchers, and compelling for institutional partners.
- Develop a social media strategy targeting LinkedIn for professional audiences and higher education discourse and Instagram for student-facing storytelling.
- Continue to publish a COPLAC newsletter featuring member news, program highlights, funding opportunities, and advocacy updates.

Implementation & Governance

The success of this strategic plan depends on clear ownership, adequate resourcing, and regular accountability. The Executive Committee and Board of Directors will provide oversight and strategic guidance, while operational implementation will be led by COPLAC staff in partnership with member institution representatives.

Governance Structure

- Each pillar will be assigned a Board Champion — a board member or representative who provides strategic oversight and reports progress at quarterly board meetings.
- A Strategic Plan Implementation Committee, comprised of member institution representatives, will convene semi-annually in concert with Board Meetings to assess progress and recommend adjustments.
- Progress metrics will be published in the year-end COPLAC Executive Director's Report.

Phased Implementation Timeline

Phase 1	Launch new Communities of Practice, establish Data Hub infrastructure, begin media outreach strategy, launch grant identification process.
Phase 2	Continue advocacy campaign and storytelling initiative, promote scholarship and awards programs, publish first annual State of Public Liberal Arts report.
Phase 3	Scale membership to create international partnerships, operationalize student study away/exchange, achieve regular presence in national media, deepen consortium grant portfolio.

Key Performance Indicators

Progress against this plan will be measured using the following illustrative indicators:

- Number of active Communities of Practice and member participation rates
- Number of media placements in *Inside Higher Ed*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and national outlets annually
- Value and number of consortium grants applied for and awarded
- Number of students participating in COPLAC research exchanges and symposia
- Number of awards distributed annually
- Website traffic, media citations, and data hub usage statistics

The four pillars of this plan do not stand alone — they are mutually reinforcing. A strong professional community builds the relationships that power advocacy. Advocacy creates the visibility that attracts resources. Resources deliver tangible benefits that deepen community. A thriving community garners positive attention on the national stage. Together, they define what COPLAC is and what public liberal arts can be.