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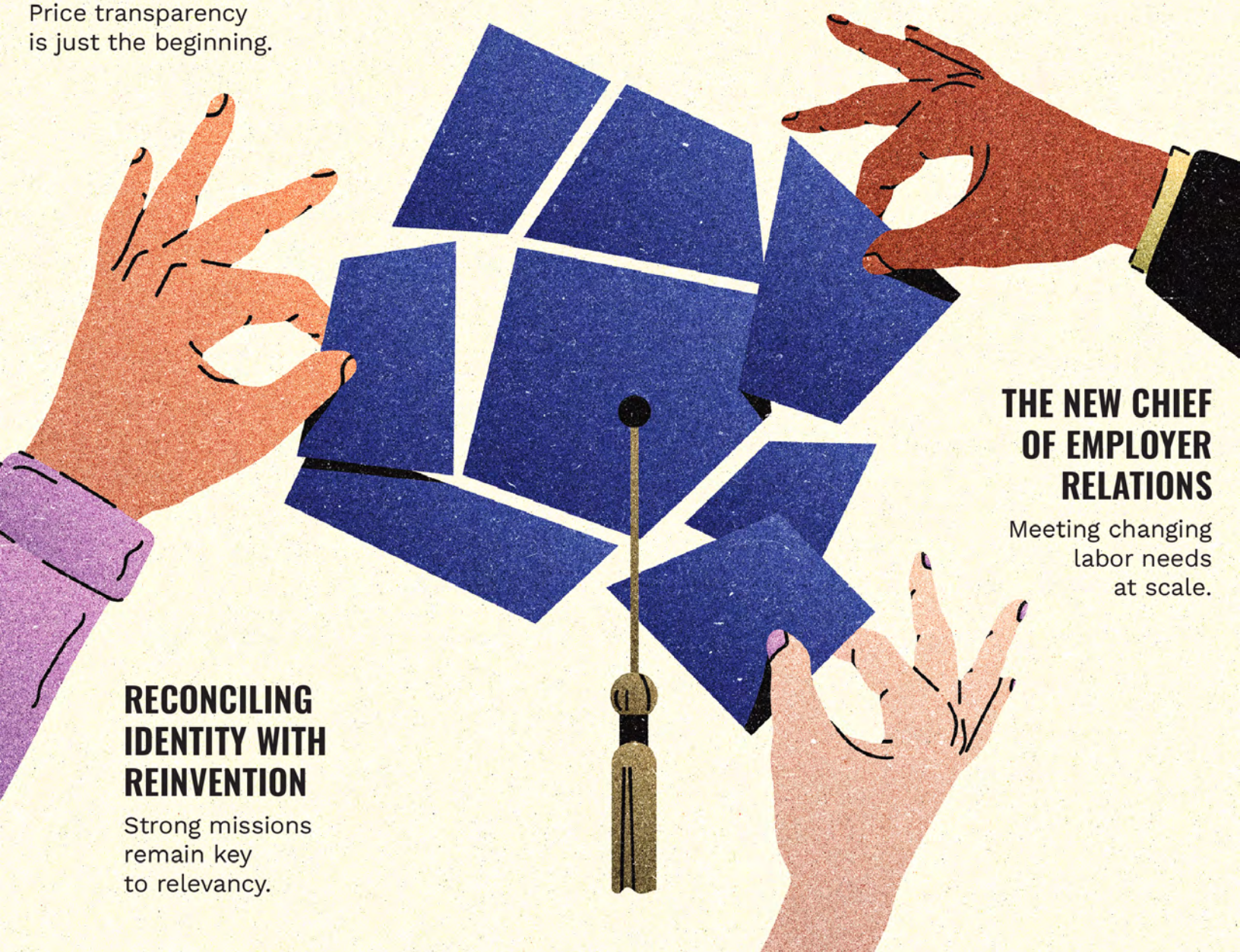
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Betting Bigger Than One Institution

In this edition of the AcOps Magazine, we bring you a different set of profiles from previous editions. The college and university president. The public faces of our institutions who are in charge of selling the vision of higher ed, running effective institutions, advocating for more dollars, and more. You might think the president is above the day-to-day academic operations of an institution. And in some ways they are. They aren't reviewing the course schedule section by section or reviewing every small curriculum change. So what can presidents reveal about our institutions and how we run them?

Presidents know we can't go at it alone. The presidents featured in this issue spoke of partnerships with their state legislatures, K-12 schools, colleges and universities outside of their "tier," employers, and the broader community. A partnership with local employers to host a "Diesel Day" was the key to growing enrollment by over 100% in Ferris State University's Heavy Equipment Technology program. President Kathy Humphrey learned about cancelled surgeries when visiting a relative in the hospital, inspiring Carlow University to now offer a surgical tech program. Bunker Hill Community College President Pam Eddinger said it best: "We cannot do it all. The problem is too big. We're solving for poverty. So unless you get partners to come in, in a meaningful way... that is really the only way."



How do we make the case for these partnerships though when they often require resources and a willingness to do things differently? Presidents agree that having the right data to back you up is a necessity. For President Richard Nelson, this means forgoing "phantom metrics" and highlighting job placement rates to the state legislature, rather than the number of degrees conferred. However, a focus on affordability and transparency is just as critical. Presidents are fighting back on the affordability narrative by showcasing free community college tuition, a commitment to cover tuition and fees for all families making less than $125Kk, or their position as the most affordable public university in the state.

For presidents, the real pay-off from all of these initiatives is in knowing their students better. When staff capacity is freed up, they have the time to ask the right questions, identify gaps, and build effective interventions. Bridgewater State University President Fred Clark explained that "the only way not to leave them [students] behind is to understand who they are, what their identities are, and what interventions can make them competitive." For example, if you've never asked your students if they are hungry, how do you know if the need exists on your campus? On the K-12 front, President Rob Pepper highlighted how Huntington University partners closely with alumni working in K-12 to better understand dynamics that impact dual enrollment students.

Higher ed is undoubtedly changing and presidents are responding. The question I return to time and time again is, are we changing fast enough? As you read this issue, I'd encourage you to consider:

- How much time do you spend with your partners? How can these partnerships traverse the artificial boundaries of higher ed?
- Are we assessing and championing the right metrics? What metrics are meaningful to your stakeholders?
- What's one aspect of your students' lives that you don't feel informed about? Ask the question. Ask the right people.

As always, I am grateful for this community and their commitment to the students we serve.

Bridget Moran
Editor-in-Chief

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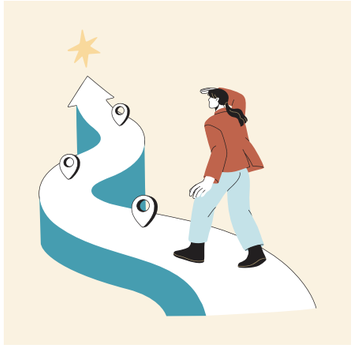
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AcOps Magazine design by ***Melanie Peluso***



Staying Relevant and Responsive: Lessons from Ferris State University

ABOUT

INSTITUTION:	LOCATION:	STUDENTS:
Ferris State University	Big Rapids, MI	> 10,000

Dr. Bill Pink, President of Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan, has a simple framework for how the institution of over 10,000 students operates after more than 140 years: be relevant and be responsive. For Pink, those two words describe everything from the university's founding mission to how it designs programs and builds employer relationships. "That, to me, is the challenge of Ferris State University: I call it being relevant and responsive," he says.

At the core of his philosophy is the idea that remaining relevant and responsive hinges on connecting students to in-demand, well-paying jobs. "We've got a really cool reputation in the state of Michigan as being that school that not only sends you to work, but sends you to work in a good-paying job." Dr. Pink shared how Ferris State achieves this vision through partnerships, awareness, and a commitment to change.



A Founding Commitment to Access

While Ferris State has undoubtedly changed since its founding more than a century ago, its founding principles remain just as true today as in the 1880s. Founders Woodbridge and Helen Ferris built the institution on a foundation of accessibility. As Pink describes it, "They started it on the premise that everyone in the state of Michigan ought to have access to higher education… no matter what the color of your skin, no matter what gender, no matter who you are. They said 'If you're in Michigan, you ought to have a right and access to higher ed.'"

Pink, the 19th president of Ferris State and its first African American president, sees it as his responsibility to continue the founding vision. While welcoming students of all backgrounds to Ferris State continues to be important, Pink knows this is just the first step in remaining relevant and responsive.

> *"We've got a really cool reputation in the state of Michigan as being that school that not only sends you to work, but sends you to work in a good-paying job."*

Earning the Opportunity University Designation

Once students arrive at Ferris State, Pink emphasizes that the right programs and structures need to exist to provide students with the opportunity to thrive and secure a good-paying job. While many institutions publicly strive for the same goals, Ferris State can back it up with the "Opportunity University" designation they earned through the Carnegie Foundation. For him, this external validation goes beyond marketing. "Our students have opportunity when they finish a program at Ferris State. They're going to get into not just a job; they're going to get into a good-paying job that has a great pathway to a career," he says. He's direct about why that distinction matters to him: "That Opportunity University designation, that is a third party that's not even us... now we got data that says this is the institution that sends you to work."

Dr. Pink believes that Ferris State's commitment to remaining relevant to Michigan's workforce is one of the reasons the institution received this designation. This spans across programs such as welding and automotive engineering, one of the country's oldest pharmacy programs, a college of optometry, and accredited programs in professional golf and tennis management.

Employer Partnerships as a Built-In Talent Pipeline

While research can help inform program alignment, much of Ferris State's responsiveness comes from how deeply the institution weaves employers into curriculum development. Advisory committees at Ferris State do more than review course content. Pink explains: "They actually come and meet and share with our faculty. 'Here's what we're doing. Here's what the industry looks like now. Here's what we need.'" Students sit in on those conversations too, which Pink describes as a built-in talent pipeline: employers get early exposure to future hires, and students get direct insight into what companies actually need.

This relationship extends into hands-on learning and student opportunities as well. Companies donate equipment, replace it as technology advances, and fund scholarships and lab naming rights. Pink connects this directly to outcomes like the Opportunity University designation: "When I see that kind of connectivity, it doesn't surprise me when we get things like Opportunity University designation, because what it means is that we are that connected to our industry partners."

Diesel Days: Solving an Awareness Problem

While Ferris State offers many programs with well-known career paths, serving a rural community with farming and industrial needs presents opportunities for lesser-known careers. However, even the best-built program can struggle if students aren't aware of the opportunities available to them. For example, Ferris State's Heavy Equipment Technology program prepares students for careers as diesel mechanics for farm and highway equipment. A few years ago, the program was struggling with enrollment for a simple reason: high school students didn't know the program existed. "If you don't know something, you'll never go to something," Pink says.

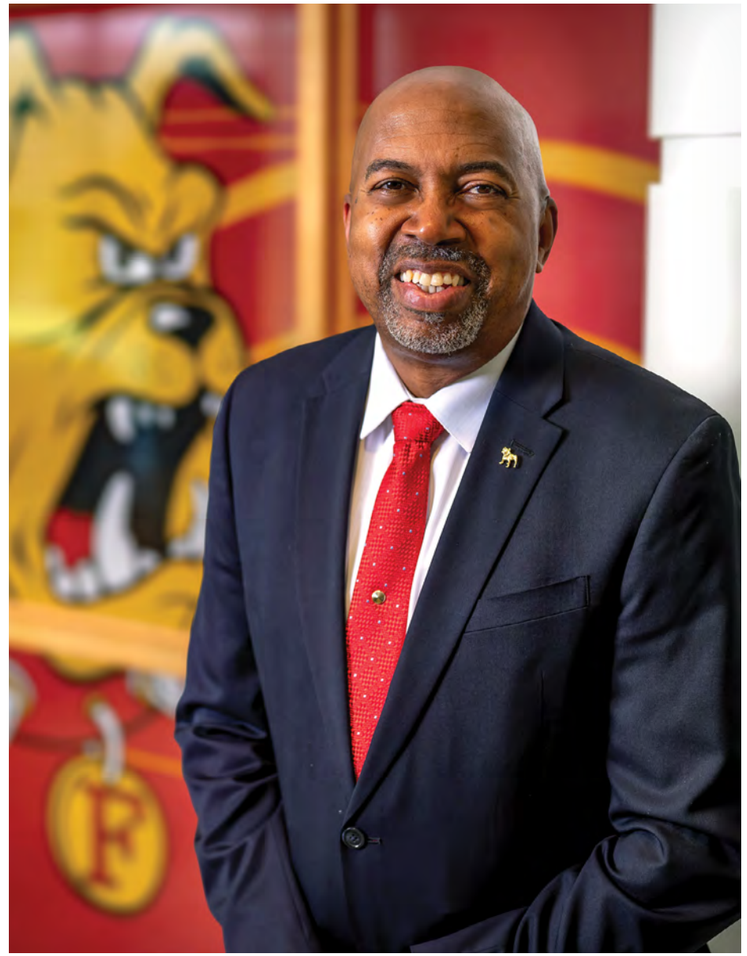
The solution to this awareness problem came in the form of Diesel Days: an event bringing high school students to campus alongside industry equipment and company representatives. The first year drew 15 company partners and 150 to 200 students. Last October, it drew around 700 high school students and 50 companies over two days, and the model has since expanded to a second event in the Detroit area. Since then, program enrollment has grown by over 100%. Pink frames the result as a three-way win: "The students are going to win because we're going to give them a career path. Certainly, the company wins because we're giving them a workforce. We win because we've upped that enrollment."

> *"The students are going to win because we're going to give them a career path. Certainly, the company wins because we're giving them a workforce. We win because we've upped that enrollment."*

No One Wants to Be the Next Blockbuster

When asked about how Ferris State maintains relevancy given the speed at which employer needs are changing, Pink was candid about the pace higher education tends to move at. "I sometimes say, in higher ed we can take six months just to buy a pencil. We take forever to do things," he says. While he praises Ferris State for being more nimble than most, he still acknowledges that this is an area for growth.

He points to Blockbuster as a warning for what happens when an institution stops treating relevance as something it has to keep earning. "If we in higher ed think that we are too big and mighty, we



Dr. Bill Pink

President

Ferris State University

Photo: Dr. Pink catches up with a Ferris State student.



will find ourselves going the way of Blockbuster. We can be deemed irrelevant and no longer exist just like that. Any given November, we can find ourselves in bad spaces. You combine that with the idea of responsiveness. If we're not responsive to what they need, then where are we?" he says.

For Pink, the founding mission, the employer relationships, and programs like Diesel Days aren't a fixed formula the university landed on once. They're the ongoing work of staying responsive to keep up with what students and industry need next. ■



ABOUT | **INSTITUTION:** Carlow University | **LOCATION:** Pittsburgh, PA | **STUDENTS:** > 2,400

Meeting the Next Great Need: Inside Carlow University's Purpose-Driven Growth



Ninety-five years ago, five members of the Sisters of Mercy arrived in Pittsburgh with a simple charge: meet the need in front of them. Today, that same instinct shapes every decision Dr. Kathy Humphrey makes as the 11th president of Carlow University, from how the institution talks to prospective students to which academic programs it builds next. In a recent conversation, Dr. Humphrey laid out how Carlow has grown enrollment by nearly 500 students in four years, not through aggressive marketing, but by staying close to its founding mission and to the needs of the local Pittsburgh community.

A Mission Built to Meet the Next Great Need

Carlow's founding story is central to how Dr. Humphrey frames the university's identity today. "We began 95 years ago, by the Sisters of Mercy. And these were five gutsy, gritty women who came from Ireland to meet the next great need in Pittsburgh," she said. That need, in 1929, was access: "Initially it was to provide Catholic and other women an opportunity to get an education when nobody else was allowing that to happen." She points out how radical the timing was: "Women had just begun to vote. And here are these five women starting really an enterprise that would live for hundreds of years later, in communities, providing hospitals, educations, elementary schools, and universities."

For Dr. Humphrey, that origin story isn't history to be honored from a distance. It's an operating principle. "This work that they did, to provide opportunities to those who would not have opportunities, is some of the work we continue to do today at Carlow," she said, "and specifically to meet the next great need. So much of our work is to say, okay world, what do you need? Okay world, who's not getting an opportunity to get an education, how can we get you that education?" For her, the question isn't rhetorical; it guides curriculum development, community engagement, and student purpose.

Growing Enrollment by Listening to the Community

Carlow's mission-driven approach has translated into real enrollment growth, at a time when many institutions are struggling to hold steady. "In the last four years, we've gone from an enrollment of about 1,987 to an enrollment of about 2,456," Dr. Humphrey said. "In this environment, that's a tough job to do. And people often say, 'How do you do it? How are you doing it in this environment?' And I say, 'We're doing it by being intensely who we are.'" In practice, this means responding to the needs of the greater community.

To identify community needs, Dr. Humphrey meets directly with local employers and keeps her eyes and ears open, even when she is off the clock. "When I came into the position, I went into the hospitals and said to the teams, 'What do you need here? What's missing?' Of course, nurses. So we created an LPN program." A conversation with a surgeon led to another: "One of the surgeons said, 'You know, I have to cancel surgeries because I don't have enough surgical techs.' And immediately it becomes personal, 'What do you mean you have to cancel surgeries? That could be me someday. My surgery could have to be canceled.' And so we immediately figured out how to start a surgical tech program."

While these interactions help close immediate employer gaps, these new opportunities are just as profound for the students. When Carlow opened its surgical tech programs, one student shared: "You know what? I'd been mopping the OR my entire career, and I thought I could do more."

Outside of scheduled meetings with employers, Dr. Humphrey also has a keen eye for signals she sees in daily life. For example, Carlow is now investigating an automobile technician program after she repeatedly noticed "technicians needed" signage when she was shopping for a new car. For Humphrey, this is an exciting opportunity to rethink traditional notions of certain programs. She was quick to point out that automobile technician no longer means just understanding where a certain part goes, but all of the technological elements that now go into cars. She asks: "How can I provide something that's really going to assist the community, but also change my curriculum to meet the needs of the 21st century?"

Selling Purpose, Not Programs

While offering programs that meet real employer needs is one piece of the puzzle, simply advertising the programs is not enough to get students excited. For Dr. Humphrey, this means moving away from traditional higher ed marketing. "We want you to know why you are going to come to Carlow. So we spend our time talking about our values, who we are, what you can expect, as opposed to just saying, 'Come, because we have this program.'"

To achieve this, Carlow leads with purpose over program. "You're not just getting this education for yourself. You're getting this education to make the world better. This is your piece of the puzzle, but it's not just for you," Dr. Humphrey tells students. The homepage of Carlow's website doesn't list the word program or any specific degree programs. Rather, it highlights how students can explore their purpose: healing, expression, discovery, service.

A University That Rejects Traditional Labels

Most higher ed leaders can easily rattle off the expected categories that their institution fits in. Dr. Humphrey directly posed this question to her team and found that liberal arts college, technical college, or any other classification simply didn't fit. She found "We don't have a term for who we are, because we're all of that. We need a new term." Her answer is a phrase she has started using to describe what Carlow is building instead: a purpose-driven education, one that leans less on a fixed institutional type and more

> ***"You're not just getting this education for yourself. You're getting this education to make the world better. This is your piece of the puzzle, but it's not just for you."***



Dr. Kathy Humphrey

President

Carlow University

on a standing commitment to ask what the world needs next and build toward it.

She measures success in terms that extend well past graduation: "My greatest hope is that they [students] will play a significant role, first in their own families, then in their communities, then maybe in their region, and some in the country, and some in the world."

Rethinking How Institutions Operate

While leading with mission and community drives Carlow's success, Humphrey readily acknowledges that universities must also rethink their business models to continue to operate. At Carlow, this can mean treating other regional institutions as collaborators rather than competition: "We don't see other uni-

Photo: Dr. Humphrey presents diplomas at Carlow University Commencement.



versities necessarily as pure competitors, and so we are partnering with other institutions with back-office functions. Our police chief is the same police chief at another university, because we don't all need police chiefs, but we all need a police chief." The goal, she said, is straightforward: "How do we share, so that we can contain our cost to provide these opportunities in a world where cost is constantly rising every single day."

> ***"My greatest hope is that they will play a significant role, first in their own families, then in their communities, then maybe in their region, and some in the country, and some in the world."***

If Carlow's approach holds up, it points to a different way of thinking about institutional growth altogether. As more colleges and universities face questions of identity under real financial and demographic strain, Carlow's bet is that the institutions willing to define themselves by what they're built to solve, rather than the category they've always claimed, may be the ones still standing to solve the next great need. ■

200 Years of Reinvention: How Athens State Built a Transfer-First Model



ABOUT | **INSTITUTION:** Athens State University | **LOCATION:** Athens, AL | **STUDENTS:** > 3,000

Dr. Catherine Wehlburg, President of Athens State University, leads an institution that has reinvented itself more than once across two centuries. Founded in 1822 as a women's college, Athens State later admitted men, had a stint as a Methodist institution, and spent decades as a community college designated as an upper-division partner for students transferring in from junior colleges. Today, it is one of Alabama's 14 public four-year institutions but still exists to primarily serve transfer and adult students.

At the heart of its history lives an institution that is constantly evolving and re-examining how they operate. Despite more than 40 years of experience serving transfer students, Athens State continues to ask how they can serve a population of students they already know better than most.

A Head Start on Transfer Students

In practice, Athens State accepts students only after they have earned at least 36 credit hours elsewhere, with roughly half of its student body arriving through community colleges while the other half consists of adult learners returning to finish or redirect a degree. While transfer students were once considered a negligible population when Athens State served this population through the '80s, '90s, and 2000s, what was once an outlier has become a competitive advantage as more institutions chase transfer enrollment.

"Now, because of the enrollment changes that many institutions are having, transfer students are becoming a true, measured, and sought-after population," Wehlburg said. "And that's what we've been doing since the 80s. So we've got a little bit of a head start on that and part of our challenge is to make sure that we maintain that head start."

Building Structure Around Every Student's Path

Because Athens State students arrive with credit already in hand, the institution treats transfer evaluation and prior learning assessment as front-line operational work, not an afterthought. "One of the things that we do is, when students come in, we work really hard with them to make sure that their transfer credits are counted," Wehlburg said. This includes work



Dr. Catherine Wehlburg

President

Athens State University

experience as well. "If a student has work experience or other kinds of industry credentials that map to course outcomes, we give them prior learning assessment credit," she explains.

Since prior learning credit looks different for each student, this creates an interesting challenge for degree and schedule planning. Athens State created two-year program maps to give students a structured plan toward graduation, while also understanding that individual student timelines may not line up perfectly. "Not every student is coming in in the same place," Wehlburg explains. "And so we have two-year schedules, two-year rotations of courses for every one of our programs. And we hold to those, but we also have to, in some instances, offer directed study or other kinds of courses for students because we don't want them to have to wait another semester or two semesters for that one class in order to graduate."

While Athens State originally used program maps only for certain programs, the university is now extending the approach institution-wide. To create truly feasible maps, the institution is asking departments to scrutinize listed courses. Courses that rarely or never run can quietly become graduation barriers for students who plan to take them, only to be left scrambling to find another course or extend their timeline. On the scheduling side, there's also the question of how many sections to offer. With most students enrolled part-time at Athens State, being deliberate about the number of sections offered is a necessity to balance budget constraints with how many students genuinely need a seat.

A Streamlined Strategic Plan With Built-In Measures

Initiatives such as program maps don't just live in a vacuum at Athens State. Projects live under one of the four strategic plan pillars: student success for transfer students, student success for adult learners, community engagement, and innovative teaching and learning. While this sounds simple on the surface, each pillar has a dedicated champion and its own set of tracked metrics. Additionally, the individual projects underneath each pillar have their own dedicated metrics, giving the institution a single structure that ties day-to-day initiatives back to overall direction rather than tracking progress piecemeal.

Defining and Innovating Quality Instruction

As part of Athens State's strategic plan work, Dr. Wehlburg and her team are critically thinking about what successful instruction and courses look like



Photo: Ribbon cutting ceremony for the new STEM Learning Lab at Athens State.

for transfer and adult learners. To achieve this, they formed a Summer Academy, where roughly 30 faculty spend two weeks examining course design in cohorts. Athens State pays faculty through a course-release stipend so they can spend the entire two weeks working on a project that is required to report measurable outcomes. “They spent two weeks, pretty full-time, looking at different aspects of what makes a good course,” Wehlburg said. “And some of that had to do with how they do assignments, how they do assessment of student work, how they can use technology to help support some of that.”

A related project asks faculty to define course quality itself, an exercise Wehlburg says only works if the institution is willing to sit with the ambiguity first. “If we had to have a rubric that looked at what a good course is, how might we do that?” she said. “And that’s got all the nuance and everything that goes into: what is a good class? Because there is no one model, there is no one answer for that. But if we’re not having these conversations, then the answer is we don’t know what a good class is.”

The Case for Pairing Metrics With Student Stories

With public confidence in higher education under pressure, Wehlburg treats the strategic plan as a tool for external communication as much as internal alignment. “With this strategic plan, I am able to talk about an overall strategic direction that we’re going in, and be able to back that up with specific examples,” she said. “I’ve got data, but I’ve also got the stories.” One example she returns to often: a student whose internship at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville led to a job offer, three promotions, and eventually a formal learning partnership between the center and the university. “All of that is because this student had an internship, was prepared for that internship, got the job, and is now doing more and more things,” she said.

That pairing of metrics and narrative gives Wehlburg something to bring to legislators, accreditors, and prospective students alike as a way of showing not just what the institution measures, but why those numbers matter to the people behind them.

A Closing Thought on Change

While structural change is never easy, Wehlburg is quick to point out the cost of inaction. “We all agree change is hard,” she said. “But not changing has pretty big consequences too, especially where we are right now.” Institutions, she argues, need to set a clear direction and hold to it. “Clearly communicate, this is where we’re going, and this is why we’re going in that way. And then be prepared to move in that direction, and don’t get sidetracked.”

> *“We all agree change is hard. But not changing has pretty big consequences too, especially where we are right now.”*

To maintain momentum, Wehlburg advises minimizing exceptions and recognizing that short-term reactions likely won’t matter in the long term. While keeping everyone on track requires sustained effort, Wehlburg is quick to point out that the people doing the work deserve credit for it. “Our faculty and our staff do a lot of work, and we need to hold them accountable for that work, and we need to recognize that work and appreciate that work.” ■

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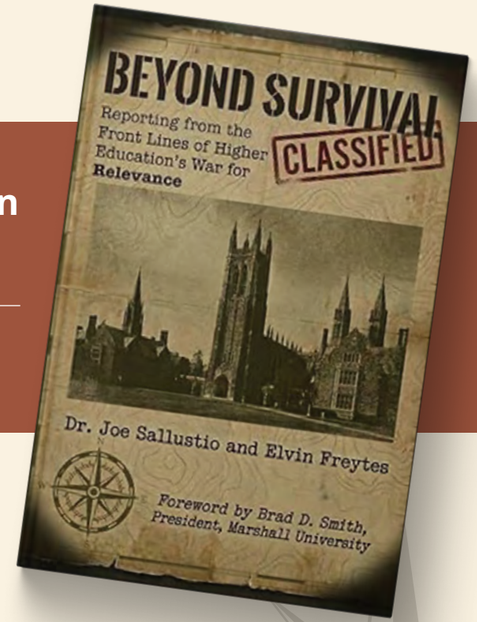
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DR. JOE SALLUSTIO & ELVIN FREYTES | FOREWORD BY BRAD D. SMITH, PRESIDENT, MARSHALL UNIVERSITY

Storytelling as Leadership at Rollins College

ABOUT

INSTITUTION:	LOCATION:	STUDENTS:
Rollins College	Winter Park, FL	> 3,000

It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood at Rollins College in Winter Park, FL. The alma mater of Fred Rogers features stunning architecture, lake access, and maybe most importantly, a spirit of giving back to the community. In fact, the attributes of the Rollins community ended up drawing in someone who never intended to become a college president: Dr. Brooke Barnett.

When a friend encouraged Barnett to apply for the role, she was initially skeptical as she never sought a presidency. However, the Rollins community quickly convinced her otherwise. She discovered a campus built on several differentiating factors: a business model that funds scholarships through a boutique hotel and art museum, a firm commitment to the liberal arts, and a community whose traditions run generations deep.





In a recent conversation, President Barnett explored themes she believes are critical for the continued survival of higher ed: the importance of storytelling for community building; the relevance of the liberal arts; and how a college's business model should reinforce its educational mission.

The Winter Park Innovation Triangle: A Business Model Inside the Community

Rollins' most distinctive asset may be the Alfond Inn, a hotel owned outright by the college. As Barnett describes it, the inn is "owned by the college and all net profits from the inn, spa, café, and restaurant altogether go to student scholarships. It's an incredible business model."

However, the inn is just one piece of the model. "We've created an innovation triangle taking the inn as one piece and then two pieces right across the street," Barnett explains. The Rollins Art Museum will soon move into downtown Winter Park, joining the Rick Goings Institute, which provides high-level executive education. The vision is a single, connected experience: "People will stay at the inn, they'll go to the museum, they'll be in these sessions, they'll be in dinner and conversation in Park Avenue and Winter Park."

This innovation triangle hasn't always existed, though. Barnett and her team assessed the strength of the college's assets to create a larger vision of how the college could expand into the community and deliver value in the areas they already do best: educating and bringing people together.

Liberal Arts' PR Problem in the Age of AI

While Barnett is quick to point to the value higher education provides, she's also direct about where she thinks the liberal arts have struggled to make their case. "I like to talk about the liberal arts broadly because I think the liberal arts have a PR problem and not an evidence problem," she says, noting that placement rates for liberal arts graduates at Rollins and elsewhere are strong even when the narrative around them isn't.

She connects that argument directly to the pace of technological change. "The enduring value of what we offer in the liberal arts, with intellectual flexibility, the ability to think deeply, shift frameworks, tackle problems that don't come with a manual," she says, is "not a luxury. It's the preparation that students need to grapple with a complex world that's getting even more complex." This is especially true as students encounter AI and rapid advancement all around them. "The liberal arts is not a relic. It is future-proofing in a moment of renaissance, in a moment of AI."

> *"The liberal arts is not a relic. It is future-proofing in a moment of renaissance, in a moment of AI."*

In her mind, the liberal arts exist to engage with AI, ask the right questions, and provide valuable human oversight. However, this does not mean letting AI completely take over. "If we move into a world of cognitively offloading certain skills in an educational environment, we need to make sure that those skills are known and learned before they're cognitively offloaded."

Leading Through Story

Barnett came to higher education with a background in media and journalism, providing her with a unique perspective on how institutions can tell a stronger story. "There is real power in specific stories and stories that aren't examples," she says. "We tend to think of story as example, but to truly tell it as a story." Her advice to peers, especially new presidents on a listening tour, is simple: "Figure out what are those special things about your community and tell them in a story." Identifying those key stories that embody an institution allows presidents to "turn those [stories] into a way to animate your aspirations, your future, your current, and what is special about the place."

She points to a Rollins tradition as an example of a story that has outlasted the person who started it. "Thad Seymour was another one of our presidents who used to walk around with silver dollars and hand them out to students when they were doing good things because he knew character was an important part of education," Barnett says. Now, Rollins hosts an annual kindness day rooted in the tradition of President Seymour and his wife.

Knowing Your Students, Preparing Them for a Purposeful Life

For Barnett, the differentiator that no amount of marketing can manufacture is a felt sense of community. "To know us is to love us," she says of Rollins. "I think our community is palpable. It takes very little time to walk across campus and feel what I think feels great about Rollins." That extends to her own relationship with students: "When I walk across campus, I am so proud of our students. I'm proud that I know them. I'm proud they feel comfortable enough to come up and talk to me and ask about things and to send me things."

That closeness feeds directly into how she describes the purpose of a Rollins education. "We also take very seriously that we want to prepare students for a good life," she says. "Part of a good life is a good career. We don't shy away from that... but part of it is an appreciation for the finer things of life, art and culture and dance and literature and all media, all of it. We want you to be an engaged citizen participating in your community, enjoying your life, able to support yourself with a career that matters and is meaningful. And to take seriously that notion of service and purpose."

> *"We want you to be an engaged citizen participating in your community, enjoying your life, able to support yourself with a career that matters and is meaningful."*

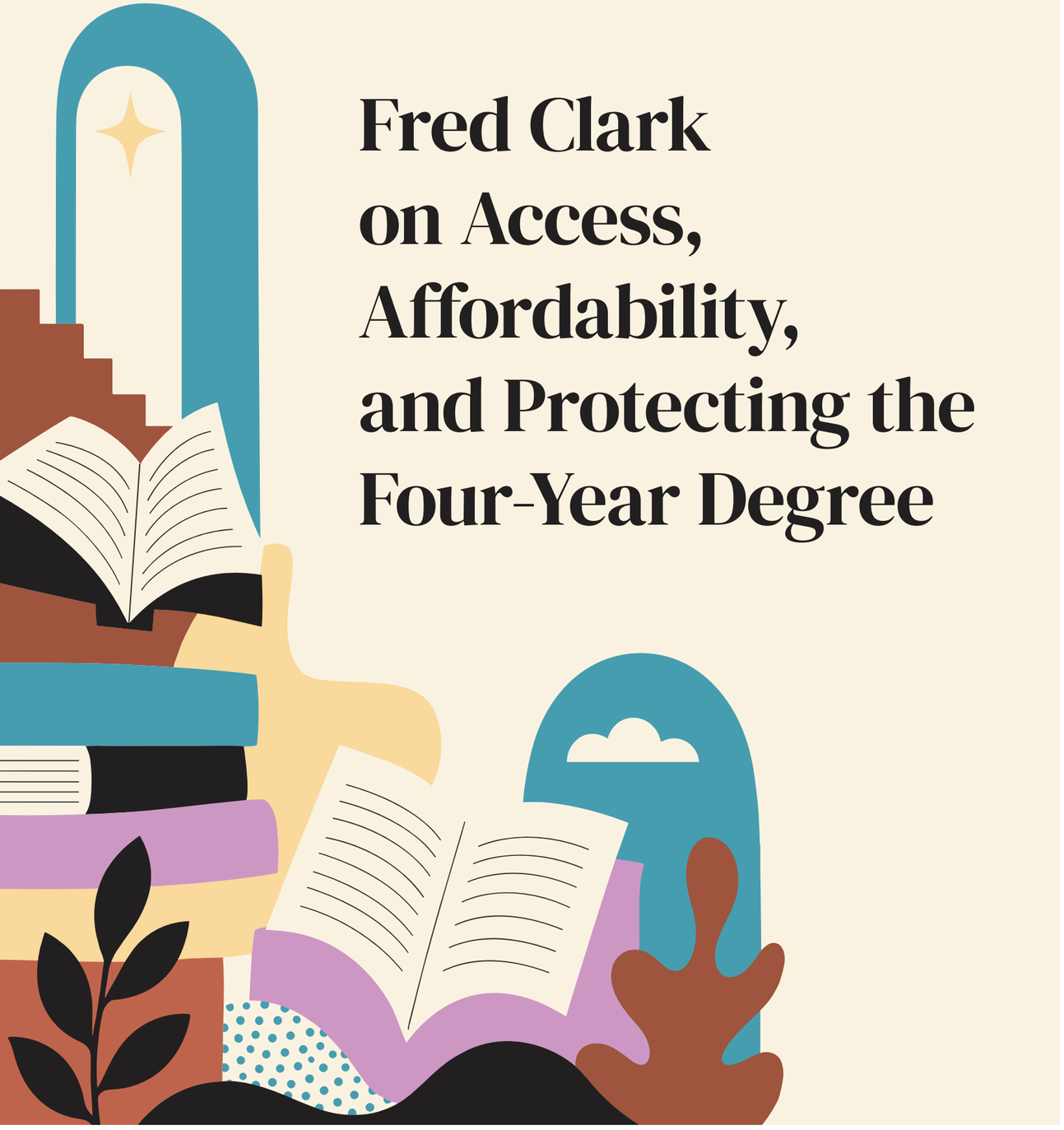
For Barnett, this isn't just theoretical. She leans into the ethos of alum Fred Rogers to promote kindness, dignity, and service in how the college operates and the stories it tells. ■



Dr. Brooke Barnett

President

Rollins College



Fred Clark on Access, Affordability, and Protecting the Four-Year Degree

ABOUT | **INSTITUTION:** Bridgewater State University | **LOCATION:** Bridgewater, MA | **STUDENTS:** > 10,300

At Bridgewater State University in Southeastern Massachusetts, founder Horace Mann and supporters Daniel Webster and John Quincy Adams still loom large 185 years later. Originally founded as a teacher preparation college, the institution still operates in the same location and strives to fulfill its founding principles. President Frederick Clark Jr. explains that the founding logic was simple and still rings true today: "if everyone has an education it's good for the economy, it's good for society, and it's good for citizenship."

The same principle still shapes how Clark runs a university of 10,350 students, nearly half of them first-generation. Clark recently shared what it takes to support those students, why he opposes shortening the bachelor's degree, and what it means to truly see students for who they are.

10% of the Budget: Bridgewater State's Bet on Financial Aid

While many institutions highlight accessibility as foundational to their mission, Clark sees it as an obligation that requires real infrastructure. "When we admit a student here, we owe that student a responsibility to provide the supports that they need to succeed. It doesn't guarantee success. What it does is it gives them a fair opportunity to succeed. And that's what we do at scale. We say student success for every student, one student at a time without exception."

For many students, finances are the biggest barrier to accessing higher ed. To directly address this issue, The Bridgewater Commitment covers tuition and mandatory fees for students and families earning less than $125,000 a year. To fund this commitment, the university made an unusual allocation: "we've dedicated 10% of our entire operating budget to student financial aid. No one does that. Nobody does that in Massachusetts, at least not in the public sphere. So, for us, that's about $24 million per year. We give it all back to our students." Clark pairs this bold commitment with an awareness that even the smallest price increase could suddenly make the cost of attending out of reach. "We realize that if we go up $100 on tuition and fees that we leave students behind. They're that price sensitive," Clark explains.

Beyond aid dollars, on-campus employment is another critical pillar of accessibility at Bridgewater State. Clark breaks down why this isn't just important from a financial standpoint: "We have a thousand jobs on campus that our students can take and that provides not just financial aid, but career readiness. We have almost a thousand paid internships for our students. We see all of those as building blocks of affordability, but also building blocks for pathways to employment, and that's why they're here."

Seeing Students for Who They Are

At Bridgewater State, no class exceeds 40 students, and the average runs at just 21. "We want to get to know the names of our students. That's a low bar. But how about their hopes and their dreams? And then lean in to help them to fulfill those hopes and dreams. That's what we do at scale for our 10,350 students." He credits faculty presence as much as class size for keeping students connected. "We have only 15% of our day faculty who are part-time. Our faculty are here. They get to know our students. I think that's hugely important."

> ***"If everyone has an education it's good for the economy, it's good for society, and it's good for citizenship."***



Frederick Clark Jr.

President

Bridgewater State University

Small class sizes are just one part of helping students form real relationships and feel supported. Clark draws a further distinction between being present and being known. “Inclusion means you’re at the table, but equity means that you’re paying attention to where your students come from. You know, what their experiences are. Not all education backgrounds are the same. You’re seeing students for who they are and you’re providing whatever support you can to give them a fair chance to compete and to succeed.”

Clark ties understanding students’ backgrounds and providing tailored support directly to the university’s mission. “We refuse to leave any student behind but the only way not to leave them behind is to understand who they are, what their identities are and what interventions can make them competitive. By the way, that to me is the definition of America. That’s what America is all about. Giving you a fair chance to compete. It doesn’t guarantee an outcome for anybody, but it gives you a level playing field to compete and to win.”

Clark also frames equity and inclusion as a matter of institutional survival. “Our state is going to be a minority majority state. Bridgewater State is on its way to be a minority majority state. You know, if you leave people behind, guess what? You’re going to go out of business. You’re going to close your doors. You’re going to hurt your economy and your society and citizenship.”

A Case Against the 90-Credit Degree

While Clark is a big believer in creating infrastructure tailored to student needs, there’s one area he believes shouldn’t be compromised: the length of the bachelor’s degree. As some states weigh cutting bachelor’s degrees to 90 credits, Clark’s position is steadfast. “I am not a fan. I think it robs students of a really valuable fourth year.”

> ***“Inclusion means you’re at the table, but equity means that you’re paying attention to where your students come from… You’re seeing students for who they are.”***

At Bridgewater State, Clark explains that the final year carries real weight: “Our students, 1,800 of them, do undergraduate research in their fourth year. That’s incredibly valuable. Many of our students, hundreds of them, study abroad in their fourth year.” He also points to a host of other losses: the critical thinking skills general education builds (often the first thing cut in these programs); internships and apprenticeships in the fourth year; eligibility for graduate programs.

Many of the arguments made in favor of the three-year degree don’t ring true for Clark. On the employer front, he isn’t hearing employers push for these changes. “I talk to employers all the time. Not one has ever said to me, ‘I want a 90 credit degree. Get your students across faster.’ They’re not saying that.” Financially, Clark points to institutions such as Bridgewater that do make the cost of higher education affordable and achievable.



Aside from the arguments for the three-year degree, Clark is also concerned about who bears the cost of a faster track. “All you’re really doing is pushing students through and you’re probably attracting students that are more marginalized, that can least afford to have less skills than the more privileged students.” He puts it bluntly: “I do think it’s inequitable. I don’t think Harvard is going to launch a 90 credit program.”

With three-year degree programs gaining traction, Clark believes now is the time to make the case for the four-year degree. He points to the creativity and multi-disciplinary perspectives today’s world needs and that students can’t develop overnight. Still, the debate over time to degree isn’t likely to go away anytime soon. As more states test faster paths through college, Clark is betting that Bridgewater’s answer, more support rather than less time, will come out on top. ■

Balancing Mission and Market at Huntington University



ABOUT | **INSTITUTION:** Huntington University | **LOCATION:** Huntington, IN | **STUDENTS:** > 1,600

How does a small, faith-based institution in northeast Indiana serve a wide range of student demographics including traditional residential undergraduates, working adults, online learners, graduate students, and more? Dr. Rob Pepper, President of Huntington University, starts with three simple questions. What's the problem we're trying to solve? How does this impact students? And is there a better way to do it?

For Pepper, these questions are essential to run a student-centric institution, stay true to mission, and move with the speed needed in today's market. Just over a year into the role as Huntington's new President, Pepper shares strategic moves he's already implemented, how he continues to remain curious, and what it takes to reconcile mission and market in today's environment.

Remaining Curious & Acknowledging Gaps to Serve Different Student Segments

While Huntington does offer a traditional residential experience, Pepper is quick to mention the institution's large population of commuter students and high school dual enrollment students. While these students may not live on campus, he still sees it as a responsibility to ensure these students feel part of a community. "Students have jobs and we think about where students spend their time. We have to make sure they have the services they need. Are our offices open? Do we have a space for them to go hang out between classes? Do they feel comfortable joining in all the other activities we have on campus to keep them engaged?" Offering the right services and spaces at the right times can make or break whether a commuter student feels like the campus also belongs to them.

Pepper is quick to acknowledge that asking 'how do we best serve students?' leads to very different questions from one student population to another. Huntington serves a couple hundred dual enrollment and early college students, drawing students from homeschool, private, and public school settings. For Pepper, it is critical to acknowledge that universities operate with a knowledge gap when it comes to K-12. "There's a big push to track students early to gather credits, and so we have to serve those students as well." Pepper leans on alumni working in K-12 to close that gap, describing the exchange as a kind of double-loop learning. The university provides college-level content while high schools teach the university about relevant issues such as the post-covid academic slide and social-emotional wellness.

Restructuring the Honors Program to Provide Prospective Students with a Comprehensive Offer

As a new president, finding the balance between honoring past work and bringing in new best practices is an ongoing balancing act. Pepper's advice: ask a lot of questions. Rather than assuming, pose questions such as, "I'm not familiar with that? Can you tell me more about that?" However, Pepper also recognizes that today's environment can require swift action. One change Pepper implemented early on was a reimagination of how they structure and market Huntington's honors program. Previously, the honors program was separate from the academic merit aid process. A student could compete for academic merit funding, enroll, and afterward apply to the honors program.

After the institution implemented a new general education core, they could now offer a single combined pathway for the honors program. "Can't we have an academic merit aid system at a high school where students apply to the university, they get accepted, if they're identified as a high achiever, we invite them to campus for an interview process, they get their aid, and then we also offer them a spot in the honors program?" Pepper posed. With the new standardized core, the honors sections now offer a deeper version of courses every student already takes, rather than a separate curricular track.

Once faculty agreed to the concept, Pepper set a deadline that gave enrollment and marketing time to promote the program for the upcoming academic year, rather than having to wait until the next cycle. Pepper shares how this change is already yielding results. "It's working. Our deposits are up right now. As of three days ago, we have more deposits at this point in the cycle than we've had in the last 10 or 12 years for first-year students." For a class goal of around 300 students, he notes that even enrolling

a handful of students they might not have originally attracted makes a big difference. Simply put, "It's a game changer for us."

> *"It's working. Our deposits are up right now... more deposits at this point in the cycle than we've had in the last 10 or 12 years for first-year students."*

Maintaining Identity & Meeting Needs Through Partnerships

As a faith-based institution, mission will always be central to how Huntington operates. However, Pepper knows that mission isn't the only factor at play. "We need to be mission-driven, but we need to be market-sensitive." These two factors require a careful balance, as institutions that chase the market too hard risk losing their identity. Pepper explains what this overcorrection looks like: "If you're market-sensitive, then you have mission drift and people don't know who you are."

To understand how Huntington can remain true to who they are while still remaining competitive in the

> *"We need to be mission-driven, but we need to be market-sensitive."*



Dr. Rob Pepper

President

Huntington University

market, the institution is currently running a full mission, vision, and values refresh, precisely so market responsiveness doesn't come at the cost of identity. Pepper distills this exercise: get clear on who you are, then ask the community what problem it has, then decide honestly whether the university has the expertise to solve it. Sometimes the answer is no. Sometimes this requires tweaking what the university already offers.

Pepper highlights what real alignment with community needs looks like. One example includes the university's vet science partnership with Purdue, a four-year animal science degree paired with an associate's degree in vet tech. While this is difficult to replicate

> *"Where there's no margin, there's no mission. Just because we think we want to do it and we think it's the right thing, we have to figure out how to fund it."*

across all programs, Huntington is exploring select areas where this type of partnership makes sense.

Another lens examines how Huntington can give students an undergraduate experience that builds directly into their post-graduate plans. Pepper poses a scenario the institution is actively exploring: "What are the predetermined pathways from undergraduate to graduate? We might attract a student here because we're a residential faith-based university, give them a great experience for four years, and then they say, 'I want to go to an R1 for graduate school.' If we can develop these partnerships with pathways directly — whether it's a preferred admissions criteria, or a summer residency, or a guaranteed interview."

Making Tradeoffs to Continue Delivering on Mission

While partnerships and pathways are one piece of market alignment, Pepper knows that the programs an institution offers internally are just as important. In an environment of tight university finances, he explains, "Where there's no margin, there's no mission. Just because we think we want to do it and we think it's the right thing, we have to figure out how to fund it." Pepper believes this is the new normal and points to policies such as Indiana's funding thresholds, which only fund programs that achieve certain metrics. He uses an analogy that directly cuts to the truth of the matter: "There's a lot of ponds; we can't fish in all of them. We have to decide the ones we're going to fish in."

When it comes to program viability, Pepper has learned that programs need a regular understanding of how they're doing so bad news doesn't come as a surprise. He frames it as a yellow-light, green-light, red-light approach that helps programs make adjustments before it is too late. In-the-moment signaling gives departments time to adjust before a decision is final. Pepper acknowledges that closing a program you care about is hard, but "it's harder to keep a program that you really love and have no students in it ... If there's no demand, then you just can't have it. It's unsustainable, and that's for any college." While never an easy decision to make, these decisions ensure an institution can still successfully operate and serve students.

> *"What makes Huntington special is, we see you, we hear you, we know you ... Someone's going to know when you're not showing up."*

For Pepper, Huntington is a place where students can receive a faith-based education and really be known. He wants to ensure Huntington can continue to deliver on this mission, while aligning with student and market needs. "What makes Huntington special is, we see you, we hear you, we know you ... Someone's going to know when you're not showing up, someone's going to know when you need help, and we're going to connect you with somebody to help you be successful." Pepper believes continuing to ask the right questions, moving quickly, and staying true to mission will enable Huntington to continue to deliver this type of relationship-based education. ■



Black Hawk College's Jeremy Thomas on Meeting the Consumer Student

ABOUT | **INSTITUTION:** Black Hawk College | **LOCATION:** Moline, IL | **STUDENTS:** ~ 4,000

How many of us close out of a website that doesn't load quickly, complain when an automated customer service agent can't solve our problem, or shop around different sources for the best deal? These are habits we exhibit on a daily basis, so why shouldn't we apply them to prospective students? Dr. Jeremy Thomas, President of Black Hawk College, sees it as his duty to reimagine how students interact with the systems, people, and finances of higher education. Thomas leads the two-campus institution based in Moline, IL, and breaks down what today's student is looking for, what he would like to see change, and how Black Hawk is leading the charge.

Articulating Value to Today's Savvy Shopper

Compared to previous generations, today's students possess an elevated expectation for their college experience. Students want to know the cost upfront and how their program will translate into a career. While most institutions still have catalogs hundreds of pages long with a laundry list of available programs, students don't want to sort through endless options. The sentiment Thomas hears from students is closer to: "I know what I want, and I want you to help me get there. I don't want to hear about a thousand choices. I want to hear about the choices that interest me." Students want to know how the college will help them get to their end goal, rather than waiting until graduation to understand how their degree connects to a career.

To satisfy students' consumer instincts, Black Hawk aims to build clarity into every interaction the student has with the institution. For example, rather than using a typical fees structure that varies from program to program, the college completely eliminated fees. "We don't have tuition and fees; we just have tuition," Thomas said. This transparent pricing structure allows the college room for "deeper conversations around career choices" with the cost question settled up front.

While transparent, straightforward pricing is critical, students also expect a return on their dollars for every class they take. When students ask, "Why do I need this class?" Thomas doesn't treat it as a nuisance question. "You've got to be able to articulate that to this generation, otherwise they don't buy it. They just think you're saying that to keep your job." While the course requirements may be the same, what's changed, in his view, is the expectation that faculty and staff can explain it in terms the student finds credible.

Stop Asking Prospective Students About Majors

If there's one habit Thomas wants higher ed to move away from, it's leading with major instead of destination. "One thing I've really been pushing our staff on is to quit asking about majors. I need to know about where you want to go," he said, framing the college itself as a means rather than an endpoint: "Community colleges in general are not your destination — it is not where you're headed, it's a vehicle to get you to where you need to be." However, he noted that most systems haven't caught up to that thinking yet. For example, he points to application systems that still ask students for their major rather than career choice.

> ***"Community colleges in general are not your destination... it's a vehicle to get you to where you need to be."***

This distinction is especially important for the majority of students who don't understand the jargon that defines higher ed degrees. A student who says they want to be a lawyer doesn't need a lecture on degree types to get started on the right path. Thomas argues that the mapping should happen behind the scenes, not in front of the student. "They don't need to know what an associate of arts is. That's irrelevant to most, except for those of us who talk the lingo all the time."

He's blunt about why: "A first-generation student does not understand the difference between an associate of arts, associate of applied arts, and associate of science. All they know is what they want to do."

> *"I really think students were tired of the robotic ways of doing things and wanted that personal touch."*

A Personal Touch, at Scale

Thomas's belief that faculty and staff need to meet students where they are doesn't stop there. He writes a personal message to the student body and sends it out every Sunday night. The message is short, designed for phone reading, and, by his account, has an open rate email marketers would envy. "My open rate is a little over 20%," he said. But the habit isn't just about an email. It's about resisting the instinct to automate the relationship away. "I really think students were tired of the robotic ways of doing things and wanted that personal touch," he remarked. This is particularly true with many students seeking connection in the face of a world that has moved toward virtual and automated interactions in the post-pandemic era.

This instinct puts him at odds with the trend toward automation as he pushes for more direct human contact, rather than less. "I got a lot of really weird looks when I started saying, 'We're going to personalize this, and by the way, we're not just going to let AI do it for us. It's going to require more work on our parts, some nights, some weekends — personal touches, phone calls, texts, emails.'" He's equally direct about what happens when a campus skips that step. "I don't care how nice the campus is. If the people are horrible to you, that's going to wear off pretty quick. Then word



Dr. Jeremy Thomas
President
Black Hawk College

gets out, and then you have a bunch of beautiful buildings that just look nice but are empty."

Thomas compares this approach to a standard a former college president once shared with him — one that has stuck ever since: "You recruit every student like you're recruiting a national athlete." He credits this mindset for helping the college achieve real, measurable movement. "This year we're up in double digits in enrollment. That's bucking the state average, bucking the national average, and it's not a fluke. It's because we're being strategic, really thinking things through."

Showing Students Who Stopped Out That You Still Care

While Thomas constantly strives for better systems and more authentic interactions, he acknowledges that students still face barriers beyond the college's control. He's seen enrollment gaps become more common, a pattern he says accelerated with the pandemic. When his staff called every student who had stopped out to ask why, the answer surprised him less than it might have. "Two-thirds of them, it was for non-academic reasons. So what that tells me is these students can make it. They have the ability, they were passing their classes, but life gets in the way." Free tuition, he pointed out, still doesn't solve for a student who can't put food on the table.

Winning some of those students back, in Thomas's experience, starts with contact rather than a program. "It's simply first off reaching out to them and showing them that somebody cares. We all get stuck in our heads that the world is mean only to us when we're having down moments. The truth is there's probably somebody who's gone through something very similar." From there, the college tries to match students with specific resources to help close the gap: a scholarship they didn't know existed, a connection through the foundation, or a local partner.

"I'll continue to say the personal touch goes a long way. We can't AI everything. We've got to show them we're human, that we've been through these trials, and we need to show them that it's possible to make it through," Thomas emphasized.

Pricing Tuition to Avoid Creating a Crisis for Future Students

Transparent tuition is just one piece of how colleges need to think strategically about their finances. Community colleges often face a conundrum that Thomas describes simply: raise tuition and enrollment drops, hold it flat and the gap between revenue and inflation compounds year over year. "If you hold your tuition flat or low, and there's inflation every year, and you don't bring in the funds to offset even just inflation, you end up in a backwards downward spiral." The more common outcome, he said, is deferral followed by shock. "Community colleges are known for holding

> *"We can't AI everything. We've got to show them we're human, that we've been through these trials, and we need to show them that it's possible to make it through."*

their tuition flat for three years, five years, six years, ten years at a time, and then we're desperate, we've been dipping into reserves, and tuition jumps all at one time." However, all this does is defer a bigger tuition jump to future students who will bear the consequences.

Black Hawk's answer is to trade unpredictability for small, disclosed increases planned three years out — roughly $2 per credit hour at a time. Thomas acknowledges this is not a substantial amount of money, but he hopes to avoid pricing out future students. "We're not talking about loads of money, but if you have none, then $2 a credit hour is a lot, and we're very conscious of that." During this trial period, he's asking his finance team to hold to the number: "I'm really pushing my finance people not to come back and ask for more, because I want to hold to that at least through the first three years and see if we can't make it work."

Thomas's approach across pricing, advising, and outreach shares a common thread: none of it happens by accident. Simplifying tuition, mapping degrees to destinations, calling students who stopped out — each is a deliberate choice to close the distance between institutional operations and student needs. As more colleges compete for a shrinking pool of prospective students, that kind of intentionality may be the differentiator that informs where, and if, students choose to enroll. ■

SURVEY

Snapshot

A Hanover Research and Coursedog survey of 200 provosts uncovers the pain points, priorities, and AI gaps shaping academic operations.

Inside the Provost's Mind: A New Look at Academic Operations

The university president is often synonymous with the voice of the university, the visionary, the chief fundraiser, the relationship builder, and more. But with their numerous responsibilities, they must delegate the day-to-day operations of their institutions to their cabinet members. When it comes to the functions that support the delivery of the academic experience, the provost most frequently oversees the areas known as academic operations.



While the public and students are rarely privy to the academic machinery behind the scenes, these functions are becoming more and more important as forces such as workforce alignment, AI, and declining enrollment shape how institutions operate. To understand how university leaders are rethinking academic operations, a recent survey by Hanover Research and Coursedog heard from 200 chief academic officers and provosts. The survey aimed to understand the pain points, priorities, and technology driving academic operations.

Less Than a Third of Institutions Report Integrated or Strategic Tech Stacks

We've all heard the groans. Where is that spreadsheet? Who needs to approve that form before I can sign off on it? Which one is the most recent version? Unsurprisingly, manual workflows and spreadsheets were the number one pain point provosts reported in their academic operations (33%). This doesn't just lead to inefficient and time-consuming processes, but also leads to other challenges highlighted in the survey. Twenty-nine percent of provosts pointed to unreliable or untimely data as a top pain point, followed by lengthy curriculum approval processes (27%).

While institutions once accepted these manual processes as routine, there's growing awareness of their limitations. Thankfully, very few provosts described their academic operations technology as ad-hoc (4%); however, the majority described their academic operations technology as fragmented (23%) or siloed (43%). Just under a third reported more advanced methods of running their academic operations, with 29% reporting an integrated approach and just 1% a truly strategic tech stack. There's no doubt that staff running academic operations are working hard, but the survey shows they lack the connective capabilities that turn individual tools into a coherent system.

Institutional Priorities Driving a Push for AcOps Modernization & New Capabilities

Unsurprisingly, provosts reported that enrollment growth (72%) and curriculum alignment (69%) are the top institutional priorities for the next 24 months. While this was expected, they report that these priorities are also the top factors guiding how they approach their academic operations. However, how will institutions ensure their course schedule, curriculum, and assessment practices evolve to make meaningful progress on these priorities?

Only two percent of provosts called academic operations modernization and consolidation a major priority over the past three years. However, that number jumps to 85% looking ahead to the next three years.

While it is undoubtedly easier to call something a priority for the future, these numbers still tell a story of changing attitudes. Course schedules that meet student needs, curriculum that evolves with industry needs, and intentional feedback loops don't happen by themselves. Provosts realize they need to equip staff with the right data, insights, and tools to make timely, informed decisions.

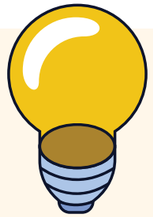
Accordingly, data and analytics capabilities are key factors that provosts consider when evaluating academic operations technology. Analytics and predictive insights (47%) and data transparency and access (46%) top the list, followed by workflow automation (37%) and interoperability (35%). Provosts want a clear, trustworthy picture of what's happening across the institution.

The AI Illusion: Why Adoption Looks Lower Than It Is

Eighty-seven percent of provosts say AI is integral to the future of academic operations; yet only 21% say they're actually using AI in their academic operations today. However, that number may be higher than leaders think. **Ellucian's Annual Higher Education AI Survey**, published earlier this year, found that 90% of higher ed professionals now use AI. Conference presentations, publications, and any given informal conversation between staff reveal use cases from AI summaries to data crunching to transfer evaluation.

So where does higher ed actually stand with AI usage? Individual use is unquestionably high. Staff use AI for their own projects; a certain team in one office uses it for a specific use case. What's missing is AI usage at scale. Leaders perhaps assume AI isn't used because usage is confined to hidden, uncommunicated corners. However, just as AI is evolving rapidly, so are institutional use cases. Seventy-eight percent of provosts expect AI usage in academic operations to grow over the next 24 months.

With these advancements come both hesitancy and opportunities. On the AI front, provosts are primarily concerned about data privacy/security (61%) and ethical considerations (55%). On the flip side, they're hopeful about how staff can reinvest saved time into strategic areas. They would like to see staff rededicate time to enhanced student support (38%), operational agility (27%), and compliance and accreditation (22%). The goal is to redirect saved time toward areas that actually move the needle for students.



Six Guiding Questions to Assess Your Academic Operations

Higher ed leaders understand the real need for academic operations that run efficiently, move quickly, and meet student needs. However, reimagining multiple functions takes time and coordinated effort. To assess where your institution stands, consider asking the following questions to assess your current state and decide what comes next.

1. Does your tech stack give you the data and visibility needed to drive modernization and growth?
2. How quickly can your curriculum adapt to shifting student and workforce demand?
3. Where do your academic operations cause friction points for students?
4. Do you have the right academic operations data to inform resourcing decisions?
5. Do you have the data infrastructure to make AI meaningful and scalable?
6. Which academic operations analytics and insights would have the greatest impact on student retention?

For presidents working with their provost, consider starting with your institutional priorities and then asking how your academic operations both help and hinder these priorities. The leaders willing to ask these questions and take action are the ones best positioned to transition academic operations from a matter of routine to a strategic advantage. ■

Leaning Into Community & Service at Utah Tech University

ABOUT | **INSTITUTION:** Utah Tech University | **LOCATION:** St. George, Utah | **STUDENTS:** 13,000

Situated just southwest of Zion National Park, Utah Tech University offers students access to stunning nature right around the corner. However, President Shane Smeed knows that proximity to natural wonders won't lead to enrollment by itself. Smeed offers a model of what it takes to connect with every corner of a community, from K-12 students, to retirees, to employers, to incarcerated youth. Overseeing an institution of 13,000 students and nearly 300 programs requires a level of alignment that connects the university's mission to the needs of the community. The new president recently shared with AcOps a practical look at how community ties take shape at Utah Tech and why he's a big believer in service.

Dual Enrollment Outside of Community Colleges

Smeed's very first day on the job didn't start with a round of introductory meetings. He kicked off his presidency by handing out diplomas to students you rarely see at four-year universities: high school students. He recounted what he saw from his place on the stage: "What I noticed first on that associate's day graduation was how many students were walking across the graduation stage who were going to be graduating from high school, just within a week or two of that point in time." The Community College Research Center found that community colleges serve 71% of dual enrollment students, putting Utah Tech at the forefront of public, four-year institutions that serve 19% of dual enrollment students nationwide.

Dual enrollment is surging across the nation as high school students take advantage of the opportunity to get college credit, often at no cost, before they even set foot on a college campus. Most of these students aren't logging into an online portal or driving to campus after school. They're doing the work where they already are. Smeed explained: "Most of those students are taking classes in the classroom, during the high school day. Some students are finding ways to take college classes online or at the university as well, but the majority of students are just taking them right there at the convenience of their school."

For Smeed, the value isn't just academic credit banked or early exposure to college. It's a head start on the transition from student to professional. "There's no better way to get ahead and to get started off and become even more workforce ready at that point."

Community Alignment Beyond Employer Partners

Ask Smeed what shapes Utah Tech's priorities and the answer keeps returning to a central theme: community alignment. As a polytechnic university built around active and applied learning, the institution treats its relationships with local employers as core infrastructure rather than an add-on. "So much of what we focus on is really about workforce alignment and workforce readiness. As a polytechnic university that's really focused on active and applied learning, we have to continue to strengthen those relationships with the businesses."

That philosophy extends into how Smeed talks about the university's place in its region. He describes a campus that is constantly working in concert with its surroundings. He emphasizes: "When I speak about community and industry, it's synonymous with what's happening at the university." One of the clearest examples is City Alliance, a program that pairs faculty and students with surrounding municipalities to work on real problems those cities are facing. "City Alliance is where we actually partner to create really economically strong areas within other municipalities that are surrounding the university. We bring in our faculty as part of the City Alliance and our students to solve these real-world problems."

The university's community reach doesn't stop at employers and local government. Through Utah Tech's Institute for Community Learning, retirees in the area engage with the university through a number of offerings. "These are principally retired individuals who are lifelong learners and we offer them classes, clubs. They take field trips. So imagine these retirees who are in town, they're engaging with the university. So when we think about the life cycle of learning in higher education, I mentioned K-12, now I'm talking about retirees." Smeed also highlighted Utah Tech's work to bring education to incarcerated youth in the region, work informed by data showing that access to education lowers the likelihood that young people return to the system.

Providing the Most Affordable Four-Year Tuition in Utah

While programs designed to serve students across a variety of demographics are critical, access only matters if students can afford to walk through the door. Smeed is direct about where Utah Tech stands on that front. "At Utah Tech University, we are the most affordable degree-granting university, four-year university, in the state. And so when you can brag about the lowest tuition in the state and reference just under $3,000 per semester, that's incredible." He credits state leadership with helping make that possible, describing a shared priority that runs from the governor's office through the legislature. "Our legislators are really focused on making education affordable. And that goal begins with our governor, and it continues with the legislature and the senate and the house."

> *"At Utah Tech University, we are the most affordable degree-granting university, four-year university, in the state."*

Service as a Defining Value, Not a Side Project

When asked about an underrated area of a president's work, Smeed immediately emphasized the value of service. "I think about service. And I don't think we talk about that enough." He recalled a recent trip where 15 students traveled to New Orleans not for a conference or a tour, but to work. "They were in New Orleans for a beautification project. They were serving. They were cleaning city parks. They were doing coastal restoration. Native plant care, community gardens they were working in." For Smeed, this isn't a program that happens as a one-off; he sees it lived out on the daily across campus. "Service is central to my mission as university president. I know by observation and by experience working with them, it's central to our students and central to our faculty and our staff."

> *"Service is central to my mission as university president."*

The Value of Partnerships to Redefine Higher Ed

Reflecting on his work and Utah Tech's position, Smeed remains upbeat on the outlook of higher education while acknowledging that institutions must guard against complacency. He points out that institutions built decades or, in some cases, centuries ago can't assume the original model will continue to work. "I do think that there are places that need to do things a little differently. They need to reimagine. The things that we were doing in 1636 when Harvard first chartered and what's happening today, they're very different. I think that universities need to really look at what they do really well and focus on that niche, focus on that mission."

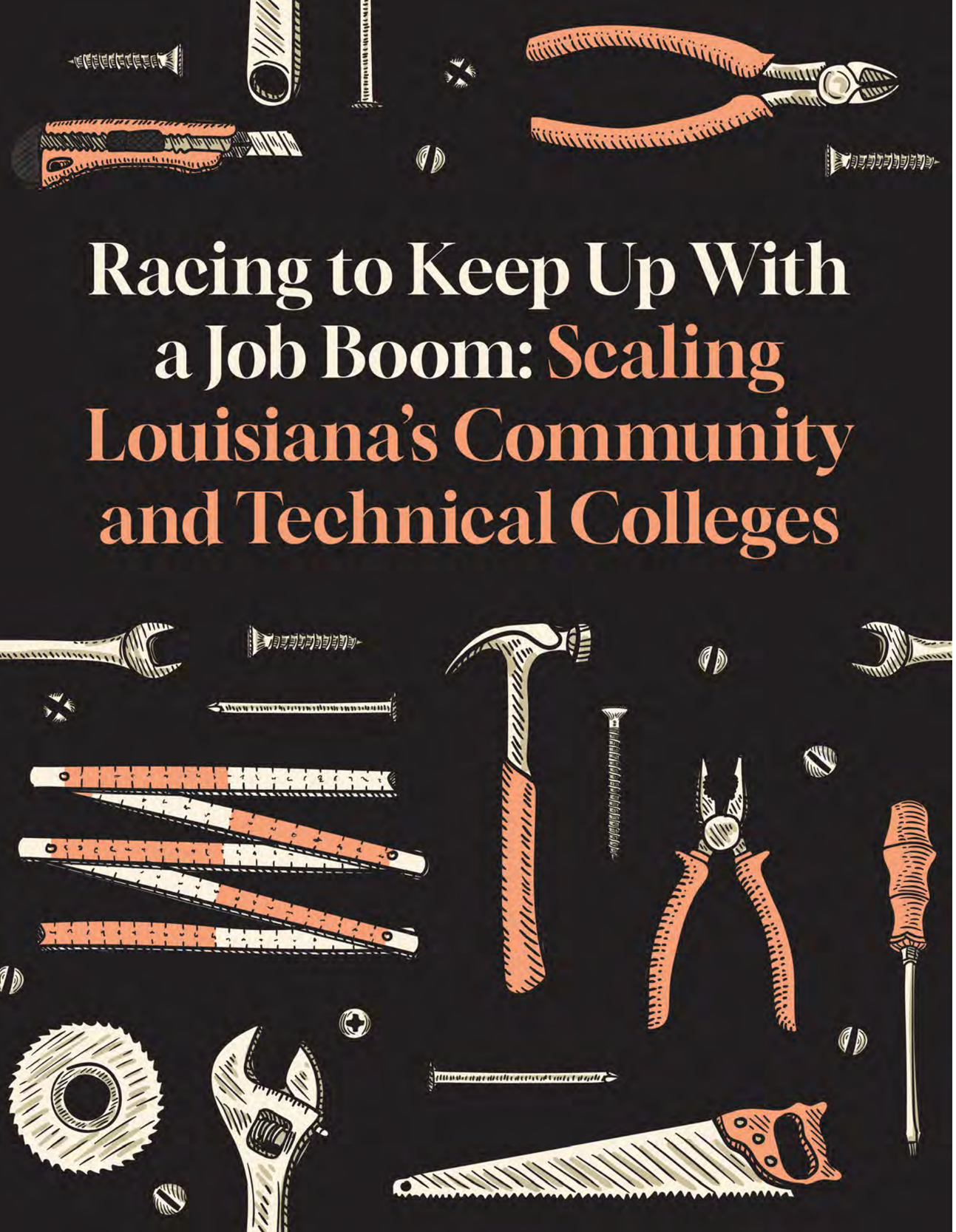
Part of higher ed's reimagining, in his view, means resisting the instinct to go it alone. "Learn how to collaborate with others, and not try to go about this independently. And so for us ... we have great partners, and we have great individuals who we collaborate with." Utah Tech's model demonstrates that an entire ecosystem of partners is what makes it possible to draw in students of all ages and stages of life. As institutions across the country grapple with the decline of the 18-to-22-year-old college student, this model will become increasingly important to maintain relevance in a crowded market. ■



Shane Smeed

President

Utah Tech University



Racing to Keep Up With a Job Boom: Scaling Louisiana's Community and Technical Colleges

ABOUT

INSTITUTION:	LOCATION:	STUDENTS:
Louisiana Community and Technical College System	Baton Rouge, LA	~ 53,000

Ask anyone to name regions of high economic growth in the country, and historically Louisiana would not be on the list. However, Richard Nelson, President of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System paints a different picture of a state on the rise, with new employers and infrastructure rapidly coming to the state. The President of the 12-college network knows this better than anyone as the former Revenue Secretary for Louisiana and former member of the state legislature. Nelson recently shared how LCTCS is preparing to meet emerging employer needs as a wave of new capital investment is expected to bring roughly 100,000 jobs to the state.

Transforming a System Built for a Different Economy

With the influx of jobs coming into the state, Nelson is quick to point out that this requires a new way of thinking. "I think we have a pretty good machine of connecting people to opportunity, but at the same time, it was designed for our old way of doing business," he said. Historically, when a new employer moved into the state, LCTCS could stand up ad hoc training programs to meet employer needs. However, with employers moving into the state at a much faster rate, ad hoc programming is no longer sustainable. He recounts, "These employers come to me and they tell me all the time, 'I literally need a thousand welders.' And you're like, 'Well, the state only trained 1,600 last year'... That's orders of magnitude that don't add up."

Standing up the right programs to meet employer needs requires decision-making structures designed to come to faster decisions. Perhaps even more importantly, institutions need to get students into the right programs. In Louisiana's case, this poses the question of which types of institutions students should be encouraged to attend. While a four-year degree has long been the push, a gap is emerging in the labor market. Nelson explains: "70% of the new jobs that are coming to the state are going to be associates degree or below. A lot of them are skilled trades...The state is really leaning on the community and technical colleges to meet the gaps of both in filling these jobs but then also making sure they're filled with citizens in Louisiana."

Standing Up Training Before the Facility Opens

Community and technical colleges are traditionally associated with meeting local employer needs, but multi-billion dollar employer agreements introduce new urgencies. Programming doesn't need to just be ready by the time a new facility opens, but before construction even begins. For example, a Meta data center coming to Richland Parish is expected to employ 5,000 people, where at its peak, a quarter of local residents could be working on-site. To proactively address this need, the local community college built a six-week data center technician program in partnership with the contractors building the site. "It's an interesting deal that didn't exist a year ago. It wasn't there. Now you have this huge industry." The new data center is just one of

> ***"70% of the new jobs that are coming to the state are going to be associates degree or below. A lot of them are skilled trades."***

many agreements, so Nelson explains that learning and replicating is essential: "We're trying to copy some of those models with what we need in some of these other community colleges in those regions because we're going to have that same issue again."

A similar approach is underway with a Hyundai steel mill bringing 1,600 jobs to the state. "I think it's the first new steel mill to be built in the country in 50 years or 60 years. And so we have a partnership with them where we're building a training facility that we're going to operate to train their first round of employees and also do the continuing hires," he said. Nelson wants this kind of employer partnership to become the state's pitch to any company considering a move to Louisiana: "If you come to Louisiana, you don't ever have to worry about hiring people. We will find a way to get you everyone you ever need to know. And if the skills aren't there, we'll fly in these guys from Korea who will show you how to do it. And we will copy that and make it effective."

Making the Case to Legislators in Numbers They Understand

Funding a system built around fast-moving employer partnerships requires convincing a state legislature to put money behind it. As a former legislator, Nelson has developed a specific pitch for that audience. "I try to relay it to them in numbers they can understand. LSU, Louisiana State University, they have a new football coach. It costs $14 million a year. And I tell them, hey, look, for that 14 million, I can give you 3,000 welders. So just keep that in perspective," he said.

> ***"I'm not interested in the abstract pursuit of knowledge. You're trying to get people from making $10 an hour to making $40 an hour and that changes their life."***

Nelson also likes to highlight what exactly an investment will do for the citizens of Louisiana and the legislature's constituents. He explains: "I'm not interested in the abstract pursuit of knowledge. You're trying to get people from making $10 an hour to making $40 an hour and that changes their life," Nelson said. At a recent Louisiana Community and Technical Colleges Day at the state capitol, Nelson took a different approach. While he typically saw colleges demonstrate new pieces of high-tech equipment, his team "filled the rotunda of the capitol with a bunch of students who are able to say, 'This is how this degree changed my life.'"

One Metric, Not a Portfolio of Them

While Nelson uses specific metrics to make the case to the state legislature, he expects his staff to present the same type of information when they come to him with requests. Ask Nelson what he wants to see when a college brings him a new program proposal, and the answer isn't enrollment growth or credential counts. "The only thing I really care about is that when they [students] graduate, they have a job. And it's a better job than what they would have had before they came here," he said. While higher ed can produce a bevy of metrics at any given moment, he considers most of them to be noise. For him, metrics such as certificates issued and graduate counts are nothing more than "phantom metrics."

This filter shapes how his team evaluates any new offering before it launches. "When they're talking about new programs and all these other things, I'm like, 'Where are these people going to work? What's the demand for it?'" he said. For Nelson, the employment side of the equation will always be the number one consideration that drives whether a program gets the green light.

Becoming the System of Choice Earlier and More Often

If 70% of new jobs require an associate-level degree or below, why are four-year universities still the institution of choice? Nelson traces some of Louisiana's current mismatch to decades of funding decisions that favored four-year degrees over the credentials the state's job market actually needed. He also highlights the impact this has on retaining students after graduation: "What you did is create this export engine of folks to Texas or Florida or somewhere else where there's a higher demand for that [four-year degrees] versus if you would have trained them to be pipe fitters or welders," he said.



Richard Nelson

President

Louisiana Community and Technical College System

His fix isn't to push more students toward two-year programs by default and stop there, but to make movement between credential levels far easier than it is now, starting with certifications and building toward a four-year degree later if a student chooses to. "I think it's going to be a much more cyclical, lifelong search of skills and employment that will require more nimble training," he said.

Nelson's larger ambition for LCTCS centers on not just attracting more students, but getting them in the door earlier. He points to the system's average student age, around 26, as an opportunity cost problem. "That's a lot of wasted human capital because they could have been making a lot more money if they would have started earlier," he said. He poses a question that gets at the heart of the problem: "Could LCTCS have been the first choice? And how do we make it the first choice? I don't want to be anybody's best kept secret. I want to be the primary choice that people are making."

If Nelson gets his way, the next chapter for LCTCS will mean more than just filling Louisiana's coming jobs. The community and technical college system will be the place students choose first, not the one they settle for after four-year plans don't pan out. ■

Breaking the Higher Ed Luxury Good Model





ABOUT | **INSTITUTION:** Bunker Hill Community College | **LOCATION:** Boston, MA | **STUDENTS:** 16,000

Ask any college president about their institution's mission and you'll receive a variety of answers. Create productive citizens, good community members, strong employees, global citizens, and the list goes on. For Dr. Pam Eddinger, President of Bunker Hill Community College, the answer is straightforward: "I can tell you my mission is very simple. We're here to bring people into the middle class. That's it." However, making this a reality for the 16,000 students BHCC serves across the Greater Boston area is anything but simple. To make social mobility a reality for an older, diverse student body, Eddinger focuses on three pillars: financial, academic programming, and wrap-around services. She articulates why both institutional operations and policies that address these three areas are necessary to get students through a system that wasn't designed for them in the first place.

> *"I can tell you my mission is very simple. We're here to bring people into the middle class. That's it."*

College as the First Thing to Go

When a student stops out of college, Eddinger knows it isn't because they lack ambition or ability. It is that college occupies a precarious position in the household budget of a student already struggling to make ends meet. "What higher education is for our first-generation and low-income students is a luxury good. When something happens in your life, it is the first thing to go. All right, so your car breaks down. You can't pay tuition this month. You stop school. You don't stop using your car, taking care of your family." For Eddinger's students, calling back home to ask their parents to deposit more money into their account was never an option.

> *"What higher education is for our first-generation and low-income students is a luxury good. When something happens in your life, it is the first thing to go."*

This is the reality for many of today's students, but Eddinger refuses to accept it as the end of their higher ed journey. She knows that the payoff is simply too large to ignore. "This idea of generational poverty changes, it changes you because you're making a livable wage. But it also changes the way you look at your children, the way you bring them up. No one going through community college and succeeding will ever say, 'Oh, my children, they're not going to college.'" This philosophy runs through not only how Eddinger conducts operations at BHCC but also how she advocates for policy changes that are needed to support a new type of higher ed ecosystem.

Tackling the Biggest Barriers First

To bring Eddinger's vision of the infrastructure necessary for student success alive, she highlights three pillars: financial, academic programming, and wrap-around services. First, she sees free community college programs as more than a financial perk, but as a policy imperative. In Massachusetts, Eddinger estimates that the state contributes roughly $78 million a year across all 15 colleges to make attendance possible for students who otherwise could not absorb the cost. She sees this as an important political policy decision that removes the first and biggest barrier students encounter. For many students, "opportunity cost is tuition, is fees."

Next, Eddinger is ever aware of the importance of practical academic programming that leads to ROI and a successful career for students. She is careful to specify, though, that this doesn't mean strictly offering classes that are aligned to technical job skills. She describes it as an art "to create academic policies and academic framing that allow the students to get the hard skills to be a nurse and all those things that we know are good careers... but also give them enough what we call professional skills or durable skills that allow them to function and engage civically, be a good citizen."



Dr. Pam Eddinger

President

Bunker Hill Community College

Nobody Wants to Say They're Hungry

For a student caring for children and parents while living paycheck to paycheck, free tuition and solid programs often still aren't enough. Eddinger described substantial numbers of students facing food insecurity, unstable housing, transportation gaps, and childcare, quieter obstacles that determine whether a student stays enrolled. These barriers also often lead students to question whether they belong on campus in the first place. To respond to these life challenges, BHCC created a food pantry and now actively promotes federally funded childcare programs, discounted transit passes, and housing referrals for students experiencing homelessness. All of this work is aimed at making the campus feel like it belongs to the people who use it. She explained: "We've created the sense that the college is really not only a hub for learning, but it's also a hub for social services... and we do everything that we can to create the kind of affinity for students on campus. So when they walk onto the campus, they don't feel like, oh, this is somebody else's house."

Identifying need is its own challenge, since students rarely volunteer that they are struggling. Eddinger recalled hearing colleagues insist their campuses had no hunger problem, simply because no one had asked. "Have you asked the right people? Have you made it not shameful? Nobody ever stands up and goes, 'Hey, right here, I'm hungry.'" BHCC built the topic into orientation and everyday interactions instead of waiting for students to raise it: "When a faculty member sees a student or when a staff sees a student, sometimes we say to them, 'Have you eaten today?' And if they haven't, we send them off to the food pantry."

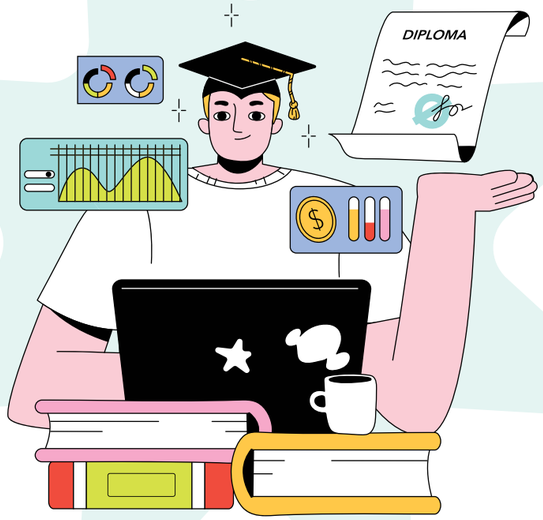
Eddinger is direct about the thinking behind this approach. People often say that students need to pull themselves up, without acknowledging what that requires. "If you want people to come and get education and lift themselves, you've got to give them the boots for the bootstrap, right? These students, they were supposed to be pulling themselves up. Don't tell them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They've got no boots. So we're trying to provide the boots."

Redesigning the Transfer Process for Greater Permeability

A community college can do everything in its power to help a student get where they need to be, but often the college is just one stop in a student's journey. For Eddinger, this begs the question of how all of those pieces interact with each other. K-12, community colleges, four-year publics, private institutions, and selective universities all exist as separate systems that a single student may need to move through, yet the connections between them remain disparate. "The wonder of our ecosystem is because all these things exist and they exist together. And one student can traverse all the pieces of the ecosystem in their career in higher ed. What we don't do is to make the barriers between those pieces of the ecosystem permeable."

One of BHCC's answers centers on redesigning the transfer relationship itself. For example, the college created joint admissions agreements with partners such as UMass Boston. "We do joint admissions, not just transfer. When we admit a student, let's both admit them, so they have the identity with you and they have the identity with us. If they do well, give them scholarships to go to you. Don't make them jump through hoops and do a damn transfer essay. Make it as easy as possible to traverse the landscape of higher education."





Leaning into Partnerships for True Change

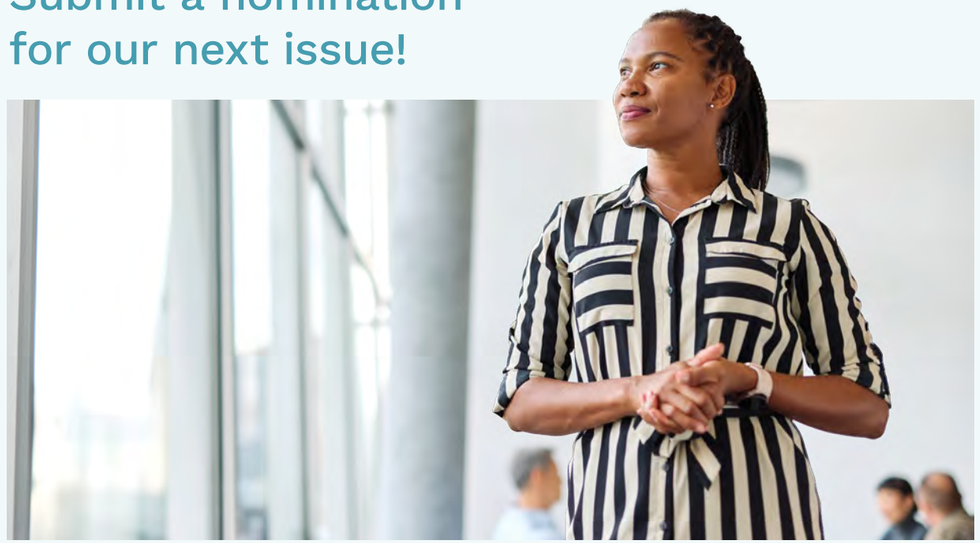
Change of this size, Eddinger is clear, is not something any single college can produce alone. "The community colleges, higher education, we cannot do it all. The problem is too big. We're solving for poverty. So unless you get partners to come in, in a meaningful way... that is really the only way." For example, she would love to see a stronger partnership with employers to continue to grow apprenticeships. She would like to see apprenticeships become less transactional and more of a true co-ownership of a student's training. However, she acknowledges that the right incentives aren't in place. She points to Germany as a model where "Employers pay into a trust and the dollars in that trust come back around and fund these apprenticeships. So there is a source of public dollars." Ultimately, she would like to see a system that is consistent and so ubiquitous that students recognize it just as much as a Pell Grant.

Systemic change is never easy, and Eddinger frames the work ahead not as a system in decline but as a system being rebuilt in real time. "You need to make change, but keep that critical hope that things will be okay. We will get there. Higher education is not falling apart. This is what change looks like. It's messy." ■

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