

## Creating the Mission-Oriented Opportunity

### College transformation through purposeful pragmatism

Too many years ago, I first read Tom Peters' and Robert Waterman's influential study of American business, *In Search of Excellence*. I read it again recently and I found its insights as enduring today as they were fresh when the book was first published. The literature of higher education deals broadly with strategies for achieving excellence by addressing subjects ranging from strategic planning and staff development to presidential leadership. Yet there are no definitive studies of the common denominators of college transformation and success. Nor are there agreed-upon definitions for success. It lies in the eyes of the beholder.

Every college president wants his or her college to be as successful as possible. The elements of success related to the fulfillment of mission. Among the more visible manifestations of success are achieving qualitative and quantitative enrollment objectives; fostering an appropriate and rigorous academic program and integrating it with student services; sustaining the health and strength of institutional finances; developing and maintaining campus facilities, and promoting good levels of support from the college's alumni and other friends. A common sense of purpose, collegial relationships with internal and external constituencies, and a palpable spirit of forward momentum are all signs of a dynamically successful college.

For more than a decade Drury College has moved forward along these dimensions for success. We are an independent, church-related college grounded in the liberal arts tradition. Our home campus is located in Springfield, Missouri, a thriving metropolitan center in the southwest corner of the state. Some 1,400 students are enrolled in traditional day programs that lead to bachelors degrees in 37 fields. Another 2,250 pursue degrees through our continuing education division or "evening college" and about 320 are enrolled in five masters degree programs. Our students are better than good academically, with average ACT scores in the 25+ range.

Thanks to our faculty of 120, we have created an academic program that provides students with a solid foundation in the arts, humanities and sciences and prepares them for careers in a number of professional fields. Two-thirds of our students live on campus. We have adopted a financial philosophy of not spending what we don't have. Endowment has reached \$103 million, and the annual budget is about \$32 million. The college's culture mirrors a shared belief that Drury is doing the right thing at the right time and the university is on the move. But Drury was not always like this.

I was appointed president in 1983, the same year Stephen Good was named the vice president of academic affairs and dean of the college. Though we found that the college had an essentially sound foundation, it was barely maintaining the status quo. Drury's immediate past had been grim: A continuing saga of lost enrollment, operating deficits (\$1 million cumulative), and controversies in the community. Endowment was about \$10 million. There was open speculation about whether the college would survive.

And yet Drury had a number of strengths. Its regional reputation as a liberal arts college was strong. It had many loyal alumni, and its reputation for personal attention to students was well known. The college's business school (established in 1960 by the

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prominent industrialist, Ernest Breech, an alumnus and trustee of the college) was also highly regarded. Capable faculty and staff were devoted to the institution and committed to Drury's long-term success. Springfield, the third largest city in Missouri, was on the threshold of major growth.

The year I joined the staff, the board of trustees emphasized the importance of building enrollment, improving our budget situation and working on capital development. Discussion about a capital campaign had begun and in late 1983 we initiated a campaign to raise \$12 million for planned improvements on the campus. We also focused on recruiting qualified students and mobilized all of our staff in this priority effort.

The following four or five years were characterized by prudent and purposeful pragmatism. We faced substantial challenges: We had to develop plans to regain enrollment, raise \$12 million for capital improvements, and eliminate deficit spending.

In telling our story about the college, we emphasized Drury's heritage, its strengths and what we planned to do. As part of this we met with alumni to promote the campaign. I particularly remember one meeting during my first year when an alumna questioned our plan for a new recreation center. How, she wondered, could we talk about such grand plans when there had been speculation the college might close? I told her of the vision shared by the board of trustees and the faculty. Had she pressed me for details, I would have been at a loss. I'm not sure we had a definitive strategy for Drury's future at that time.

### **A strategy and new mission**

Like a patient in recovery, Drury's crises became less chronic and acute. We addressed immediate and tangible issues like students, money, buildings and programs. As we achieved increasing successes, our daily attention to these concerns evolved into a long-term sense of direction and purpose. Sometimes institutional visions and strategies result from pondering the future in a quiet place, but that was not our experience.

The mid-1980s found Drury, not by design necessarily but in fact, involved in continuing conversation about the future of the college. Everybody was engaged: trustees, staff, faculty, alumni, townspeople and friends from around the country. This was not something we organized. Rather it was word of mouth—something that people who cared about the college talked about with others of similar interests. Today, political spin-masters would call it “buzz.”

We began a planning process that was informal, low key and certainly not as all encompassing as many institutions undertake. We looked at strengths and needs and talked about major things we wanted to accomplish. We discussed what we wanted to do to be more successful. We set goals each year, after reviewing accomplishments of the prior year. Our trustees were fully engaged and provided both insight and, when we asked, hands-on help. Day to day discussions and decision making brought faculty and staff together and built a sense of teamwork and mutual confidence.

Drury was launched into transformation and the vital signs were improving. Yet we felt the need to focus our energies on a path that could distinguish the college from others of similar size, location and church-relatedness. We needed to update and refresh our mission statement. For a year we engaged faculty, staff, and students in organized discussions of mission. Stoutly debated was the appropriate balance and integration of a traditional

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liberal arts curriculum with professional and career-oriented programs. The debate was constructively resolved in our revised mission statement adopted in 1989:

Drury is an independent college, church-related, grounded in the liberal arts tradition, and committed to personalized education in a community of scholars who value the arts of teaching and learning. Education at Drury seeks: to cultivate spiritual sensibilities and imaginative faculties as well as ethical insight and critical thought; to foster the integration of theoretical and practical knowledge; and to liberate persons to participate responsibly in and contribute to life in a global community.

## Shared Vision and Culture

A college is a community of people. It is the aspiration, energy and knowledge of the members of the community that move an institution. Shared success—coming initially in the areas of enrollment and development but also in curriculum and student affairs—enabled members of our faculty to become engaged in shaping the future. For the first time in many years, we all could see a future that was brighter than the present.

By the late 1980s, the core administrative team was functioning as a cohesive unit. This included the vice presidents for academic affairs, development, administration and student services; the directors of athletics, admission, public relations, continuing education, registration, human resources and financial aid. Faculty and other staff, participants in key decision-making through a deliberate process to involve them, felt increasingly empowered to determine the college's future. An institution with this wholesome spirit is much more likely to be successful.

Drury has been diligent in its efforts to enhance communication, involvement, and respect for individuals' abilities to do their jobs. The college was fortunate to have and build upon the loyalty and experience of a core group of long-term faculty and staff. As one success led to another, individuals noted the positive momentum of the college. This momentum is manifested in a growing enrollment, strengthening finances, in new and renovated facilities, the addition of programs and in wider recognition. Everyone likes to work for an organization that is well-regarded and moving ahead.

Along with Drury's transformation have come heightened expectations, not only for success, but also for standards of quality, for involvement and contribution, for openness and accessibility and for effective communication at all levels. Our work together in setting goals and plans has been matched by a shared commitment to achieving them.

We are in a perpetual state of improvement. We regularly gather teams of staff to visit other colleges, share those things that are working for us and gather new ideas that are transforming other institutions. Such visits not only help us hone our programs, but also reinforce the sense of shared vision that guides us.

Although it meets as a full body only twice a year, our board of trustees is deeply engaged and has been since the very beginning of Drury's transformation. The board was, after all, the first group to commit to revitalizing the college. Many of our trustees, but not all, live in the region. We communicate regularly, formally and informally. While our governance structure is clear on the primacy of the board, at Drury leadership is shared just as it is in other successful colleges. Trustees, staff, faculty and students are partners in common endeavor.

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## Coming of age

aily successes translate into accomplishment of objectives and goals that in turn lead to stronger institutions. In every transformation can be found salient events that define passage from one level to the next. This is as true for Drury as it is for other successful institutions.

In 1960 Drury set a precedent for itself by creating the Breech School of Business and incorporating its programs into the college's liberal arts curriculum. It created another similar program in the 1980s. Because there was no accredited undergraduate school of architecture in Missouri, in 1984 faculty and staff proposed to create, and earn accreditation for, a five-year professional degree resulting in a liberally educated architecture professional.

Helping to underwrite the new program's capital costs was a Drury trustee, John Q. Hammons, a national hotel and real estate developer who worked regularly with architects. We developed the curriculum, built the staff, and in 1990, the same year the program received full accreditation by the National Architecture Accrediting Board, opened a new facility to house the school. The success of this new school has contributed significantly to our understanding of Drury's identity as a New American College, which blends a strong liberal arts tradition with professional and career preparation in a unique way.

Support from leading foundations can also redefine an institution. Until the early 1990s, the F. W. Olin Foundation made building grants to private colleges. The foundation selected only two or three projects a year, based on competitive proposals, and funded them completely. Competition was keen. Drury had identified a new library as one of its pressing needs, and in the fall of 1985, our chief development officer and I called on the foundation's president, Lawrence Milas, at his office in New York. He interviewed us at length about Drury, but at the end of the discussion observed that while they might accept our proposal, there was little prospect of a grant because Drury was not up to the standard of the colleges the foundation typically funded.

Discouraged? No. We took this as a challenge, not only to improve the institution, but to be persistent enough to win their support. It took five years and five times through the proposal process—as Drury was improving in other ways congruent with Olin's standards. In 1990 we were notified that we would receive a building grant of \$6.2 million for a new library, the largest initial grant the foundation had ever made at that time.

The significance of this grant was several-fold. First, it resulted in a beautiful, much needed library facility, which opened in 1992. Second, the Olin grant put the equivalent of the Good Housekeeping Seal on our institution. Third, the grant application process made us a stronger and better institution. And fourth, and perhaps of greatest importance, the grant contributed appreciably to our sense of confidence in what we were doing.

## Sustaining success

uccessful transformation must focus on the elements of institutional endeavor that are most important to the college's future. Our goal setting and planning emphasize what we perceive as keys to Drury's institutional health.

An energetic and able admission staff leads the effort to recruit good students and increase enrollment appropriately. We are marketing seriously and have benefited from the expertise of George Dehne in determining our competitive position and strategies to become more effective in attracting and graduating students.

Our vice president for academic affairs has provided leadership to develop new programs: architecture; premedical scholars, which tracks students into medical school; a major in international business; expanded opportunities to study abroad; and graduate degrees in communication and in criminal justice. Our entrepreneurial continuing education program has earned a reputation for personal service and has grown in enrollment.

What's more, our broadening curriculum and increasing number of graduate programs prompted trustees to approve a change in our name from Drury College to Drury University.

Early in the process of transformation, Drury began an ambitious program to raise capital funds for facilities, programs and endowment. This first campaign in 1983 was launched with a marvelous \$4 million gift by Bob Breech, then chairman of the board of trustees. Since then we have been in a perpetual, if at times undeclared, capital campaign. The endowment has grown from about \$10 million to more than \$100 million; campus facilities have been expanded and renewed. New capital funds support the operating budget through investment earnings and have enabled the board of trustees to restrain tuition increases from year to year. The result is national recognition of Drury as a high value in higher education.

We have also tracked our progress closely. We monitor student applications and the enrollment outlook carefully. We check gift revenue and endowment performance regularly. We track alumni giving, the balance sheet, investment returns and new student profiles. We monitor retention and graduation rates, among the most powerful indicators of how we are doing overall.

On the academic side, we have developed assessment programs providing information that allows the faculty to strengthen instructional programs. Less tangible, but no less important, are such measures as the recognitions and rankings we have received, the feedback we get from students and others, the surveys we conduct, and comments from the larger environment, including other colleges. We discuss these assessment indicators regularly as a part of our continued planning.

### Principles for institutional transformation

As background for this article, I asked a number of colleagues to reflect on the qualities and factors that contribute to Drury's success. In considering our experience, we developed a summary of those factors we believe are making a difference. Drury's experience can serve as both a case study and benchmark for other colleges undertaking or perhaps in the midst of, transformations of their own.

The following elements, not in any order, are salient in Drury's transformation:

- A strong core of faculty members shares a deep commitment to the institution. They believe in Drury's mission and purpose. And they contribute tirelessly to Drury's success.
- Paramount importance is attached to taking care of people, including students, their parents and members of the college community. This "passion to be of assistance," as one staff member characterized it, goes far beyond job descriptions or organization charts.

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- The college enjoys unusual continuity in its administrative leadership. Drury's administrative team has an average tenure of nearly 19 years. The 12 team members work together effectively and share a strong commitment to the institution's progress.
- The college selectively adds programs with high student appeal, a practice which contributes to Drury's distinctiveness. It might be said that Drury operates by creating "Mission Oriented Opportunity." Drury dramatically benefits from its fortunate location in a dynamic and growing community. Springfield is attractive to college students and supports an expanding continuing education program.
- By emphasizing strengths and setting forward-looking goals, the college moved from a mode of crisis management to a proactive style of operation. One staff member observed that the stronger Drury has become, the more planning we have done. Today, Drury leads with its strengths and has a clear sense of its identity even as that identity has evolved as a "New American College."
- Staff, faculty and trustees share a deep commitment to the college's mission, success, and progress of the college. Trustees support this progress with sound policies and significant financial leadership.

This retrospective profile of Drury's transformation over a decade and a half is only one case study, and a brief one at that. The factors that have contributed to Drury's continuing success may or may not be relevant to the experience of other institutions in transformation.

I believe, however, that smaller, private institutions like Drury constitute one of the most dynamic areas of American higher education today. An interesting question involves whether it is possible to develop a definitive set of principles of transformation and common denominators for success. This subject is a fertile field for additional case studies such as the ones contained in this monograph, and possibly also a conference. These might be excellent steps for developing higher education's version of *In Search of Excellence*.

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