Chapter 7: Creating Pathways to Opportunity and Service

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Higher education in the United States is under intense scrutiny. Recent polls reveal an unusually large drop in the public’s confidence in the value of a college degree.

Growing numbers of politicians and pundits question the need for a college education, and parents and students who pay tuition bills complain about costs, indebtedness, and employability after graduation. Legislators and public officials often target higher education as the next sector, like health care, to be reformed. The underlying strength of the public trust is that a college degree can advance one’s career and lead to a better life, but this confidence is eroding. Views about the nature of education often reflect partisan divides, but the belief in the efficacy of a college education in both political parties is down from previous years. While nearly 100% of those surveyed affirm the importance of additional education and training beyond high school, less than half of those respondents consider a college degree as the optimal path to opportunity.¹

The story of American higher education is about access and opportunity. In the first wave of college building in the early republic, the rush to found colleges proceeded without restraint. The same entrepreneurial spirit that generated canal building, cotton ginning, gold mining, and high-yield farming also created colleges. They were educational engines of opportunity designed to prepare citizen leaders whose abilities would be commensurate with the possibilities of an
adolescent nation. Following the devastation of the Civil War, an upsurge of college expansion brought far-reaching changes to American political and social life. Newly created colleges opened doors for a better life while championing high ideals of leadership and service to others. In this context, James Archibald Campbell launched the Buies Creek Academy in rural North Carolina in 1887. From its rustic beginnings with 16 students, the institution steadily evolved into a junior college in 1926, a four-year college in 1959, then achieved university status in 1979. Today, Campbell University is comprised of eight schools with more than 6,500 students. Throughout its 131-year history, Campbell University has provided pathways to meaningful careers within an academic community that values service to others.

Institutions that create pathways to opportunity and service are grounded in a robust sense of mission. J. A. Campbell’s purpose in starting a school was to meld Christian values with effective academic instruction to give students a better life and a higher purpose of serving others. Campbell University today is a diverse community of learners from a wide range of backgrounds, but it is still guided by its Christian mission as it seeks to “graduate students with exemplary academic and professional skills who are prepared for purposeful lives and meaningful service.” Campbell represents what Robert Benne calls “quality with soul,” a description of schools that are mission-driven and keep faith with their religious traditions, where learning influences understandings of human flourishing and character development. Students have the opportunity to participate in an ongoing conversation about the things that matter most and wrestle with ideas that inform their sense of vocation and shape a commitment to serve.

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Effective organizations are built around a mission, a reason for being, which serves as an anchor of stability and guiding principles. Being faithful to the mission requires adaptive leadership to stay relevant and responsive within a dynamic context. Successful institutions of higher education understand the power of mission and live out their values. This guiding sense of mission is crucial for building resilient universities for the future as the world constantly changes and disruptive forces require nimble responsiveness. A rooted and clear sense of purpose not only helps differentiate the university among the variety of institutions in a highly competitive marketplace, but also makes a difference in the quality of the students’ educational journey.

Institutions of higher education that create pathways to opportunity serve the places where they are located. Colleges and universities have a moral responsibility to the people and places in their regions. The presence of a college in an underserved area exerts an influence in reversing the downward trend of economic and health indicators. It promotes the common good and generates social capital in places often overlooked and left behind. Students from these areas, many of whom are the first generation from their families to attend college, benefit by earning a degree from these schools, but the schools also play a vital part in improving the lives of those in the region who never attend the school.
The geodemographic identity of Campbell University is multifaceted. Its main campus is a thriving university village situated in a rural landscape and culture, yet it is located within one of the fastest growing regions of the United States. What the University has received from its surroundings, it has returned. Campbell University enrolls more North Carolinians than any other private school in the state. Thirty percent of the current class are first-generation college students, and 35% identify as minority and underrepresented groups. Campbell University has provided upward mobility to generations of students seeking a better life and has groomed them to serve the places and people where they live. It has done its part in reversing the brain drain from small towns and rural communities. Campbell University Law School graduated its first class of students in 1979. There are now Campbell lawyers in 95 out of 100 counties in North Carolina. The same pattern is being replicated with health science students and graduates from the Campbell University School of Medicine, who work in small-town hospitals, rural clinics, and medical residencies in underserved areas. Alumni in other occupations follow suit in the places they live. The University has established collaborative partnerships with area schools, businesses, churches, local governments, and regional agencies because of the moral responsibility to serve those closest to us. These affiliations have in turn provided invaluable learning experiences for students, enabling them to develop into reflective practitioners in their fields of study and mature as emerging leaders.

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Promotional and recruiting materials often tout a university’s effectiveness in developing global leaders who serve the world. Campbell University’s aspirations are more focused on developing local leaders who serve the communities where they live and work. Global education programs and a knowledge of national issues and world problems are crucial for effective, local leadership and engaged citizenship, but the prevailing institutional ethos is oriented to the local and regional as a base for learning and service. Recognition of the University’s expanding impact upon rural communities has been augmented by recent grants from the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Health Resources and Services Administration, and the National Science Foundation, to name a few. These resources are deployed to assist students and community leaders in developing collaborative projects in small towns and rural areas. Making a difference to those closest to our campuses is a way to win back national trust that higher education is an invaluable public good that strengthens and enriches our communities. Colleges should make this a priority.

Though Campbell University operates extended programs and has a rising enrollment in online degree programs, place is important. This tangible patch of real estate in the Sandhills of North Carolina has shaped and formed the University’s institutional identity and mission and engendered a sense of responsibility to Creator, creation, culture, and community which manifests itself in what is shared and inhabited. Wallace Stegner noted that when some kind of culture develops, it is the product not of “boomers” who pillage and run, but of “stickers” who settle and “love the life they have made and the place they have made it in.” American colleges and universities have a moral obligation to give themselves to their places, thereby adding to their health, restoration, and future.
Institutions of higher education that create pathways to opportunity and service provide programs that are market responsive and mission driven. From its inception, Campbell University offered instruction for employable skills supported by an ethos for service, a combination which attracted students and led to rising enrollment. By the late 1960s, the steady ascent in growth levelled out. Enrollment had stagnated, and monetary margins were thin. Under new leadership, the University developed market-responsive and mission-driven programs providing students opportunities for gainful employment and public service. This resulted in revived growth, reliable revenue streams, and budgetary margins which strengthened the institution and generated seed money for launching additional programs.

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Trust and Wealth Management was the first of these ventures and the first program of its kind in the United States. Half a century later, it is still one of the most vibrant and successful programs on campus. During the Viet Nam era when other universities were dismantling military programs, Campbell University started ROTC. It is now the largest traditional ROTC program in the nation and has commissioned more Army officers over the past five years than any other traditional program. ROTC attracted new students to the campus and established the connection for extended programs on military bases. Today, approximately 1,200 of the University’s 6,500 students are veterans or currently serve in the military. In this era of new program creation, Campbell University also forged a unique partnership with Tunku Abdul Rahman University College in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. After 40 years of operation, there are more than 14,000 Campbell graduates from this program living in Asia and around the world.

Other programs followed in the wake of this trajectory: Law School in 1976, the first law school established in North Carolina in over three decades; College of Pharmacy in 1985, the first school of pharmacy in the United States in 40 years, which paved the way for launching programs in the health sciences; Divinity School in 1996, preparing women and men for Christian ministry; and others, such as Homeland Security, the first program of its kind in North Carolina.

There has been another recent wave of program expansion. In the last five years, Campbell graduated its first class of physicians’ assistants, physical therapists, masters of public health professionals, nurses, and medical doctors. Students from the newly formed School of Engineering will soon receive their diplomas as members of the inaugural class. Collectively, these programs average a 96% first-time passage rate on licensing exams. In response to new delivery systems, changing demographics of undergraduate students, and declining enrollment nationwide of extended-campus programs, Campbell University now offers online undergraduate programs leading to a degree and has experienced continuous growth in enrollment since its inception in 2014.

In the current higher education marketplace, it is difficult to generate institutional synergy, realize enrollment growth, and win the support of additional donors and alumni without launching new academic programs. This must be done concurrently with a thorough review of existing programs to identify opportunities for retooling, redeploying, or re-envisioning. One of
the biggest challenges for entrepreneurial schools is consolidating growth and conserving gains. Starting new programs is expensive. It takes capital, investments, and enormous expenditures of time and energy. New programs are front-loaded with start-up costs that sometimes take years to recoup. This calls for discipline, patience, and prudent management in building up new academic offerings before securing streams of tuition revenue generated by new programs.

There has rarely been a time in the history of American higher education when its institutions did not face daunting challenges undermining their stability and imperiling their existence. Colleges and universities today navigate the rapids of societal change and face the prospect of economic distress. The task is never ending of persuading constituents and the general public that a college degree is a reliable route to a better life. It is still possible to create pathways for opportunity and service so that students can fulfill their dreams and achieve their goals while facing headwinds of adversity and immense challenges. There is no other institution which has so much potential to help people make a better life, make a living, and make a difference.

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