



Happy Campus

Private Liberal Arts College

Saving a Private Liberal Arts College from Closure

A College in Crisis

For nearly two centuries, a private liberal arts college in the Midwestern U.S. has proudly enriched the personal and academic lives of its students. In recent years, this college has grown reactive to the changing demands of the marketplace, students, alumni, and the Board of Trustees without stopping to proactively consider what type of institution it wanted to become.

By early 2020, the college's lack of focus and intention had created an institutional identity crisis paired with untenable financial pressures that resulted from years of declining enrollment, tuition discounting, increased operational costs, and softening demand. As the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in late spring and the reality of projected enrollments for Fall 2020 set in, the college's crisis became existential.

With courageous leadership at the helm and a Board of Trustees who were committed to transforming the institution, the college partnered with CampusWorks to reimagine the future and develop a sustainable path forward.

- ▶ Private liberal arts college
- ▶ Established nearly 200 years ago
- ▶ Located in the Midwestern U.S.
- ▶ Enrollment: 1,600+ students annually

CHALLENGE

When mounting financial pressures and an institutional identity crisis threatened a private liberal arts college's future, its leadership turned to CampusWorks to identify a sustainable path forward.

CAMPUSWORKS PARTNERSHIP

- ▶ Engaged key stakeholders to co-create a shared vision of the college's future
- ▶ Redesigned operations to align with the college's new vision

RESULTS

- ▶ Ensured ownership among key stakeholders for carrying out the college's new vision by involving them in its creation
- ▶ Identified and proposed more than \$10 million in cost savings, revenue enhancement opportunities, and operational efficiencies to ensure the college's financial footing
- ▶ Delivered a go-forward framework to support holistic operations and strategic, sustainable decision making

Reclaiming a Competitive Advantage

CampusWorks assembled an assessment team that resembled a President's Cabinet in its expertise, bringing a broad perspective to the college's challenges. The assessment team engaged key stakeholders across the institution to co-create a shared vision for the future. Since community members typically experience some level of disruption and transition when an institution undergoes transformation, this type of broad-based engagement creates inclusion and transparency. Giving community members a voice in the process and allowing them to see how decisions are made ensures greater ownership in carrying out the new vision.

The CampusWorks team conducted focus groups and individual interviews with stakeholders throughout the college. The vision that emerged served as a strategic lens through which the assessment team evaluated opportunities to reduce waste, optimize processes, and align resources with the institution's goals.

WHAT WE LEARNED...

By attempting to be everything to everyone, the college had lost its focus, which created systemic inefficiencies:

- ▶ When the college began managing the bookstore to reduce textbook costs for students, it started losing money.
- ▶ Athletics became unsustainable because the college was trying to fund more sports programs than it could reasonably support.
- ▶ The magazine, published three times annually, was constantly over budget, took up one third of the chief communications officer's time, and did not directly correlate to student enrollment or retention.

When addressing financial shortfalls in higher education, a common solution is to implement universal budget cuts across the institution. But the CampusWorks team took a strategic approach, supported by competitive benchmarking data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), to identify key opportunities for the college to maximize operational efficiency, improve service, and reclaim a competitive advantage.

"Giving community members a voice in the process and allowing them to see how decisions are made helps ensure greater ownership in carrying out the new vision."

Liz Murphy

CEO & Chief Evangelist, CampusWorks

Breaking Down Silos to Achieve Institutional Alignment

The assessment also revealed that the college had been taking a siloed approach to its challenges. For example, the Admissions Office responded to declining enrollment by focusing on recruitment and retention efforts. While that was a step in the right direction, it overlooked opportunities to integrate and optimize policies, processes, procedures, and technology across the institution to achieve significant savings while also improving services for students and employees.

CampusWorks introduced a holistic approach to tackling challenges that engages cross-functional stakeholders and achieves institutional alignment. When applied to the college's strategic planning efforts, this approach would engage community members in defining the college's mission and vision, thereby creating institution-wide buy in. To apply this approach to the college's enrollment challenges, CampusWorks recommended developing a Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Plan with key performance indicators (KPIs) to align recruitment and retention efforts throughout the institution while also adding a layer of accountability to ensure action.

Reclaiming the Future

Many private liberal arts colleges are facing similar financial and existential challenges as they attempt to navigate demographic changes, political pressures, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. These challenges showed this college's leadership that it had to transform if it wanted to survive. Their courage and swift action armed the college with actionable recommendations and a supportive campus community that was ready to work together to drive meaningful transformation that will secure the college's future for generations to come.

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