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Campus Notes

Campus Notes is your one-stop shop for news and notes related to Triangle universities and community colleges. We'll cover it all here, from policy discussions to the silly things those crazy college kids are doing. Got an idea? Request? Criticism? Let us know. eric.ferreri@newsobserver.com.

A chat with the new Peace Prez

Debra Townsley is a product of the small college experience. She has degrees from small colleges and has spent her career working on small college campuses. As the new president at Peace College in Raleigh, Townsley plans to lead an institution already in transition mode.

Just 15 years ago, Peace was a 2-year women's college. It is now a four-year institution that began admitting men just two years ago to an adult evening program, and has designs on expanding into online education.

Most recently president at Nichols College in Dudley, Mass., Townsley [started work at the downtown Raleigh campus this week](#). She took some time to chat with the News & Observer. Here are excerpts from that conversation.

You're a product of small colleges. Are you drawn to them?

I think you have a lot of flexibility to be responsive to student and market needs. I think a lot of people don't realize that nationally, small colleges tend to represent more for the under-represented groups than publics do. We can have a nice one-on-one with students because of our smaller size and intimate setting. That's very rewarding.

What are your first impressions of the higher education environment in the Triangle?

This is a higher ed town, or region actually. Last weekend I spent the day on Friday going to all the campuses and just driving through them to see the different schools. I did Shaw and Meredith and NC State. And then I went out and did UNC-Chapel Hill and Duke to get the feel of the land. It's a wonderful higher education community as well as being the hotspot for business in the community. It's a pretty exciting environment.

How will that geography benefit you, and Peace?

The mission of Peace - we strive to prepare women for either graduate education or for their meaningful careers or lifelong learning. Given the location we're in, our mission is just a platform for women who graduate from Peace. For graduate programs, for meaningful careers. We have great business here, great hospitals, great research. For all the fields we educate women in, there are wonderful careers for women.

At Nichols College, you're credited with turning around an institution with lagging enrollment. Under your leadership, full-time day students increased from 620 to 1,150 and residential enrollment increased as well. Does Peace need to grow as well?

I think it's always good to grow in multiple ways. There's day programs, evening programs, undergraduate programs. There are multiple ways to grow. But when you grow it has to be in the context of what your mission is, and that's to still be a small, private college. So growing it within its mission is important. Peace has wonderful potential.

Small colleges often grow enrollment and revenue through night and online courses. Is that something in Peace's future?

At Nichols, we grew evening programs. And I started an online program because adult learners need programs that fit their schedules. Peace started an adult program in the classroom just a year ago. We will be exploring other options as we move ahead. We will be getting into online. I'm hiring someone right now to develop an online program. We'll have it within a year.

There's a market for that?

Yes. Absolutely. The fastest growing form of education delivery is online education. And the fastest growing market is the adult student, over age 24.

What role should Peace College play in the Raleigh area and community?

It's to provide a quality education to women in the day programs and in the evening programs. It's to prepare a workforce that's culturally balanced and produces men and women who are civically minded. We have a very strong liberal arts and sciences program as well as the various majors.

Men can now take evening classes?

Yes. That's how the evening courses were designed. It's been in place for just a year.

Does that just open a new market for you?

Yes, it does. It uses what our talents are, but with a new market.

So was that an economic decision?

Over the long run it will be, but it was also mission-driven because the mission is to provide education for the community. So it makes sense.

What are Peace College's strengths? Weaknesses?

It has a wonderful history and long presence in Raleigh and the community. It's well-respected for producing very capable graduates. On the weakness side, or, we'll say, instead of weakness, areas for improvement, we're like any small, private, tuition-driven institution. We need to look for the next thing in the market. The market is very dynamic. It's fast-paced and things are changing quickly. We can be responsive with that.

An example is the adult degree program. Another is the online program. We can be more nimble because we are small and private. We don't have a large culture to change or a bureaucracy. So those are areas where we can improve. We have the resources. The campus is here 24 hours a day. The faculty is very talented, so we can be using those resources.

What have you been told by trustees is your primary mission?

There's a strong commitment to keeping the women's education in the day and residential program, and then to look at where opportunities for growth are in the future. Like online and adult programs, and new majors where the market demands them, and looking at what students are interested in.

Are the things students are interested in now different than they used to be?

It changes, yes. At Nichols we started a sports management program 11 or 12 years ago. Who had even heard of that area of study? But it's now the largest specialization in the business program there. It's been driven by demand from students. Another was criminal justice management, which is now the third largest program.

The dynamics of the marketplace change. Nationally, enrollment in criminal justice programs rose after 9/11. So I do think the marketplace changes over time. And it is driven by what students are interested in by their cultural surroundings and where the job opportunities will be.

You have to rely heavily on tuition for your revenue. How much is too much?

It's a really tough one. Tuition for families, you have to be cognizant of the limitation of families. We do scholarships and there are loans available so we work with each student and family to come up with the best package. We have to be very cautious on tuition increases. But our expenses are going up. Health care goes up. Utilities go up. So it's a fine balance, but not unlike what any other industry is facing.

How much of your time do you anticipate you'll spend on private fundraising?

We have a terrific development department and my predecessor, her area of expertise was in fundraising. She was fabulous at it, which is fortunate for the college and for me. Initially it won't be as high, but over the years it will escalate. The first few years, I'll be getting my feet on the ground and meeting constituents. Then the fundraising starts from there.

So you see it as a long haul. You're here for the duration?

I am. I love being here. I only started here Monday, but I am really excited to be here. I love it.

Read more: <http://blogs.newsobserver.com/campusnotes/a-chat-with-the-new-peace-prez#ixzz0woxus6qM>