

## Careful growth at Peace

**RALEIGH** Though Debra Townsley is new to Peace College, she has a firm grasp of the institution's mission as a small, private college that prepares women for a lifetime of learning.

That mission is even printed on the back of her business card.

As Peace's new president, Townsley will keep that in mind as she tries to increase the university's enrollment - and revenues - by continuing a transformation her predecessor, Laura Bingham, started. Bingham stepped down earlier this year after 12 years as president.

Under her leadership, Peace grew from a two-year college to a larger four-year institution granting baccalaureate degrees. The college also expanded its campus and, in 2008, admitted men for the first time - to an adult evening program.

Now, Townsley hopes to expand evening courses and start an online education initiative, a common move by universities looking to add revenue and serve more nontraditional students. And down the road, perhaps: the institution's first graduate programs.

"There are multiple ways to grow," said Townsley, 55, who began work at Peace this week after a dozen years as president at Nichols College in Dudley, Mass. "But when you grow, it has to be in the context of what your mission is, and that's still to be a small, private college."

At Nichols, Townsley is credited with turning around a lagging institution hindered by low enrollment and a significant budget deficit. Under her leadership, enrollment there nearly doubled.

Peace, which enrolls about 700 students, may not need to double in size, but some say it has room to grow.

Biology professor Joe Wolf thinks Peace can serve more students but needs to do so carefully.

"I think we need to grow and use the wonderful product we offer to serve more students," he said. "But we need to make sure that we don't grow too large. The special thing we have here is the close interactions we have with students. That grows out of being small."

### Responding to needs

At small colleges, tuition is a key revenue stream, so more students mean more money. Evening and online courses can be attractive to students who value flexibility.

"The economics of a private education requires you to maximize the opportunities available," said Todd Robinson, chairman of Peace's board of trustees. "And this is being driven by a change in the complexion of the potential student body. More students are willing to combine on-campus with evening and online courses to achieve their objectives."

Townsley said she's wary of becoming less affordable. Tuition, room and board for a full-time residential student in 2010-11 is about \$33,000, an increase of 4.67 percent from last year. Many students receive at least some need-based financial aid.

Townsley taught at several small colleges before becoming a dean at Nichols in 1997. She became its president the next year.

"I think you have a lot of flexibility [at a small college] to be responsive to student and market needs," she said. "We can have a nice one-on-one with students because of our smaller size and intimate setting. That's very rewarding."

#### Culture drives interest

Student and market needs will largely drive Peace's growth, Townsley said. As times change, the popularity of some programs fluctuates. For example, few colleges saw the need for a sports management program when Nichols started one under Townsley's leadership more than a decade ago. Now, it's the most popular speciality within the business program there.

Student interest is also driven by popular culture and current events. Interest in criminal justice spiked earlier this decade after the Sept. 11 attacks and the rise of the "CSI" series of television shows, Townsley said.

"The dynamics of the marketplace change," she said. "And it is driven by what students are interested in by their cultural surroundings and where the job opportunities will be."

Small colleges that lack the layers of bureaucracy at larger public institutions can often respond best to these changes in the marketplace, said Hope Williams, president of N.C. Independent Colleges and Universities.

"One of the great advantages of a small institution is that it can be very nimble in how it responds," Williams said.

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