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Elevator Pitch for a Women's College: Revamp Curriculum, Attract Students

By Lawrence Biemiller

DECATUR, GA.

AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE is making a big bet on its future as a liberal-arts institution for women. It's a wager that trustees have backed with a \$20-million investment from the \$260-million endowment, and that faculty members have enthusiastically supported by refocusing the curriculum. And this past August it brought the 127-year-old college its largest first-year class ever, raising total enrollment to 915 students.

Administrators say it's too early to be sure the bet will pay off, but there's no hiding how happy everyone is with the initial results.

The elevator pitch is this: Agnes Scott has refocused its liberal-arts curriculum to emphasize leadership and global awareness, two concepts that an in-depth market survey showed had far more appeal among high-school women than any others the college could come up with. And every first-year student will travel as part of a spring-semester course, with most going overseas.

At the same time, the college is adopting digital portfolios in which students will record their work, and is also overhauling its advising system so that each student will have a four-person advising board, including a career adviser who may be a successful alumna. Those changes appeal to parents as well as applicants. And the college has given the athletics director new responsibilities as "dean of fun," with a budget for enlivening the campus with occasional bands, food trucks, and more.

An elevator pitch was exactly what Agnes Scott needed, says its president, Elizabeth Kiss (her last name is pronounced like "quiche").

Before last year, if a high-school student asked why she should consider Agnes Scott, which is named for the mother of a 19th-century benefactor, Ms. Kiss would give a long answer about the value of the liberal arts, the college's great faculty members, its beautiful Collegiate Gothic buildings, and so forth. But the only really distinctive element was one many high-school students consider a drawback — Agnes Scott is a women's college. Now Ms. Kiss can say instead that it's a college for women who aim to become leaders in a world where problems and solutions are increasingly global.

The Need for a Plan

The transformation plan, called Summit, took shape slowly. Like many small liberal-arts institutions, Agnes Scott Col-



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When asked why a student should choose Agnes Scott College, Elizabeth Kiss, its president, used to wax long about the value of the liberal arts, the college's great faculty members, its beautiful campus, and so on. Now she simply says that it's a college for women who aim to become leaders in a world of global problems.

lege has known for a while that it needs to grow. Enrollment, just under 500 two decades ago, leveled out at about 900 a few years back, and nothing the college tried pushed it higher. Meanwhile, a strategic plan developed to keep the college viable financially set 1,100 as an enrollment target for 2020 — and 1,200 for 2025.

"When I first got here, 15 years ago, we were pretty flush," says Elizabeth Hackett, an associate professor of women's studies and philosophy. More recently, she says, "people started to get really concerned about financial stability. I really worried that there wasn't a plan."

The recession that began in 2008 drove those worries home. During the downturn the college offered early-retirement packages that 24 faculty and staff members accepted; it laid off 16 others. It also started holding regular convocations to discuss finances, says John P. Hegman, vice president for business and finance. "We became very transparent. The faculty and staff started owning the need for change."

So did the Board of Trustees. "The board has felt for some time that Agnes Scott needed to find something unique, a program that could distinguish us," says Elizabeth Jones, a 1973 alumna who is a lawyer and a board member. "We've tried different marketing approaches, but none really took."



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In their final project, students in a mathematics class taught by Rachel Bayless (center) at Agnes Scott College focused on voting schemes in a fictional country with four ethnic groups.

We heard that these are tough times for liberal-arts colleges, and unless you come up with something unique, you're not likely to survive."

"We started talking about what's going to be the big idea?" says the board chair, Clyde C. Tuggle, senior vice president and chief of public affairs at the Coca-Cola Company. He organized a retreat for trustees and faculty members that many here recall as a turning point in relations between the board and the faculty. Ms. Hackett says the retreat "started to give the faculty some trust that these aren't people who just parachute in."

Ms. Kiss returned to an idea that had been proposed a few years earlier — creating a Center for Women's Global Leadership. She also hired a consulting firm, the Art & Science Group, which recommended that Agnes Scott test the global-leadership idea against other possibilities. So faculty members came up with a total of eight concepts.

"There was a lot of brainstorming — what idea that is true to who we are could we go big with?" says Ms. Hackett. Among the possibilities were making Agnes Scott a college centered on social justice and turning the college into an institution for self-reflection.

Admitting men, however, was never on the table.

Art & Science commissioned a survey that reached 675 students in the college's inquiry pool and 323 students who had been admitted, and the consultants presented the results at a faculty meeting in November 2013. Of the big ideas, only leadership and global awareness were hits with the high-school women.

Afterward, Ms. Kiss challenged the faculty and staff to move fast. "We said, OK, fall of 2015 is when we start," the president recalls. "The ability to catch students' attention has an expire date."

5 Skills for Leaders

What followed was a frenzy of debating, planning, and testing that involved most faculty members and many members of the staff. Some professors worried that they'd have to teach

corporate-style leadership, but what the faculty settled on instead were five skills essential for leaders — teamwork, critical thinking, writing, public speaking, and digital literacy.

"A lot of things we teach in a liberal-arts education are leadership skills — we've just never thought about them that way," Ms. Hackett says.

Academics in some disciplines had trouble imagining what role their courses could play. "A lot of people have questions about how math fits in," says Rachel L. Bayless, an assistant professor of mathematics.

For one of her own courses, she created a fictional country with four ethnic groups and asked teams of students to write a constitution that distributed votes fairly while safeguarding the interests of all four groups — a challenge during which they learn "complicated and advanced mathematics."

The curricular changes have been widespread. Every student takes a leadership and a global-awareness course in her first year, and travels somewhere with her class during the spring semester. She also decides whether to emphasize leadership or global awareness at the same time that she completes a traditional major (or more than one).

Meanwhile, faculty members are rethinking how they teach existing courses so that students will come away having learned the traditional content but also having practiced working in teams, speaking in public, and the like.

So far, results are promising. A survey of the current freshman class found that two-thirds rated Summit as either important or very important to their choosing Agnes Scott. Yield increased: The admissions office overshot its 240-student goal and ended up with 272 — even though attracting students to a women's college usually means "working twice as hard for a quarter of the results," according to Laura Martin-Fedich, vice president for enrollment.

Even so, Mr. Hegman won't reveal the college's current discount rate — that's the average share of tuition covered by institutional aid, and it's an important component of an institution's viability. (Moody's Investors Service estimated it at 61 percent in an unflattering 2013 report.) But Mr. Hegman will say that the way to get that rate down "is by getting demand for the college up." Then "you're in a better negotiating stance with students."

Meanwhile, Ms. Kiss is looking ahead. "Very soon," she says, "we will have to start thinking about Summit 2.0." ■

Lawrence Biemiller writes about a variety of usual and unusual higher-education topics. Reach him at lawrence.biemiller@chronicle.com.

Correction (1/7/2016, 7:12 a.m.): An earlier version of this article failed to identify Rachel Bayless as the professor of the math class pictured above. The article has been updated to reflect that correction.

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