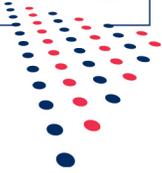


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2006 SERIES: “CREATING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE”

– ESSAY 6 –

Food for Thought: External Partnerships and the Strategic Plan

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DR. WENDY B. LIBBY
President, Stephens College

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When a college sets out to transform itself, it is not always obvious where to start. In the case of Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri, it seemed early in the 21st century that there were more opportunities than time. One of approximately 60 women’s colleges in the United States, Stephens—founded in 1833—had long been considered one of the jewels of women’s higher education. However, in 2003, College alumnae, long-time faculty and staff, and the community at large were experiencing the disturbing sense that something was wrong. They realized that the decades-long slide in enrollment—from approximately 2,000 residential students in 1970 to about 450 in 2003—was foretelling a very dark future.

Realizing that there was no time to lose, the new administration quickly launched an all-hands-on-deck, fast-turnaround strategic planning process. Faculty, staff, students, alumnae, trustees, and concerned community citizens united and rose to the challenge of reversing this enrollment trend. In addition to the need to increase residential enrollment and establish firmer financial footing, the resulting strategic plan laid out several goals. These included the creation of a more student-centered culture, the recognition of employees as valuable members of the campus community, and the enhancement of a respected brand identity among key audiences.

Within six months, the blueprint for the future was in place, and it was time to implement an aggressive renewal of academic programs, the aging physical plant, and the entire student services area, including dining services and catering by an outside provider. At the time of this transition, our offerings did not reflect a student-friendly college environment, nor were presentation and quality at the high level desired. Although our resources were limited, it was clear that creativity and a fresh approach would be required to rethink the entire program.

First Impressions

We began with our customers—prospective students and their families. The old adage is true: first impressions are everything in the total campus visit experience.

The food services area may be seen as a minor element in a student’s decision to enroll. However, the student and her family evaluate this aspect of the visit, just as they do the appearance of campus grounds and their interactions with faculty and students. Is the staff friendly or rude? Is the dining area sanitary? Is there a variety of options at every meal? Are the meal plans flexible to fit student schedules and lifestyles? Is the college conscious about changing dietary preferences, knowledgeable about nutrition, and sensitive to cultural differences?

By design, our partnership with the new dining provider pushes these conversations to the forefront. Together, we looked strategically at such questions within the framework of our mission, strategic plan, and specific goals for recruitment and retention as we viewed our food service operation through the eyes of the customer. This understanding helped us all to be more competitive and student-friendly.

Delivering on a Student-centered Promise

College dining must not only create a good first impression, it must also deliver on its promises in order to retain students. We must reassure students through our actions that they have chosen a college with a culture that will still fit their needs three or more years from now.

Stephens' student body represented several special challenges. First, because 75 percent of the undergraduates are design, fashion, and performing arts majors, body consciousness, body image, and a focus on low-fat and vegetarian cuisine are paramount. At the same time, students want food options that feel like home and offer limitless choice.

Given this culture, our dining provider recognized its critical role in helping to meet the challenges of reinforcing nutrition and promoting wellness. To this end, its foundation helped to fund the development of a campus fitness and wellness center, The Health Connection. This level of partnership surpassed the traditional dining hall experience, demonstrating a more balanced and robust partnership between a college and its food service provider in meeting students' needs.

In addition, because Stephens does not have a true student union, our students tend to congregate and socialize over meals. Thus, the total dining ambiance must be relaxing and rejuvenating. To that end, the College recovered chairs, resurfaced tables, added paint, and hung large black-and-white photographs taken from campus archives and other meaningful artwork.

One of the latter is a complex fabric/mixed media wall hanging, illustrating scenes from the Stephens campus, that was created by one of our costume design faculty members.

We have also added spice aimed at overcoming the perceptions of the stale and institutional. Special events, such as beach parties and luaus, create buzz that takes on a life of its own. Scheduled before final exams, our popular midnight breakfast—featuring faculty and staff serving breakfast, as well as a DJ and karaoke—gives students an opportunity to take a study break during the pressure of finals. It has become a much-anticipated event. Responsive in creating experiences that address the needs of our students, our dining provider works with the College and student leadership to be one of the centers of campus life.

Moreover, the staff readily tailors its daily cuisine to enhance campus programming. For example, when the College recently focused its Women's History Month celebration on international projects and issues highlighting Ireland and Ghana, meals and post-event refreshments carried these international themes, adding an extra dimension.

In creating any dining experience, we recognize that our customers, especially faculty and staff, have choices about where they eat. Therefore, we experience competition for flex points—built into our student meal plans—permitting students to eat at “The Grill” on campus after the main dining area closes. Our strategic planning recognizes that students have other food alternatives, especially because of our proximity (less than one quarter mile) to downtown.

Engaging the Community

Since the advent of our strategic plan, the College has focused on fostering and enhancing relationships with businesses and individuals in Columbia—a community of approximately 90,000 residents, including two other colleges and universities and thriving healthcare and insurance industries.

In such an environment, Stephens' campus and its underutilized facilities, including several auditoriums, a recital hall, and other spaces, represent an untapped resource. Under the direction of a new conferencing coordinator, the College is now aggressively marketing the campus as an event venue, delivering an excellent meeting experience.

While offering yet another marketing opportunity, completion of Lela Raney Wood (LRW) Hall and its Kimball Ballroom as a campus and community venue represented yet another daunting challenge. Remembered for more than 50 years as the "best dance floor in Boone County," it was known for the finest food, elegant and beautifully displayed, in keeping with the standards of an institution of Stephens' stature. Thus, its reopening carried with it high expectations.

With business meetings, weddings, conferences, and other similar activities taking place in LRW and elsewhere on campus, the quality of our dining program is paramount to the success of these ventures—both in terms of customer satisfaction and revenue generation. Our program requires the flexibility to accommodate the discerning palate of the 50-year-old cosmopolitan adult as well as the taste of an 18-year-old female.

How Are We Doing?

Our strategic plan also calls for us to seek input as we work toward our goals and evaluate our progress. This means soliciting feedback from our customers, as well as all food service staff, to ensure that we are delivering a quality dining experience.

A food service committee, consisting of students, food service staff, and other interested individuals, meets regularly to discuss concerns and ideas aimed at improving the dining experience. The suggestion box is emptied daily, and staff replies are posted publicly with the suggestions. The staff frequently encourages students to bring recipes from home to place on the College menu.

Managing Growth

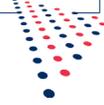
Stephens began the 2006-2007 academic year with approximately 280 new residential students and a total undergraduate residential student population of approximately 650—representing a 64 percent increase in residential students in three years, with no lessening in academic quality or in the services demanded. As a result, the College is experiencing a new set of challenges in managing this growth and responsibly devoting the necessary resources in terms of space, personnel, and funding. In our strategic plan, we anticipate stabilizing our enrollment at 900 residential students by fall 2008. Achieving this goal requires cooperation among everyone at the College, including our dining partner. Only by leveraging our external relationships into strategic partnerships can we make thoughtful decisions about what we will look like down the road.

Dr. Wendy Libby became the 23rd president of Stephens College in July 2003. Upon her arrival, she united the campus and community in a major strategic planning initiative designed to recommit the 173-year-old women's college to its historical strengths, to bolster beloved traditions, and to imagine new areas of growth. Since then, enrollment has increased, new programs have been developed, and other positive changes have occurred in a period many have started calling "the Stephens Renaissance."

Dr. Libby is a founding board member and board chair of the Tuition Plan Consortium (the Independent 529 Plan), a national pre-paid tuition plan for private colleges, of which Stephens is a founding participant. She is also active on professional boards and Columbia councils.

Dr. Libby earned her Ph.D. in Educational Administration from the University of Connecticut and her M.B.A. from the Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell University. She also has a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from Cornell.

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