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Harnessing Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Domestic and International Program Development

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Harnessing Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Domestic and International Program Development

Dr. Todd Hutton: President, Utica College

I recently had a conversation with a writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. She was intrigued with the idea that small private institutions like Utica College are increasingly pursuing alternative forms of delivering educational programs. She also was skeptical about the reasons behind this emerging trend, and she asked if the competition for students was becoming so fierce as to drive schools to this seemingly uncharacteristic activity. It seemed to me that the idea of small private colleges establishing domestic and international branch campuses or satellite programs was particularly questionable, or at least curious, in her mind.

It should come as no surprise to many presidents that such skepticism, curiosity, and intrigue exists in the minds of our various publics. Entrepreneurship and market-driven innovation are not generally associated with our industry, and particularly small private institutions. The *Chronicle* writer's skepticism and curiosity are matched, if not surpassed, by the faculties at many of our institutions and, to a lesser extent, by our governing boards and alumni. Nevertheless, over the past decade and a half, our industry has seen the emergence of early adopters and innovators in our ranks. In the large private university category, there is Drexel

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University, and within the ranks of smaller schools are such institutions as Alaska Pacific College, Webster University (Missouri), Park University (Missouri), St. Leo University (Florida), and Ottawa University (Kansas). These institutions and others like them have led the way in demonstrating that the private, not-for-profit sector of American higher education can be grounded both in the traditions of the liberal arts and in the entrepreneurial spirit of this country. Certainly, my own institution has learned from the experience of these pioneers, and while Utica College might be considered by some to be part of the pioneering generation of private institutions, in reality we are late-comers among the pioneers. This, however, has allowed us to identify best practices, establish criteria, and delineate guidelines for our entrepreneurial endeavors.

A Transformation Occurs

Over the past decade, Utica College has had a unique opportunity to transform itself. Founded as a branch campus of Syracuse University in 1946 to serve returning GIs and the blue collar populace of the Mohawk Valley, Utica College of Syracuse University (as it was known until just six years ago) has achieved its independence in steps. It became independently accredited in 1978 while still remaining a branch campus, and more recently became separately chartered by the state of New York in 1995. With the charter came Utica College's financial and legal independence, the creation of its own governing board, and the authority to select its own president. Yet, the college still confers the Syracuse University baccalaureate degree through a unique agreement with the university, although the college will take the final step toward independence when this arrangement ends with the Fall 2011 entering class.

This past decade of transformation has been born out of necessity, but it has also been enabled by the spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation that was somehow infused into the culture of the campus during its earliest days. One year after its founding, Utica College became one of the first national birthplaces of undergraduate public relations programs and soon thereafter became an early adopter of construction management curricula. In subsequent years, the college established one of the first psychology-child life, therapeutic recreation, and human rights advocacy programs and was first in the nation to offer an economic crime investigation program and economic crime management masters.

Since 1999, there has been a ferocious pace of change, fueled by a new and emerging sense of self and by the legacy of entrepreneurship and innovation. The results include 19 new graduate degree programs; six new undergraduate degree programs; one program discontinued and two placed into receivership for reform; two memoranda of understanding for international branch campuses; one master's prepared for launch in the Asian market; three new residence halls; seven new academic and athletic facilities; nine new NCAA Division III sports; a new shared governance system with a first-time Faculty Senate; creation of an integrated student financial services office and a division for student success; reorganization of academic divisions into schools; launch of a board orientation and training program and a reorganized board committee structure; and completion of a $12 million campaign and launch of a seven-year $25 million campaign, with the goal being reached within four years.

Essential Ingredients—Lessons Learned

Now that we have (almost) caught our breaths, what have we learned? What are the essential ingredients of an entrepreneurial agenda? First, a culture of entrepreneurship must be reinforced and cultivated. This is certainly an easier task when there is already a history of it. The president's role is to pay homage to the past, highlighting successful entrepreneurial and innovative endeavors. The president also aims to articulate the future value of innovation and entrepreneurship through writings, state of the college addresses, meetings with governance groups and alumni, and interactions with the surrounding community's leadership.

Second, entrepreneurial intent must be codified in a vision statement that the board embraces and that a major portion of the college community accepts. In Utica College's case, our "Vision for the Future" professes that we desire "to be one of the nation's finest small regional universities, acclaimed for its integration of liberal and professional study, for its centers of academic excellence, for its innovative and cutting edge master's degree and career-oriented doctoral programs, and for its diverse learning community." It also proclaims that, "We will be known for our academic centers of excellence and our master's and career-oriented doctoral degrees that offer gateways to career and innovative approaches to meeting the emerging needs of society," and that "Our Utica College of the future will be characterized by a transforming living, learning, and working environment." (*A New Dream, A New Era: The "2010 Plan" for Utica College*, p. 5)

Third, a strategic plan is a requisite for action and a crucial vehicle for pursuing a vision, fulfilling a mission, and giving authority to innovation and entrepreneurship. Utica College's strategic plan lays out six strategic initiatives with attendant goals. Strategic initiative number three declares that, "Utica College will commit itself to innovation in program offerings and delivery based upon effective planning." Three of the goals state that the college will "develop strong undergraduate programs…that anticipate and respond to the environmental trends and to the changing skill and knowledge requirements of an evolving society," will "develop graduate programs that are innovative, meet a unique social need, or afford entry-level credentials into a profession," and will "explore the development of satellite programs and campuses and distance education programs that enable UC to offer current and new programs consistent with its mission and vision for the future, including satellites in other locations within the state and Northeast region and in other locations throughout the world." (*A New Dream, A New Era: The "2010 Plan" for Utica College*, vol. II, p. 29)

Fourth, there must be a framework for entrepreneurial action that guides the process of analysis, development, and implementation. Utica College's 1997 edition of *A Sourcebook for Procedures and Definitions*, published under the auspices of the college's Curriculum Committee, called for proposers of new programs to work in concert with members of their discipline or related disciplines as the curriculum is developed, and required that various "issues" be examined, including "the existence of external pressures to create the new program," "ability to attract students," and "ability to place graduates in professional positions." (UC Curriculum Committee, Fall 1997, p. 22-23). Nuanced language like "pressures" as opposed to "opportunities" notwithstanding, it was clear that a different approach to program analysis, development, and implementation was necessary. Early in 1999, Utica College contracted with a strategic communications firm, The Paige Group, to hold a training session for deans, academic department heads, vice presidents, and other faculty and administrators on more comprehensive and inclusive strategies for introducing new academic programs—strategies that blended business and academic approaches to product and program design and implementation. This training emphasized the need for a team structure at the very beginning of the process, as opposed to the more typical isolation of academic program developers. Functions that needed to be filled on a program development team included champion, researcher, developer, integrator, analyzer, and marketer. These were discussed in detail, as were other key strategies that fell under the following categories (The Paige Group, 1999):

- Team Structure

- Team Leaders (responsibilities)

- Study Teams (functions and responsibilities, use of curriculum consultants)

- Team Leader Questions (such as human and material resources needed for the process)

- Demand (industry, social and economic needs, industry timeline demands, affordability, competition, enrollment trends)

- Institutional Value and Impact (mission, character and atmosphere, student life, relationship to current programs, new program features, including professional achievement, intellectual growth, social responsibility, leadership

- Accessibility (location, delivery, scheduling, enrollment criteria, opportunities for students with potential)

- Affordability (competitive pricing, sponsorship)

- Cost and Return on Investment (support systems, income/expense analysis, ROI)

This more comprehensive and integrated approach, which brings a range of expertise to bear on the challenge of program creation at the earliest stages of an idea, has enabled the college to be more effective and efficient in program development and implementation. Shortly after the training, the Association of Governing Boards published an article on a board's ability to determine academic priorities, which included one-page guide to analyzing programs. This guide reinforced and helped refine our approach to analysis, development, and implementation. (Dickeson, p.3)

A fifth and more recent ingredient in our entrepreneurial agenda has been to develop a statement of purpose and guidelines for international programs. This enables us to connect international ventures to the college's mission statement and to define broad parameters for international branch campuses, joint degree ventures, and international residencies for selected programs. With memoranda of understanding already executed for branch campuses in Albania and Vietnam and the launch of an existing online executive master's degree in economic crime management scheduled for winter 2009 in the Asia market, we became cognizant of the board's and campus's need for written guidelines. More detailed guidelines related to legal and logistical requirements, quality assurance, administration and control, marketing, net revenue sharing, and repatriation if needed in crisis situations are currently under development.

A sixth ingredient, which had its origins in the college's 1999 strategic plan (revised in 2004), was a commitment to integrated marketing. The fourth strategic initiative in the plan committed the college to advancing "its programs, achievements, and reputation through an integrated marketing and communications plan." With independence from Syracuse University came a much heightened need to strengthen the reputation and brand of Utica College in its own right. We also knew that for new programs, a "build it and they will come" mentality would not work. An investment in marketing had to be part of the entrepreneurial equation. This goal has been of such importance that when the board reorganized its committee structure several years ago, one of five standing committees became the Committee on Innovation and Marketing.

A seventh and vital ingredient in our entrepreneurial ventures has been the ability to finance the aggressive agenda that we have pursued. It was obvious that a former branch campus with a very modest endowment could not rely upon that resource nor upon the annual, tuition-dependent operating budget to underwrite new ventures. In a sense, we needed "venture capital" to achieve our agenda. This venture capital has come in the form of increased unrestricted annual funds (a 100-plus percent increase in four years), operating surpluses (cash flow), commitment from the board, and a recent commitment from a bank based upon a business plan that laid out a "Three-Year Action Plan" as a capstone to the 10-year strategic plan. This action plan is aimed directly at the need to address the imminent demographic downturn of traditional-age students in the northeast and to diversify further the college's revenue streams—all within the context of the strategic plan and vision for the college. Under this three-year plan, Utica College has developed and brought to the marketplace nine new undergraduate, graduate, and certificate programs in the past 14 months. We expect to recoup all development and roll-out costs (such as, new faculty, space renovation, marketing, technology and library investments, and addition of core courses) and break even financially within two or three years, depending upon the program.

Finally, an eighth ingredient has included the development of finance and administrative systems that can support the entrepreneurial ventures, provide data and financial analyses for monitoring and decision making, and contribute to planning. These systems remain a work in progress. Businesses take such systems for granted, and the early entrepreneurial pioneers have developed systems from which others, including Utica College, can learn.

Parting Thoughts

Throughout this essay, I have used such words and phrases as entrepreneurship, venture, industry, enterprise, brand, marketing, roll-out, demand, competition, product, and return on investment. This is not commonly the language of the academy. It even feels a bit odd to this president, who was educated in and spent much of his career in the most traditional of liberal arts colleges. Yet, this is the language of the global American college that must survive, strive, and thrive in a fiercely competitive environment—an environment that is becoming more so with growing competition from proprietary institutions and emerging universities on the international scene. Lest we forget our essential purpose, however, it is important to recall the words and wisdom of Alfred North Whitehead, who himself found the new Harvard School of Business a novelty but also an embodiment of change in university education aimed at "the welfare of the social organism":

> The universities are schools of education, and schools of research. But the primary reason for their existence is not to be found either in the mere knowledge conveyed to the students or in the mere opportunities for research afforded to the members of the faculty….The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest for life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning. The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively. At least, this is the function which it should perform for society. (Whitehead, p. 92-93)

Ultimately, entrepreneurship and innovation must have the purpose of uniting learners and teachers in the imaginative consideration of learning.

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About the Author

Dr. Todd Hutton was appointed the 8th president and 13th chief executive officer by The Board of Trustees of Utica College on August 1, 1998. During his tenure as president, Utica College has witnessed dramatic growth and transformation. Dr. Hutton instituted major reform in the campus governance, reorganized the Board of Trustees committee structure, and focused attention on the integration of liberal arts education and professional studies.

Prior to joining Utica College, Dr. Hutton was the vice president for academic administration at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, where he served for eight years. Before that he was assistant to the president at Austin College in Sherman, Texas, for four years, where he also served on the graduate faculty of the Austin Teacher Program.

Dr. Hutton received an A.B. degree in English from Davidson College in 1970, a master's of education in school psychology/psychological foundations from the University of Florida in 1972, and a Ph.D. in Education (Sociology of Education and Comparative Education) from Duke University in 1982.

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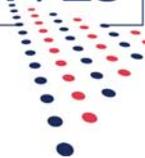
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