

PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



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Inspirational Innovation

CHAPTER

5

Embracing the Paradigm Shift



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Embracing the Paradigm Shift

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What happens when an elite college starts accepting large numbers of low income students?

This question stalks around the edges of calls for greater college access for low income students to improve America's global collegiate competitiveness. In early 2014, President Barack Obama convened dozens of presidents of the nation's most elite colleges and universities to urge them to accept more low income students.¹ More access sounds like a great idea, a moral purpose, a winning strategy—but (a big BUT) also a great risk, a considerable financial challenge, and quite possibly a reputational disaster if the students do not persist and complete in the same way as other students.

The access debate is a strand in the larger discussion of the transformation of American higher education at a time when census forecasts indicate dynamic increases in the proportion of Hispanic and black student enrollments in the next decade. The same demographic forces that are transforming the U.S. population are also forcing a paradigm shift in higher education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics², by the Year 2021 the proportion of Hispanic students in higher education is forecast to rise by 42 percent and African American enrollments will increase by 25 percent, while white enrollments will increase by only 4 percent.

Colleges and universities that want to thrive at mid-century must embrace this paradigm shift. Some institutions, like Trinity in Washington, have already done so.

Nearly three decades ago, for the historic Trinity College³ in Washington, embracing the paradigm shift was not an obvious or easy solution to years of enrollment decline and mounting deficits—increasingly worrisome problems for many colleges in 2014. But Trinity, once a highly selective Catholic women's college whose graduates include such notables as Democratic Leader and the first woman Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius, had few choices at the end of the 20th

¹ The White House Summit on College Opportunity

² National Center for Education Statistics, Projections of Education Statistics to 2021, January 2013, Table 29

³ Trinity College in Washington, D.C., is now also known as Trinity Washington University.

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Century. Coeducation at the Catholic men's colleges like Georgetown eroded Trinity's traditional population of young women from top Catholic academies, and the effects of Vatican II on religious life left the college without the large corps of religious women whose "contributed services" kept the place financially afloat during its first century.

Strategic planning through the early 1990s helped Trinity to clarify mission while also establishing principles for institutional change. The Sisters of Notre Dame, the college's founding congregation, insisted that Trinity could thrive if the college turned its attention, as a matter of social justice, to women in the city just beyond Trinity's stone gates on Michigan Avenue in northeast D.C.

But Trinity had never really recruited in D.C.—certainly not from the D.C. Public Schools. Could large numbers of students from the D.C. Public Schools succeed in this college that once drew students mostly from elite Catholic girls' academies in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia? And even if Trinity could rebuild its enrollment by welcoming large numbers of local students, at what price would Trinity survive?

Today, 25 years after the paradigm shift began at Trinity, a dramatically different institution has emerged with a stronger sense of its historic mission than ever before, but articulated in bold new ways to new populations across five academic schools. Four of the university's five schools are coeducational professional and graduate units; the historic women's college remains the core of the institution. Today, that women's college is four times as large as it was in 1989, at more than 1,100 students. The total university student body of 2,500 students reflects the face of Washington, D.C.: more than 70 percent African American, almost 20 percent Latina and with many students of multiple races and ethnicities with roots in countries around the globe. The median family income of the full-time first year students in 2013 was just \$25,000; 75 percent of the students are Pell Grant recipients.

As Trinity evolved from a mostly white, Catholic, residential liberal arts college to a Minority Serving Institution with low income students of many faiths, controversies erupted around issues that Americans still find vexing: race and ethnicity, social class, language, religion—all talismanic markers for perceptions of fidelity to mission and standards of academic quality.

"We don't mind the diversity," said one alumna during a particularly tense meeting in the mid-1990s, "but are they Catholic?"

Helping the college's traditional constituents understand that fidelity to Trinity's Catholic mission did not mean educating only Catholics, but rather, living the Gospel imperative to work for social justice for all people, required a long period of earnest dialogue.

Eventually surmounting the early resentment of demographic change, Trinity then had to face more difficult questions about academic quality.

"Fine," said another alumna later in the 1990s, "we're okay with the racial diversity and understand that they're not Catholic. But what are their SAT scores?"

Trinity learned that the real educational challenge would no longer be inputs—SAT scores and high GPAs from elite schools—but outcomes. Students from the impoverished schools and neighborhoods where teen pregnancy, adult illiteracy, and violence are daily realities simply do not enter college with the same levels of academic and social preparation as peers from more economically secure and academically advanced



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environments. For these reasons, Trinity's faculty and leadership team developed a distinctive philosophy about collegiate success and essential programming. Understanding the real needs, motivations, and behaviors of the students, rather than imposing traditional programs based on collegiate stereotypes, is the vital foundation for Trinity's model.

Among the most critical challenges facing Trinity's students, these have the most impact on academic readiness and success:

- **Critical Reading** tops the list of the most serious academic deficiencies, followed closely by math and writing, a result of failing public schools and severe levels of adult illiteracy in families.
- **Financial Stress** is a chronic issue for low income students, even with considerable amounts of financial aid. Most of these students are independent at young ages, with no parental or other adult support financially or emotionally.
- **Pregnancy and Young Motherhood** are real challenges for many Trinity students, along with numerous other health issues, physical and emotional, that can interrupt and delay college persistence.
- **Homelessness, Domestic Violence, and Family Resistance to College:** Low income students face an appalling set of social conditions. Many do not have permanent addresses; some suffer domestic violence. In some cases, parents actively discourage their daughters from attending college, saying that, "You'll never amount to anything," or "You'll just be another statistic." Trinity students write passionately in their application essays about their desire to prove the naysayers wrong.

What does it take to turn such students into true college success stories?

Trinity's faculty and staff have developed curricula, pedagogy, and wrap-around support services specifically tailored to help students surmount their critical challenges. Key elements of the model include:

- **Entrance Assessment:** Trinity uses Accuplacer and other instruments to assess every student's skill levels at entrance and to develop individualized academic plans.
- **Required Course Schedules:** Trinity's First Year Experience program includes specific required course schedules for every student based upon the Accuplacer results and further assessment of student skills development needs.
- **Professional Advising and Comprehensive Services:** Rather than relying on the traditional system of faculty advisors, who are more appropriate once students declare majors, Trinity today employs a corps of professional academic advisors who work with the first year students on a broad range of academic, social, and personal issues.
- **Attendance, Triage, and CARE Team Interventions:** Trinity faculty take attendance in all first year courses and advisors follow-up with students who miss class. Students who manifest more serious attendance and behavioral issues get extra attention through the Triage Program, which is focused on students who show multiple signs of stress, and the CARE Team, which is an interdisciplinary leadership group convened by the Vice President for Student Affairs and including multidisciplinary service leaders.



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- **Faculty Development and Instructional Specialists:** Trinity's faculty have engaged in myriad professional development opportunities over the years to develop their proficiency in teaching students with a wide range of learning abilities and challenges. Trinity also employs a talented corps of staff instructional specialists, expert teachers who deliver the gateway courses in math, critical reading, and writing along with supplemental workshops and tutorials.
- **Strong Financial Aid Platform and Many Partners:** Trinity keeps tuition comparatively low (\$21,900 in Fall 2014) and provides institutional grants averaging 40 percent of tuition. Trinity leverages many scholarship partners in D.C. whose contributions help to close the gap; more than half of the D.C. residents at Trinity have tuition balances of zero.

Does this broad range of service and support mean that low income students can march through college in a traditional four-year sequence just like more traditional students?

No. Trinity has come to understand that success looks very different for the most challenged students.

Today's national conversation about college success is largely rooted in completely outmoded ideas about pathways through college. The U.S. Department of Education's IPEDS⁴ "graduation rate" is often cited as a surrogate for success, but the profound flaws in this measure make it a very poor tool to measure success for low income students, particularly since the rate does not track transfer behavior.

Trinity has developed a different way of looking at student migration through college called the "success rate." This analysis considers not only continuing enrollment and completion at Trinity, but also transfer and completion at other universities using data available through the National Student Clearinghouse.

For the cohort of students who first enrolled at Trinity in Fall 2008, the "success rate" as of 2014 is 68 percent—the percentage of originally enrolled students who are still enrolled or who have graduated from Trinity or another university. Fifty-two percent of the cohort have earned degrees at Trinity or elsewhere in six years, a dramatic result considering the acute poverty of the students and their severe preparatory deficiencies. Of the 32 percent who stopped out, as of the most recent data collection, at least half had severe financial problems. Trinity keeps track of all stopped out students and keeps working with them to find the pathway back to school. Women with family responsibilities often do return, but sometimes 10 or more years after the first enrollment.

Unfortunately, many elite colleges are reluctant to enroll large numbers of low income students because of the risk they pose for lower completion rates on the IPEDS timetable, a reputational risk with consequences for things like the U.S. News rankings. Embracing the paradigm shift means taking the risk that some observers just won't understand that a lower graduation rate according to IPEDS might actually mean that the school is doing exactly the right thing, namely, enrolling more low income students who take longer to complete or who "swirl" through multiple schools.

⁴ IPEDS = Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, the data system for colleges and universities required by the U.S. Department of Education



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Trinity takes satisfaction in knowing that the success model generated and tested across several generations of students is working well, even as the faculty and staff continue to invent solutions to the new challenges that arrive with each succeeding class cohort. Trinity has learned that what really counts in transforming a college is not whether the institution might move up a few notches in a magazine ranking or win plaudits from politicians, but rather, whether students truly discover and develop their strengths to learn, to be expressive, to master broad and deep knowledge, to become experts in their fields.

Trinity's most recent graduates are well-employed (95 percent of recent grads are employed), have strong earnings (on average \$65,000, 10 years out) and, most important, are proud role models for their children—the best possible outcome of embracing the paradigm shift.

Patricia McGuire has been president of Trinity Washington University (historically, Trinity College in Washington, D.C.) since 1989.



Dr. Pat McGuire has been president of Trinity since 1989. Previously, she was the assistant dean for development and external affairs at Georgetown University Law Center where she was also an adjunct professor of law. She began her career after law school as the project director for the Street Law clinical program at Georgetown. President McGuire serves on a number of boards including the Consortium of Universities, Cafritz Foundation, Community Foundation, College Success Foundation DC, United Educators, and the Ameritas Holding Company. She writes and speaks on a wide variety of topics in higher education, women's issues, and Catholic education. She holds honorary degrees from several universities, and has received recognition in the Washington Post, Washingtonian magazine, Washington Business Journal, and other media outlets. In 2007, she was named "Leader of the Years" by the Greater Washington Board of Trade, and in 2012 she received the Henry Paley Award from the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. She earned her law degree at Georgetown in 1977, and her baccalaureate degree *cum laude* at Trinity.