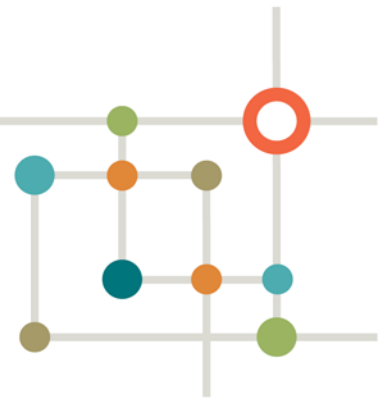


INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION



CASE STUDY: AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE Decatur, Georgia / www.agnesscott.edu

Institutional Type:	Private, liberal arts institution
Institutional Characteristics:	Liberal arts college for women affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A)
Location:	Located in Decatur, Georgia, part of metropolitan Atlanta
Full Time Enrollment:	937 (Fall 2017-2018)
Annual Operation Budget:	\$52.3 million (Fall 2016-2017)
Board Size:	28 members

The Challenge: Solving the “Car-Chassis” Dilemma

In an era of increased public skepticism about the value of a liberal arts education and intense competition for students among public, private and for-profit institutions, Agnes Scott College faced formidable headwinds. Only a small percentage of high school girls even consider attending a women’s college, and Agnes Scott lacked a strong national brand or distinctive market niche to attract those applicants.

Shortly before the Great Recession worsened the college’s financial position, a campus-wide task force composed of trustees, faculty, and staff determined that the college’s business model was unsustainable: the cost of operating the college (i.e., the car) was simply too big for its income-generating sources (i.e., the chassis) to support. In response, the Board of Trustees created a strategic financial plan which set out six steps to financial strength, including a seven percent reduction in annual operating expenses. But the Board knew that cost-cutting by itself was not a workable strategy. Agnes Scott needed to achieve significant enrollment growth to sustain its mission of providing a high-quality liberal arts education to women.

Over the next three years, the executive leadership, board, faculty, and staff transformed the college by developing, market-testing, and launching SUMMIT, an initiative to reinvent a liberal arts education for the 21st century by providing every student with a robust focus on global learning and leadership development.

The Search for a Big Idea

The first step in this process occurred in 2012, when board chair Clyde Tuggle suggested that key faculty join trustees at an off-site retreat and provided financial support to make this possible. The theme of the retreat was “What’s the Big Idea? What Game-Changing Steps Will Distinguish Agnes Scott and Drive Aggressive Growth?” The frank conversations at that retreat began to build trust and mutual respect between trustees and faculty, and became crucial to the success of SUMMIT.

The idea of positioning Agnes Scott as “The Global Women’s College” emerged as the compelling idea from this retreat. Recognizing that this initiative needed to be grounded in market research, the Board



hired an outside firm to complete a strategic positioning study for the college. The results of this study confirmed that global learning and leadership resonated profoundly with Agnes Scott's prospective students, but also made clear that these themes would have a strong impact on enrollment only if they were *ubiquitous* across *every* student's experience. Moreover, to achieve the predicted impact, the college needed to move quickly: Agnes Scott needed to fully launch SUMMIT by the fall of 2015.

SUMMIT Stimulates Collaboration and Produces Results

The need for action prompted key commitments by the Board of Trustees. First, the Board committed to honoring the faculty governance structure in the design process. They approved annual raises for all faculty and staff in the strategic investment budget. And, after careful financial analysis and with an understanding of the risk involved, the Board voted to make the necessary start-up investment from the college's endowment to launch the initiative.

Following the Board's approved investments, the faculty launched a widespread effort to redesign the college's core curriculum, which was approved by 82 percent of the faculty in March 2015. Other groups across campus worked to implement key aspects of SUMMIT: recruiting a SUMMIT director, developing a new team-based advising model, organizing faculty-led first-year trips, launching a center to support student digital portfolios, and designing the leadership immersion experience.

Following two years of intense activity, SUMMIT was "soft-launched" in the fall of 2014 and fully launched in the fall of 2015. Its impact has been immediate and dramatic. In SUMMIT's first two years Agnes Scott enrolled its largest first-year classes in history. Retention hit an all-time high of 87 percent, with dramatic increases in levels of student satisfaction with advising. Revenue from students also increased significantly and was up by \$3.4 million over pre-SUMMIT levels.

SUMMIT has proved a successful response to the challenges facing the college: a mission-aligned, market-relevant initiative to distinguish an Agnes Scott education.

President Elizabeth Kiss on Innovation at Agnes Scott

Outgoing Agnes Scott President Elizabeth Kiss discusses launching SUMMIT and the lessons she, faculty, and trustees learned along the way.

Q: What motivated Agnes Scott to launch SUMMIT?

What prompted innovation was a set of realizations that we came to as an institution, each building upon the other. The first was acknowledging that the status quo of enrolling about 220 students a year was simply not sustainable. At the time we were at a healthy enrollment plateau, among the highest that the college had ever been. However, as we looked to the future we understood that our current plateau was not workable.

We came to the second realization by using a financial forecast model to zero in on the drivers available to us to strengthen the college's finances. Using this forecast, we identified enrollment growth as the solution, with 1100 students as the target for our enrollment.

With that acknowledgement came our final realization: we did not have a compelling strategy—a "Big Idea"—to achieve that growth. We were already implementing incremental improvements like updating our website, rethinking enrollment strategies—the things that you should be doing all the time to have an effective admission operation—but that wasn't enough. We needed to come up with a more compelling



answer to the question “Why Agnes Scott?”

Q: What challenges did you encounter throughout the process? How did you overcome these challenges?

The big, overarching challenge we faced as board members, faculty, and even as a president was to recognize that change management is a journey with its ups and downs, but to persist through the process. I joked with both trustees and faculty about “freak-out” moments. I told them that we might all experience them, but that it was *normal* to experience them, because institutional change is hard.

One challenge our board faced initially was fully understanding and appreciating what a heavy lift this was for the faculty. Asking the faculty to completely redo our core curriculum meant challenging some of the faculty’s core values, and so they had a lot at stake in this process. For the board, it was important to realize that the faculty weren’t being ornery or difficult when they challenged certain aspects of the process—they were being *thoughtful*. And the board came to acknowledge that the outcome would be better if the *entire* campus—board, faculty, staff, and executive cabinet—were resilient in engaging with skeptics and welcoming them into the process.

As president, it was a challenge for me to keep the board informed on our progress and remind them of the overall timetable. Since the board is only on campus a few times a year, I needed to ensure they understood how hard everyone was working. Our faculty was really leaning into the development of SUMMIT, and I needed to communicate that activity and buy-in to the board.

Q: What was the board’s involvement in this innovation on your campus?

The Board’s decision to invite faculty to its 2012 retreat was incredibly important. The conversations held at that retreat broke down the silos between trustees and faculty. For faculty, it demonstrated that trustees cared deeply about the college and were true thought partners in this enterprise. And it also worked the other way—the board realized that even though salaries had been frozen for several years the faculty remained committed to the college and would continue to step up. Because of this shared process, the board was more willing to be “risk savvy.” Sometimes when boards are risk-averse, they can keep a college from moving forward. Our board understood that we were engaging in something that, if it succeeded, would put the college on a much stronger footing, and they were willing to make the necessary financial investments up front.

At the same time, it was key that trustee leadership expressed their gratitude to the faculty for their efforts. One of the things the board did to communicate this was voting to approve annual raises for all faculty and staff in the strategic investment budget. It was a signal that the board believed in SUMMIT so much they were willing to invest in the people, not just the program.

Under the leadership of our new chair Beth Holder, the board has also been proactive and thoughtful about the oversight piece of SUMMIT. She recognized that the board had made a significant investment in the program and needed to be vigilant in monitoring its investment. In SUMMIT’s second year, she commissioned an in-depth impact report and was intentional about involving newer trustees and emerging leaders on the board to compile this report. That was a great opportunity for the institution to see what was working well and what components weren’t working the way we anticipated. And as a result, our newer trustees were given the opportunity to become invested in the on-going design process along the way.



Q: What did this process teach you about developing a culture of innovation?

SUMMIT was a true partnership between the board, administration, and faculty, with everyone respecting each other's roles. Shared governance was critical, as was having touchpoints along the way. That's why I wanted a vote by the full board on the conceptual design of SUMMIT, so I could show the faculty the board was supportive. Likewise, the board approved the financial investments in this program by Spring 2014, so that by the time the faculty were engaging in this huge effort of redesigning the curriculum there was a strong sense that the board was fully invested in the project.

Another lesson we learned as an institution was that innovation is an ongoing process. One of the dangers for colleges that reposition themselves in the marketplace is that they settle into complacency. Institutions have launched successful initiatives before, but they've lost that market leadership as others copied them and they were no longer distinctive. However, there are other examples of institutions who have kept innovating. Elon University, for example, innovated around experiential education, and they've kept innovating around that theme. It's not that Agnes Scott will innovate around global learning and leadership development and then five years later move onto something different—it's that we will continue to ask, "What's next?" related to these themes.

Q: What other lessons did you learn, and what advice would you offer other institutions pursuing innovation?

I encourage institutions to see shared governance as an engine of innovation, not an obstacle. What it took for SUMMIT to be successful at Agnes Scott was for trustees to see faculty as their strategic partners. At the end of the day, innovation will only take hold if all the major stakeholder groups on campus are creatively involved. Involving faculty in strategic conversations can be a great way to accomplish this. While innovation will take different forms on different campuses, having an inclusive process will resonate in many different environments.

One final piece of advice I have for others pursuing innovation: it will mean being willing to move forward when it still feels too early. Creating a culture of innovation means being willing to think creatively and push yourself to continue to be bold and creative even when it's a bit beyond your comfort zone. That is also why it's important to get new people involved in the process in leadership roles. It may be tempting to keep going back to the same people who were instrumental in innovation in the past, but it's recruiting the next generation of leaders—both at the board and the faculty level—that ensures a culture of innovation continues to be a part of the life and leadership of the college.



Sources

Agnes Scott College. "Summit Hub." Accessed at <https://agnesscott.edu/summithub/>.

Biemiller, Lawrence. "Can a signature program save your college?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 11, 2018.

Biemiller, Lawrence. "Elevator pitch for a women's college: Revamp curriculum, attract students." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 6, 2016.