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Can a Signature Program Save Your College?

By Lawrence Biemiller | MARCH 11, 2018

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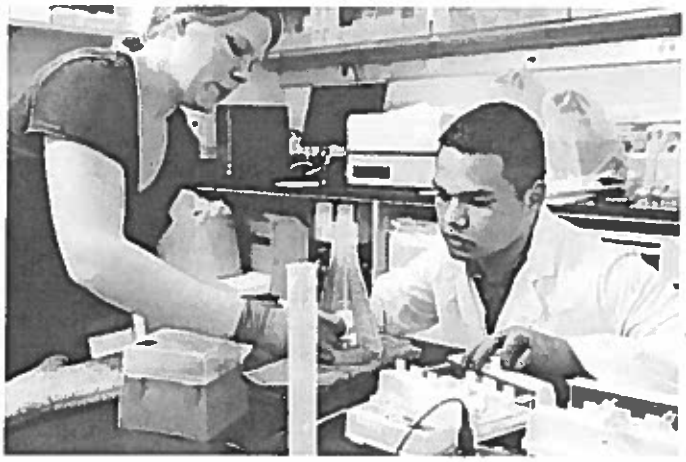

Ramin Rahimian for The Chronicle

Dimitrios Camacho (right) works with a research associate, Stephanie Rasmussen, on one of the student projects that have helped to double the graduation rate at Dominican U. of California.

At Dominican University of California, it's called the "Dominican Experience." Marymount Manhattan College chose "City Edge," while Furman University went with "Advantage." Both Connecticut College and Ohio Wesleyan University emphasized connecting — "Connections" at the former and "The OWU Connection" at the latter. Queens University of Charlotte picked "Yes/And."

Marketing slogans? Yes, but. These are slogans with a particular kind of pledge attached — a commitment to make sure that all students benefit equally from data-proven, high-impact learning experiences like first-year seminars and undergraduate research; intensive, personalized academic advising; and internships and other real-world, off-campus opportunities.

A number of small-college presidents hope these pledges are their new keys to institutional sustainability, even prosperity. But others are skeptical th succeed in saving colleges that have too few students. They argue that instead to double down on basics — like controlling costs.

Small Colleges Are Withering. Can Niches Save Them?

Leaders hope souped-up advising, international and research programs, and other ambitious offerings will keep them afloat. But can the institutions afford them, and will they work? It's too soon to tell.

- 5 Paths for Small Colleges

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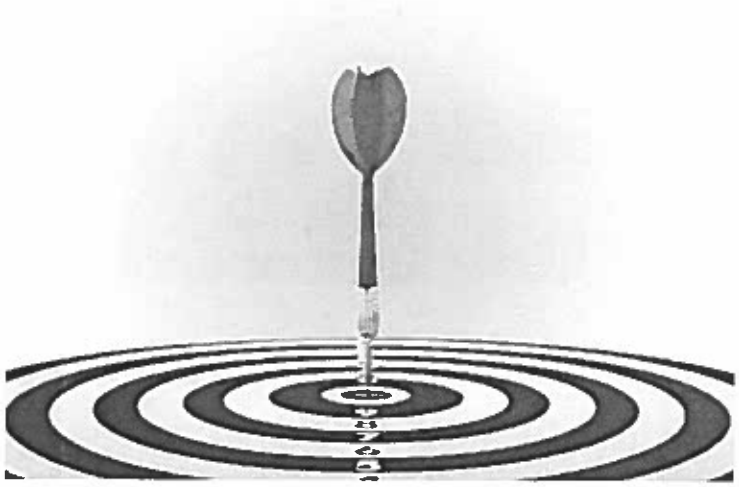

Known as distinctive or signature programs, these have sprung up in the three years since Agnes Scott College unveiled "Summit," an effort to stand out in a crowded admissions field by promising young women a new take on a liberal-arts education. The faculty reconfigured the curriculum and their syllabi to highlight leadership and global awareness, while the administration committed to foreign travel during spring break of the first year and to giving each student an advising team including a professional mentor, a faculty adviser, a peer mentor, and an alumna.

Summit brought a lot of attention to Agnes Scott and its president, Elizabeth Kiss (who is about to leave to become head of the Rhodes Trust). It also won the college a 2017 "Transformation Award" from the American Council on Education and Fidelity Investments. Meanwhile the ideas behind it had ready appeal for some other small-college presidents eager for some prescription — any prescription — to improve their institutions' long-term health.

So when Mary B. Marcy, president of Dominican, started pulling together an informal group of colleges adopting signature programs, more than a dozen were quick to respond. They include institutions that are just now rolling out their programs, like Mills College, and others that are farther along, like Connecticut and Agnes Scott, although none of the programs has been in place long enough to have been proven a success — or a failure. Some of the colleges are wealthier than others, some are larger than others, and

for the most part they don't compete with one another for students. But they all "want to focus on having a definitive student experience regardless of major, regardless of the student's background," Marcy says.

Ramin Rahimian for The Chronicle

Mary Marcy, president of Dominican U. of California, talks with Jordan Lieser, an assistant professor of history. "Even when you get the vision," she says, "you don't change your curriculum in a semester."

"There's enough similarity that we can learn from each other, but everybody has a slightly different angle or approach to it," she says. "We're not all doing Summit with a different name." The group is "very much in its infancy," Marcy says, but members have met several times and are discussing whether to create a formal organization, most likely with help from the Association of American Colleges and Universities, that could seek grants to pay for meetings.

The challenge, however, is that many small institutions are already so strapped that it's hard to invest in the changes necessary to adopt a signature plan.

Pamela Davies, president of Queens University, in North Carolina, is an enthusiastic member of the group that Marcy has assembled. Before Queens started working on its Yes/And program, Davies says, "all those trends we talk about — the demographics, the competitive nature of discounting — were coming to bear. If we didn't do something different, we were just going to be trapped in that cycle."

Queens competes with North Carolina's large public universities as well as with small private colleges in more rural communities. "So we said, 'What is a big idea that Queens is uniquely qualified to do that none of the others can?'

"We've had a required internship for over 20 years, but we weren't optimizing it. We've had international study available to all students for over 20 years, but we weren't optimizing it." Out of those discussions came Yes/And, which will put a new, high-

impacts-based emphasis on integrating what students learn during their internships and travels with what they learn in class — and will promise the same kinds of experiences to all students.

Now, Davies says, "I know that I have to go out and raise money to fund this plan" — about $1 million, she says. "I think we can do that — we're fortunate in that we have a very generous community. But for a lot of schools, you can find yourself in a situation where you've refinanced your debt, you've cut your operating expenses, you've deployed more adjuncts, and you're kind of out of tricks. Then, even if you can get your faculty and everybody on the same page about what a distinctive program might actually look like, you're back on your heels financially. If you don't have the fund-raising capacity, it's really hard to redirect your resources to get after this work."

At Dominican, which has nearly 1,400 undergraduates and about 400 graduate students on a leafy, compact campus 12 miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge, the signature program has grown out of a consensus that the university needed to focus on what it does well.

Marcy, who has been president since 2011, says, "We didn't feel pushed, but we had some serious choices to make." With an endowment of $33 million, "we don't have a lot of bandwidth financially." Dominican also needed to improve poor retention and graduation rates — the four-year graduation rate was only 34 percent five years ago, and the six-year rate was 49 percent. "The institution certainly has had some anxiety," she says.

Nicola Pitchford, vice president for academic affairs, notes that Dominican — originally a Roman Catholic women's college, but independent and co-ed since the early 1970s — now has a "very diverse student body that looks like California." It's less than a third white and nearly a third Pell-eligible, with large groups of Latinx and Asian-American students, mainly Filipino-American and Vietnamese-American. (Latinx is a designation meant to include all genders.) An increasing proportion of students at Dominican are the first in their families to attend college and have grown up largely unaware of liberal-arts-college traditions that earlier generations of students arrived on campus already understanding.

The Dominican Experience's assurance that all students will participate equally, Marcy says, is aimed squarely at these new demographics. "We want experiences to benefit those who can make the most of them, not those who are most privileged."

Beyond that, she says, the program is "built on all of the research we have now about high-impact practices. We didn't have that research 15 or 20 years ago."

In fact, Dominican did more than just look at the research — it hired away Ashley Finley, who had been a senior student-success researcher at the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and made her dean of the Dominican Experience. She says the university studied the possibilities of adopting "between zero and six" high-impact practices and determined that it could promise four:

- Every student will get integrative coaching — a stepped-up version of traditional academic advising that will bring in a series of mentors plus a specially trained coach to "help put all the pieces together." Some of the coaches are adjunct faculty members who now also do some advising, and one is the assistant women's basketball coach; together, they cost about what five full-time employees would be paid.
- Every student will have some experience that involves community engagement, whether in a class project, an individual undertaking, or volunteering in a community-service role.
- Every student will complete a "signature" work — a research project, for instance, or a work of art or even choreography.
- And all students will create digital portfolios that will both help them reflect on what they've learned and serve as archives of their educational experiences.

Marcy says the university is somewhere between two-thirds and three-quarters of the way through deploying the Dominican Experience, with the community-engagement and signature-work elements farther along than the integrative advising. Digital portfolios are being tested in a few programs.

"Even when you get the vision, you don't change your curriculum in a semester," she says. Also, the university is renovating part of its library to become the Center for the Dominican Experience at a cost of $9.5 million. After that, Marcy estimates the program will cost $450,000 annually..

Another challenge, she says, is figuring how to make the Dominican Experience work for graduate students and for undergraduate transfer students, who have fewer semesters in which to accumulate signature work and take part in community activities. The university is still largely geared to traditional students who start as freshman, she says, so "we're building the Dominican Experience around them, and we're trying to adapt to the population of nontraditional students as appropriate."

So far, Marcy says, the results look good, particularly in the area of retention and graduation rates. The four-year rate has risen from 34 percent to 58 percent, and the six-year rate has gone from 49 percent to 71 percent. "Is it just because of the Dominican experience? Probably not. But it's probably about reorienting ourselves around those questions."

The university's not putting all its bets on the Dominican Experience, however. This year it's responding to high market demand and adding a program for physician assistants, along with a limited-residency M.F.A. in creative writing. And it has increased its revenue from credentialing, from summer programs, and from gifts. It's also phasing out an M.B.A. program in environmental sustainability that it had taken over from another institution but that was facing declining student interest.

Across San Francisco Bay, in Oakland, Mills College is also creating a signature program, but without the luxury of as much time as Dominican has taken. Mills, which has struggled with declining enrollment, declared a financial emergency last May, and said it would have to reduce its faculty and its staff. It also said it would reset its tuition — from $44,765 to $28,765 — and adapt a signature program that is to be in place this coming fall.

Thanks to a curriculum overhaul that was already underway, says Chinyere Oparah, the provost, Mills "didn't have to do a lot of the basic foundational work that Agnes Scott had to do." Still, she says, the college is on "a really short timeline" and has benefited significantly from conversations with faculty members at other colleges in the informal signature-programs group.

Mills College

Chinyere Oparah is provost of Mills College, where every student does some type of community-engaged learning and takes a course on race, gender, and power.

Oparah says Mills, too, is responding to demographic shifts. "It's all very well to have high-impact practices available on the campus, and that was the case for us," she says. But then Mills looked at whether all of its students experienced those high-impact practices equally. First-generation students, those with financial challenges, those holding jobs, those without families guiding their academic and extracurricular plans — they were not, Mills found.

Under the new plan, every student at Mills will have to do some type of community-engaged learning, as well as take a course centered on race, gender, and power — appropriate for a women's college which reports that 57 percent of its students are students of color and just over half identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. There will also be an undergraduate-research component and a career-focused component involving a digital portfolio.

"What was trailblazing about Agnes Scott was they got us to think about what would happen if you got faculty, student-support staff, and marketers in the same room," Oparah says. "How do you align your mission, your commitment to academic rigor and academic success, and your savvy marketing to put something together in a language that speaks to 17-year-olds?"

Not everyone sees signature programs as the answer for small colleges, though. Lawrence M. Schall is president of Oglethorpe University, just north of Atlanta, and while he's paying close attention to Agnes Scott, Furman, and other signature-program institutions,

he's skeptical. "It's not so much can you come up with a big idea," he says. "The big idea's gotta work. And there are a limited number of big ideas."

Mr. Schall puts his faith in more-traditional approaches, like staying focused on keeping costs down and revenue up. "If you're not growing your net tuition revenue, you're not gonna make it."

Still, signature programs are appealing enough that a number of institutions outside Marcy's group have adopted the approach or something similar to it — most recently Sweet Briar College, where a curriculum revision is aimed at teaching students to be leaders and "women of consequence."

For her part, Marcy says the signature-program model "is a kind of natural next step for small colleges that have prided themselves on being high-touch, high-engagement with students." But she also says that the higher-education landscape is "rocky," and that "it's not like there is a silver-bullet answer" for small colleges.

Indeed, even Agnes Scott has seen mixed results in undergraduate enrollment, with a couple of years of solid increases followed, in 2017, by a year without growth.

Any college can have a year in which circumstances conspire against it, of course, and Agnes Scott's consultants had warned all along that Summit would not really pay off until it had been in place long enough that current students could become its advocates — in other words, until about now. It's too early to know what next fall's first-year class will look like.

That won't deter other colleges from trying signature programs, though, hoping they will prove to be silver bullets. Maybe. But even when one works, as Marcy puts it, it's "an extremely slow-moving silver bullet."

Correction (3/13/2018, 3 p.m.): This article originally misstated the name of Ohio Wesleyan University's signature program. It is "The OWU Connection," not "Advantage." The article has been corrected.

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