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ON THE BRINK

A FRESH LENS TO TAKE YOUR
BUSINESS TO NEW HEIGHTS

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First Edition

CHAPTER 9

CENTENARY COLLEGE

DR. KENNETH L. HOYT was sitting in his first board meeting at his new job as president of Centenary College in New Jersey when someone entered the room and handed him a note that read, “An airplane has crashed into the Trade Center in NY . . . we think you need to do something different.” It was September 11, 2001, and planes had just crashed into New York’s World Trade Center. Many Centenary students, faculty, and staff had family or friends in the buildings, or thought they did, and there was no way to know what had happened to them.

There was no known “best practice” for this type of situation. Hoyt called everyone into the chapel, and together they prayed and waited. Cell phones brought the news that all but one of their loved ones had been some other place that day. As the faculty and students drew close during that crisis, Hoyt realized that this was a great place to be, even though the college was struggling to find its way. Yes, there was a lot of tension and friction, but the Centenary family was able to rally together. Could they also find a way to restore the vitality of the college and help it grow?

When Dr. Hoyt had arrived at Centenary College two weeks earlier, he was coming to a college in serious financial trouble. Centenary was known as a two-year woman’s finishing

school with an equitation program and a limited course curriculum focused on teacher education. Enrollment was declining, annual deficits were staggering, and Centenary was unsophisticated at raising funds. Facilities were in a distressed state and no new facilities had been built since the 1960s. For most students, the college was their only choice, and they planned to transfer to other colleges as soon as possible.

Centenary was also a bit off the beaten path in the Kittatinny Mountains, fifty-two miles west of New York City, thirty-five miles south of the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, and twenty-six miles northeast of Easton, Pennsylvania, and the Lehigh Valley. The surrounding region is beautiful but sparsely populated, meaning that students had to come from elsewhere in the state and the region for the college to thrive. There was little to differentiate this former girls' college from many other similar schools in nearby Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

The Challenge in Context

Centenary had undergone some huge changes in the previous two decades. When Dr. Stephanie Bennett-Smith became president of Centenary in 1984, she was only the second woman to hold the presidency of a United Methodist Church-affiliated college or university. With a vision of creating a Swarthmore for New Jersey, Dr. Bennett-Smith strengthened the institution during her fifteen years as president. She took it co-educational in 1988, expanded its international programs, and revised the curriculum to incorporate required community service. She also established the graduate program, began an adult learning program, and completed the first-ever modest fundraising campaign in the college's history, mostly for the renovation of the old main building.

However, as Bennett-Smith was trying to reinvigorate the culture, Centenary's student population stalled at about seven hundred students, and staying financially viable was becoming a challenge.

Ken Hoyt was the kind of take-charge yet collaborative individual who was really needed in a turnaround situation. Fifty-something, the quiet Midwesterner exuded confidence and a sense of command. He was open to ideas, yet very clear about what he knew had to be done. He made you want to be part of his team so you could help him restore hope to the college community and help it grow.

Hoyt had been recruited to Centenary after sixteen years as the president of Ohio's consortium of private colleges and universities. In that role, he pushed these colleges to adapt new directions using business process redesign and cost-saving collaborations. He was a visionary who demonstrated an ability to help them rethink their business models, and he was an accomplished change agent, actively working with his thirty-five member colleges to transform their organizations so they could sustain their growth in efficient and effective ways. Hoyt hadn't exactly been looking to move from Ohio to New Jersey to serve a small college where he could apply what he had learned working with a group of colleges. But when the recruiter called, he was intrigued.

The Pain of Change

IT IS HARD FOR ANYONE TO SHED ONE
VISION OF AN ORGANIZATION AND ITS
FUTURE AND REPLACE IT WITH A NEW
ONE. CHANGE IS CHALLENGING.

As we know all too well, it is hard for anyone to shed one vision of an organization and its future and replace it with a new one, much less trust the new one to be a better solution than the older one that had failed them. Change is challenging. But sometimes there is little choice. We often say, if you want to change, have a crisis—and indeed, it was crisis time for Centenary.

It didn't take long for Hoyt to identify a number of problem areas. First, the school's public persona was that of a two-year girls' finishing school with horses. The only thing that was still true about that statement was the horse program. In fact, Centenary had a well-respected college equestrian program, but that was hardly enough to attract a viable student body. It did have a well-regarded teachers' training program and several career-oriented majors.

However, the administration was poorly designed for either recruiting students or retaining them. From a recruitment perspective, the college was virtually unknown among high school guidance counselors. That meant recruiters had to do a double sale, first explaining what Centenary was and then following up with why students should consider it. There was no systematic high-school recruiting process or administrative system to support one.

Moreover, retention rates were terrible. When Hoyt arrived in 2001, only about fifty percent of the first-year students returned to become sophomores. That was well below the national average of seventy-six percent. The financial impact of such a student churn was serious, and the completion rates were hardly great endorsements for the value of a Centenary education.

Although the school had launched a program for non-traditional (adult) students, it was still a small part of the college's focus, about two-hundred part-time students. Yes,

non-traditional students were being recruited, but classes were taught in the traditional fashion and took place on campus and at one off-campus location. Old models of teaching and learning still dominated the college's thinking, which did not work for adults seeking accelerated learning models.

All of the innovations that were taking place across the United States to expand college programs for non-traditional students, and for the business environment that needed those students, were being ignored at Centenary.

Dr. Hoyt's Strategy

Hoyt began to attack these challenges by promoting some excellent talent and hiring others.

Then Hoyt turned to the outmoded facilities and lack of investment in the campus. By 2002, he had completed a Campus Master Plan to take stock of the college's campus requirements, planning for additional acreage, a student and performing arts center, suite-style campus housing, and the renovation of athletic facilities that had been built in the 1950s for a women's college and did not meet current NCAA standards. He also realized that without an investment in technology, the school would fall behind what was expected from a leader in educating a new generation of students who had grown up in a digital world.

One of the best ways to fund these changes was to capture the revenue that was leaving the school due to weak retention and to create new revenue streams. Increasing the retention rate from fifty-four percent to eighty percent would translate to an additional fourteen million dollars to the bottom-line revenues. The now reconfigured and rapidly expanding Centenary adult program also added eight million to the bottom line each year,

helping to grow Centenary from eighteen million dollars to forty-three million dollars in operations.

While he worked on recruiting the best permanent faculty and administrators, Hoyt also brought on a number of consultants, myself included, to help rethink and rebuild the college.

The Missing Pieces

We were introduced to Centenary in 2002, early in our consulting business, and Centenary was a perfect launchpad for us. Our assignment was twofold: First, the college needed someone to clarify the ideal “Centenary Student.” What kind of person would thrive in this small liberal arts college, which was investing in new programs to better meet his or her needs? Second, could we convert that research into brand positioning that differentiated Centenary from other schools, and then help build the brand, market the college, and create demand for the institution? We approached these tasks very much like an anthropological research project.

WE NEEDED TO EXPERIENCE THE COLLEGE AS IF WE WERE STUDENTS, TO UNDERSTAND IT AS IF WE WERE THEIR FAMILIES, AND TO VISUALIZE IT THROUGH THE EYES OF HIGH SCHOOL GUIDANCE COUNSELORS OR A BUSINESS’S HUMAN RESOURCE STAFF.

It was clear from the beginning that there was so much change going on all over the campus that we had to be innovative in our approach. Before the college could easily answer the

question “Why Centenary?” we needed to probe deeply into its personality. Certainly this needed more than a survey or even focus-group research. We needed to experience the college as if we were students, to understand it as if we were their families, and to visualize it through the eyes of high school guidance counselors or a business’s human resource staff. Without that, we weren’t sure we could create a realistic story that could generate applications. There was no way around it: We had to get to know Centenary as if we were living there.

In New Jersey in 2001, more than seventy-five percent of students left the state to go to college. After 9/11, students’ college selection process began to favor institutions closer to home, a fact that helped Centenary’s turnaround. For a good strong liberal college, it seemed on the surface that there would be a lot of potential prospects for Centenary. I wasn’t quite sure why applications were not stronger and applicants more interested in attending. I could look at the data, but it really didn’t explain where the challenges lay.

We began looking at where the college had been focused and how that had evolved in the 1990s, the decade before Hoyt came on board. It turned out that Centenary had a good, if limited, reputation for training K–12 teachers. It was also trying to add additional liberal arts and career-oriented programs that it could afford to support and for which there was need or interest. These were growing slowly.

When Hoyt came in, he launched the Centenary Experience: Student-Centered Learning and Unparalleled Service. He also crafted a new core curriculum and incorporated a new First Year Experience Program, which would bond new students together and increase their loyalty to the institution. One of the great eventual benefits of the first-year program was its impact on retention. From 2001 to 2008, Hoyt hosted

every new freshman at the president's house for dinner, so he could ask each student what needed to change to improve the college. At first, students would report they had enrolled in Centenary but planned to transfer. As things improved, the students dining with Dr. Hoyt and his wife Marcia reported that Centenary was their first-choice institution and they felt welcome and at home.

In the meantime, though, these changes had led to widespread frustration and then anger among the faculty and staff. Despite the fact that the college was struggling, few people wanted to trust Hoyt and embrace these early-stage changes, whether they were the new first-year curriculum or non-traditional programs for adult learners. We needed them to trust us as well.

To ease that process, I hung out a lot all over the campus. I went to classes and observed, trying to pick up the essence of the student experience. These were not easy times for the faculty. The millennials who were now entering college had grown up digital, and their helicopter parents often dropped in unexpectedly to advocate for their son or daughter. Faculty members were frustrated by students' lack of ability to do projects individually. These were soccer kids; if something wasn't organized as a team sport, they didn't really know how to play. And although it was clear that faculty members often had a hard time figuring out their new students, they nevertheless taught the way they always had, and expected students to act like the students they were used to.

As I watched faculty during meetings or listened to students, we noticed some traits that Centenary shared with other colleges. They were aware that things were changing, but insisted that the way their faculty taught students was the best way. They were working really hard to prove that they didn't

need the changes. They considered their present situation to be someone else's problem.

Ironically, the teachers were doing a great deal that *was* different and that created real value for students. We began to refer to this process as an "education designed around you." As we watched classroom activity and after-class engagement, the distinctions from other colleges stood out: This was a small school, and individual students received a lot of attention and often were the focus of concern. Students spent a great deal of time with faculty in their offices. The conversations were rich and deep, and the shared experiences were, for many students, transformational. That message, though, had yet to be packaged into a consistent brand of education that the college could leverage.

From the faculty, we kept hearing a repeated theme: There was tremendous pride in how they taught their student teachers to "teach to how students learn." Their methodology was very experiential and tailored to multiple intelligences and learning styles. This was actually an unrecognized "theme song" and pertained as much to the way the Centenary faculty went about their business as it did to how their graduates were going to teach their K–12 students. Students in majors other than education received instruction in much the same way.

As for the students, whether they were eighteen-year-olds or working professionals returning to school, they were very articulate about what they were searching for in their education. Attending a small college in a remote area of New Jersey was not an easy decision for a high school graduate or a returning student. Neither was it an obvious choice for someone seeking an advanced degree.

As we listened, we could hear core values and aspirations begin to emerge in the storytelling. The students were very

focused on “belonging” and being “part of something that was ‘becoming.’” Even the non-traditional students wanted to feel a part of “The Centenary Experience: An Education Designed Around You.” They liked the new energy that they found on the campus. In particular, students really related to the first-year experience as a transformative one. It seemed to take them beyond who they were when they arrived and helped them bond with their fellow students, just as it was designed to do.

Centenary’s program for adult students had also become more attuned to a need for flexibility and family/work balance. The program was expanded to two sites in areas close to where many of these students worked, and it began to offer real value in an accelerated format that allowed people working full time to also be full-time students.

As part of our process, we went out to work with the team that was creating the non-traditional programs to introduce them to businesses around the state. To do this, we interviewed potential students about their unmet needs and tried to anticipate where Centenary was on track or off in program development. It made sense both to the prospective businesses and the students to ask a lot of questions of these two groups and then listen for how to structure a non-traditional program so it could accommodate the needs of divergent groups.

This was not an entirely new venture; it had been launched earlier and was being revamped by Hoyt. He was restructuring Centenary’s Center for Adult and Professional Studies (CAPS) under their Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) Standards. This program would be recognized in 2007 by the National Academic Advising Associations (NACADA) for innovation in adult learning.

We also worked closely with the director of admissions, Diane Finnan, to better understand how she could penetrate

the high school student market. As we went out with her staff to visit schools and college fairs, it was easy to understand their challenge. The guidance counselors didn't know much about Centenary and had little time to learn. Diane and her team members were terrific, but they needed a simple, strong story to sell and a way to make it easier for the guidance counselors to identify the right students for the college.

I sometimes wondered if anyone really cared about what we were doing. When we started, most people on campus thought it was sort of nice to have someone hanging around. At times we were the folks they vented to. At other times we became a useful third party to bounce ideas off of.

But over time, as Centenary evolved, the new things on campus became tone-changers. We could watch the shifts in values, beliefs, and even behaviors—the culture—of both faculty and students. We also began to see something unique at Centenary that could differentiate it from the competition and make it clear why students should consider it as a viable option.

Building the Story

What was the story, then? This was a college that “taught you the way you learned” and did it in a very experiential, team-focused way. Plus, Centenary was being rebuilt in both the physical and the cultural sense. New buildings and new programs—particularly the first-year experience—were concrete evidence of the abstract shifts in their core values, beliefs, and ways of doing things.

ONCE WE SETTLED ON THIS MESSAGE, WE HAD
TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO MAKE IT COME ALIVE.

Once we settled on this message, we had to figure out how to make it come alive. We had to develop marketing strategies and brand design and development. We actually could not find another college, or even a teachers' college, that was doing the same thing or promoting itself in this way. "We Teach You the Way You Learn" was an honest statement. The college was really doing this. And it was working to help students to stay in college, to graduate, and to succeed afterward.

The major branding and marketing campaign had another great element to add to the mix. Centenary began to lead as an early adopter in the use of the Internet and wireless technology in its teaching and learning environment, and it implemented a new wireless laptop initiative. Laptops were provided for all faculty, staff, and students.

It seems hard to believe now, but at the time Centenary was only one of one hundred such institutions in North America that gave laptops to every student. In 2005, it was selected by both Intel and Forbes as one of the Top 50 Wireless Campuses in the United States. That was a huge differentiator and was symbolic of how the college would become an innovator in higher education. It also opened up an entirely new way to teach those students, engage them in the process, and build a community around their interests and needs.

We launched a major marketing push with widespread advertising throughout New Jersey to build the brand identity and shift attitudes toward the college among students, parents, and high school counselors. Along with this strategic campaign came new logos, graphic design, and marketing materials building on the New American College concept. The New American Colleges were selective, small to midsize independent colleges and universities dedicated to the "purposeful integration of liberal education, professional studies, and

civic engagement.” At the time, it was a new idea built on the premise that students should learn through hands-on, project-based experiences in order to enable them to connect theory to practice. With programs designed to directly tie classroom learning to real-world situations, New American Colleges were also deeply committed to civic responsibility, whether local, national, or global in nature.

All the materials describing Centenary shared a common thread to heighten understanding of why this was a college education that students should consider and how the college taught them in an individualized way. The college became repositioned as a nationally recognized small independent college that taught you the way you best learned.

This kind of marketing and brand building is not just nice but also essential to make an experience like a college “live,” so prospects can “feel” it before they even see it. Now that we finally had the story, we had to develop the tools to tell it. “The Centenary College Experience: An Education Designed Around You” worked.

Even though this was 2002, we knew that without a website, Centenary was going to struggle to recruit students. We built the college’s first website in 2004 with one of their students who was learning how to code. It was really a start-up site; no one was sure how to build one or what should be on it. Resources were limited, too, but the talented coder was typical of the school’s can-do student base, and together he and I used the opportunity to brand the college online. It fit perfectly with what we were there to do.

Since then, of course, I’ve recognized how valuable website design and development and the building process is for an organization. Crafting website architecture requires that an enterprise see itself as others will see it. As the student and

I created Centenary's site map and wireframe as well as the graphic design, we identified those on campus who could really articulate how things at the college were connected or what students would want to know about the school, its programs, and the way students were taught there. The site became a terrific vehicle for solidifying the brand positioning and engaging the faculty and staff in how to express it.

Moving On

We worked with Centenary from 2002 to 2006, and though the results were still emerging when our assignment ended, the future direction was clear. By then, Centenary had become the fastest-growing college or university in New Jersey, having increased undergraduate, adult, and graduate enrollment to 3,200 in seven years, while maintaining a good financial picture. As for the retention strategy, it was found that for beginning, full-time freshman students going through the first-year experience, retention rates increased by more than thirty percent and graduation rates by twenty percent. As a result of its success, Centenary was selected to participate as one of ninety colleges in John Gardner's First Year Foundations of Excellence Program in 2007.

Meanwhile, because of the need to expand, the school launched The Campaign for Centenary College. Hoyt was able to secure \$45.5 million in new resources for the facilities, programs, and endowment, securing a lead gift of eighteen million dollars, which is the largest gift in Centenary's history. With campaign funds, he also constructed a thirty-million-dollar student and performing arts center, a new technology classroom building, all new athletic facilities, and two new suite-

style housing complexes, and secured an additional twenty acres of land for the college, a fifty percent increase in land area.

Dr. Hoyt left Centenary in 2009, having finished the turnaround he had envisioned. He continues to work with independent colleges and universities through his consulting firm, The Higher Education Practice, LLC, to help them assess their strengths and weaknesses and reposition themselves for growth.

By 2012, Centenary's enrollment was steady at around 2,576 students: 1,340 traditional full-time and 110 part-time undergraduate students, and 1,126 adult accelerated and graduate students. It continues to offer undergraduate and graduate studies. What is particularly interesting is that more than a decade later, those on campus say they still remember the work we did and the way it generated growth. Most of all, they recall how it gave them a place in the state where they could be successful and still be themselves.

Lessons Learned from Centenary College for Your Business

The world of private colleges today is under siege from many fronts, and though Centenary's future was not solidified by the changes Dr. Hoyt put into place, its financial and student turnaround provided a foundation for it to continue to expand effectively. More importantly, Hoyt gave the college something that your organization might find of great value: a new way to think about its role for students and society. The college's mission was to produce well-prepared and educated students who could successfully thrive throughout their adult lives and continue to learn. For your organization, what might this mean for you? Here are four things to consider.

1. What are you really doing? Yes, teaching, but what and why?

A recurring theme we hear today from businesses and corporations, and which Centenary certainly heard, is that colleges are not preparing students for the jobs of tomorrow. While a liberal arts education might provide students with a firm foundation of knowledge, the fast-changing skills needed for “knowledge workers” is outpacing the academic process of higher educational institutions. Is it time for you to go hang out with your students and listen to their views of the world, their stories—from their perspectives? Perhaps you need to build your institution’s mission backwards, starting with the needs of businesses and the types of people they need to hire. At the very least, rethink “What are we teaching and why?” If you are not a college, the question is still very relevant. Who are you serving and how well are you doing it?

2. Is your business model the right one for the future? What is the data telling you?

Regardless of what type of business you’re in, you have abundant data. What are the stories that data is telling you? Are you looking at it properly and evaluating its meaning for your business model? While anthropologists want to help you understand the “meaning” of that abundant data, you might begin yourself to examine it with fresh eyes. What exactly is it telling you and how could this help you rethink your business model for the future?

3. What is the life cycle of your relationship with your customers?

Is it a single product purchase or a lifelong engagement over their “buyer’s journey?”

Are you ready to step back and look at your engagement with your customers over their buyer’s journey? This might be a good time to realize that there is a prequel and a sequel to that purchase and to think about how these two steps affect your relationship with that user or consumer or business purchaser. If you map the sequence, what kind of revenue streams might be awaiting you and your business that you are ignoring today?

4. Business stories change. How are you changing yours?

As Hoyt was changing Centenary College’s core offering and student experience, he knew that his brand and the stories being told about that brand had to change as well. This might be a good time for you to rethink your business, the way you live your brand internally, and how you should be telling your new story to the markets you want to serve. Remember that people are storytellers. If you don’t tell them the new story, they will make one up, usually based on the past experiences they have had with you. Changing the story is not easy, but it is extremely necessary and must be done through all media channels.