

Good to Great: The Partnership That Transformed a University and Gave Hope to Thousands

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On March 22, 2015, a surprising story hit the pages of *The New York Times* like a bombshell—and the impact is reverberating through the halls of academia even today. Citing "insurmountable financial challenges," the Board of Trustees of Sweet Briar College, a 114-year-old women's college in central Virginia, announced that the school would close at the end of the term. Without warning — and many would claim, without reason — the board crushed the dreams of over 700 young women who had made commitments to spend four critically important years at Sweet Briar College. Closing the school so suddenly also had a devastating impact on the lives of more than 300 Sweet Briar faculty and staff members, some of whom had been part of that college community for decades.

The news was shocking for a number of other reasons. To an outsider, Sweet Briar College, nestled on 3,250 verdant acres in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, seemed like the idyllic personification of higher education. A renovated and expanded library, costing \$8.8 million and financed entirely by gifts from supporters, had recently been dedicated. At the time of the announcement, Sweet Briar had an endowment of nearly \$90 million. The endowment, while small, was respectable for an institution with fewer than 750 students. In its 2016 rankings, *Bestcolleges.com* listed Sweet Briar as the 14th best women's college in the nation and, as late as 2010, *Forbes* ranked Sweet Briar the 87th best college in the United States.

Finally, Sweet Briar, one of only two women's colleges in the United States to offer an ABET-accredited (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology) engineering program, had a passionate alumnae base with considerable financial resources. After an enormous uproar from every part of the United States, Sweet Briar supporters stepped in financially to stave off the closure, but the college's future is far from clear.

Sweet Briar College is not alone in its unfortunate predicament. Burlington College in Burlington, Vermont, and Dowling College in Long Island, New York, announced that they would close this year (2016), while other schools, including highly regarded Mills College in Oakland, California, with an enrollment of 1,548 students and an endowment of \$189 million (2014), are in peril. A 2015 report by Moody's Investor Service stated that the pace of college closures is quickening, an unsettling sign for many others in higher education.

Before you draw the conclusion that only women's colleges or small institutions face an uncertain future, consider the findings of a 2015 Gallup Organization survey. Conducted for *Inside Higher Ed*, the survey found that fewer than 40% of college presidents were confident about the sustainability of their institution's financial model over the next decade.

With all of its advantages, what went wrong at Sweet Briar College? Who is to blame? And how could the school's troubles have come so quickly? Could the collapse have been avoided?

Will Wootton (2016), former President of Sterling College in Vermont, offered important and perhaps self-evident insight: the responsibility for the institution's health, vitality, and success ultimately lies with the Board of Trustees.

That is where the mistakes are made, years before the actual shutting of the doors, because small colleges don't die in a moment. They linger, struggle. Presidents are let go. Others are hired. New trustees are hard to come by. Boards, weakened by years of tension and diminishing resources, find their members beginning to perform administrative tasks to help out. By the end, leadership is reduced to the intricacies of closure. And all this happens at a time when a board's expertise, history, and experience is most critically called for, if it exists. So the problem, compounded at smaller institutions where the margins for error are tiny, is not so much lack of money, which often seems to happen all of a sudden, but a long-term lack of professionalism, independence, and leadership at the board level.

I am not in a position to say what went wrong at Burlington College or Dowling College, or if Sweet Briar College or Mills College can be spared closure. But I can tell you what was happening at Chapman in 1991, just prior to Jim Doti's selection as the university's President. Jim had served as Chapman's Interim President on two previous occasions and through no fault of his, Chapman looked much like Will Wootton's description above. The two years before Jim's appointment were tumultuous to say the least. Chapman's faculty was unhappy; its students were unhappy; its alumni were unhappy; the surrounding community was unhappy; and Chapman trustees were most definitely unhappy. To make matters worse, enrollment and the quality of incoming students was falling at an alarming rate. Chapman was in the direct path of the perfect storm of failure and it desperately needed help.

As President Emeritus of Warren Wilson College and a Berea College board member, Douglas Orr (2014) knows firsthand about university leadership and the challenges it can face, so his perspective is especially valuable: "It is arguably the most important partnership in higher education because, in tandem, the board chair and the

president lead the board in defining its responsibilities and in setting the institution's strategic direction.”

Carol Christ, President Emerita of Smith College and board member of Dominican College of California and Sarah Lawrence College, is even more direct when she says that it is nearly impossible for any college president to do well without a good relationship with the board chair.

As chair of the Chapman trustees when Jim became President, George Argyros had the responsibility of working directly and immediately with Jim. George, who graduated from Chapman in 1957, was already a titan of the business world and would later serve as United States Ambassador to the Kingdom of Spain. Fortunately, George has never forgotten his beloved alma mater, becoming its longest-serving board chair, its largest donor, its most fervent volunteer and its most successful, high-profile alumnus.

Longtime friends, George and Jim quickly developed a common understanding and agreement about their respective roles. It was George's job and the board's to oversee the university from the 30,000-foot level. It was Jim's job to handle issues at the 3,000-foot level, where most things happen on a university campus.

From the beginning, their relationship was built on five basic principles:

1. A singular shared goal: to grow a private university in Orange County for future generations that was different from public institutions.
2. Differences of opinion were OK and even expected, but honesty, mutual respect, and trust were absolutes.
3. Open, regular communication — lots of listening and discussion, but no secrets and no surprises.
4. Hire the most talented and hardest working people, provide the resources they need to be successful, and then let them do their jobs.
5. Set the bar high, knowing that if we occasionally fail, we'll learn from our mistakes and keep trying.

Success obviously involves far more than crafting a simple set of principles. Jim and George would be the first to admit that they had a great deal of help (and some luck as well) while working closely together through the years. George was able to recruit some of Orange County's most successful and respected business and community leaders as trustees. They quickly became Chapman's most passionate and generous supporters. Jim was able to recruit some of the world's leading scholars, educators and researchers. And he was able to attract and retain some extremely talented and dedicated managers, some of whom continue to serve the university and provide long-term continuity and stability even today. The accomplishments of this exceptional and ever-growing group of people are now well chronicled. Chapman University's reputation, as well as the reputations of its Dodge College of Film and Media Arts, Fowler School of Law, and Argyros School of Business and Economics, continue to soar.

It is nearly impossible to succinctly list Jim's achievements, accolades, and awards outside the Chapman universe; they are myriad, monumental, and well-deserved.

But an article in the 2016 summer issue of *Chapman Magazine* did an admirable job of cataloging Chapman University's unparalleled accomplishments during Jim's presidency:

When Doti took office as Chapman's 12th President 25 years ago, the university was still a college, and enrollment was 2,200. Now the student body numbers about 8,000, many of them in the six colleges that have been added during his tenure. The number of buildings on campus has gone from 13 to nearly 70. Net assets have climbed from \$226 million in 2003 to \$1 billion today. There was one endowed chair in 1991; now there are 39, as well as 25 endowed professorships. Then there are these remarkable figures: since 1991, freshman applications have risen 1,867%, the average incoming SAT score has climbed more than 200 points, and Chapman's *U.S. News & World Report* student selectivity ranking has jumped from No. 92 to a position that toggles between No. 1 and No. 2, depending on the report (Arp, 2016).

The Center for Policy Analysis at the American Council on Education reported that the average length of service for a university president in 2011 was 7 years, down from 8.5 years in 2006. With his 25-year legacy as Chapman's president, Jim Doti has battered the industry average, as with nearly every other aspect of his amazing life — and he has an extraordinary CV to prove it.

In his 1991 Convocation Address, Jim issued this challenge: “Let us rededicate ourselves to the culture and values that made Chapman College great — a rededication that will surely make Chapman University even greater.”

As he steps down as president and to honor his extraordinary service, I invite each of us to accept yet another challenge: to dedicate ourselves to building on Jim Doti's remarkable achievements as we go forward — for that will surely make Chapman University even greater.

References

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