

CASE
STUDY

Proactive Boards Help Further Student Success

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Ascendium Education Group is excited to support The Chronicle of Higher Education's initiative to prioritize student success. Over the next year, this partnership will produce special virtual events, focused reports and a new online resource center, where colleges can search and find creative solutions and useful content from The Chronicle's extensive archives of best practices.

Our support of this project promises a comprehensive look at new and innovative approaches to helping students achieve success. By collecting voices and perspectives from across higher education, The Chronicle's expert journalists can guide colleges to make actionable changes that will help close achievement gaps and fulfill the promise of socioeconomic mobility for all students.

Ascendium supports initiatives that seek to create large-scale change so more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their educational and career goals. We share with The Chronicle a passion and purpose to inform and empower higher education trustees, leaders, administrators and faculty members about the pressing issues facing students today. That includes shining a light on students of color and transfer students, as well as those who are the first in their family to attend college.

We believe in the power of education and training beyond high school to transform the lives of learners from low-income backgrounds. The COVID-19 health crisis has exacerbated well-documented opportunity gaps that put these learners at a disadvantage relative to their peers. This makes the solutions raised by this initiative all the more vital.

Thank you for your interest in this initiative. To learn more about Ascendium, please [subscribe to our monthly newsletter](#).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Kerwin". The script is fluid and cursive.

Amy Kerwin

Vice President – Education Philanthropy
Ascendium Education Group





PHOTO BY AARON GUERRIER

When the world locked down, Centre College, in Danville, Ky., perked up.

Like most other colleges, it had to essentially close its campus and send its 1,400 students home. But while many colleges were hanging on by their fingertips, Centre decided that the pandemic was a fine time to launch an ambitious strategic plan. The Board of Trustees needed to work hand-in-glove with incoming President Milton C. Moreland, who was hired about a month before the Covid lockdown but started at Centre in July 2020. Then trustees committed to, and invested in, numerous student-success projects.

“Why not do a whole strategic-planning process during a pandemic?” says Moreland, an archaeologist who was previously provost at Rhodes College, in Memphis. Energized by “a creative and philanthropic board,” Moreland says, “even as we were having crisis-management conversations around the virus, we were able to look forward.”

Boards have traditionally taken a conservative, primarily fiduciary, somewhat distant approach to college management, their primary responsibilities seen as hiring presidents and ensuring institutions’ financial stability. In recent years, however, trustees at some colleges have pressed beyond that hands-off stance, all the more so as the

Armon Wells, a football player at Centre College, in Kentucky, takes part in its Grissom Scholars Program, aimed at helping high-achieving first-generation students succeed.

pandemic has highlighted student vulnerabilities and inequities that imperil both colleges' missions and their business plans. While no one is encouraging meddling micromanaging, some boards are getting more rigorously involved in guiding not just colleges' ledgers but also their student-success priorities.

Here are some of Centre College's recent or planned improvements:

- Enhanced advising and mentoring of freshmen and sophomores by newly hired student-success coaches
- A new communications software platform to help administrative departments cooperate in real time to monitor students' needs, progress, and setbacks
- The creation of career-exploration communities that offer students four years of workshops, guidance, and networking to find internships and hone career-gear skills
- A new 135,000-square-foot wellness and athletics facility, the most ambitious building project in the college's 203-year history
- A renovation and expansion of the college's science and mathematics center, and of its library
- Renovation of three residence halls, which will help accommodate themed housing and career communities
- New study- and work-away programs in Washington, D.C., New York City, and Lake Tahoe, Calif., to complement the programs in 24 countries in which 85 percent of Centre students participate
- A regional business start-up accelerator called CentreWorks, which accompanies a new business major

Such moves have required a bullish attitude in a scary time, with investments, for instance, of about \$50 million for the athletics and wellness center, and approxi-

mately \$15 million for the renovation and expansion of the library, science center, and student housing. Most of those funds came from Centre's almost-\$500-million endowment and significant contributions from board members and other donors. But some, explains Mark Nunnelly, the board's chair, are being secured through judicious borrowing.

“Those who stand in the same place will move backward.”

The aggressive growth was fueled by intense online meetings of the 34 trustees during the pandemic. They discussed inequity, enrollment challenges, and the future of higher education. Nunnelly, a Centre College graduate, an entrepreneur, and former managing director of Bain Capital, says he and his fellow board members have come to understand that, in higher education, “those who stand in the same place will move backward.” The Covid crisis and students' logistical and emotional turmoil from racial and political strife, he says, made board members realize that the “rate of the journey needed to pick up.”

The projects during this two-year period have ratcheted up the college's student-success imperatives from the past half-decade. For instance, the Grissom Scholars Program, begun in 2015 and funded by and named for a former board chair, David Grissom, and his wife, Marlene, offers 10 full-tuition-plus scholarships valued at \$150,000 per student. That has helped raise the institution's percentage of first-generation students from 8.9 percent to 21 percent. Overall, the percentage of Pell-eligible students has also

grown — from 14.5 in 2013 to 21.2 percent in 2021-22. The college wants to raise that percentage to 25 by the year 2027. An associate dean was appointed to focus solely on the success of first-generation students in the Grissom Scholars Program, and Centre's goal is to reach a 90-percent retention rate for first-generation students by 2030.

In 2021, Centre College also doubled, from 10 to 20, its participation in the national Posse Scholars program, which recruits talented students from diverse urban school systems. In addition to Centre College's longstanding Posse partnership in Boston, it now draws from Posse students in Charlotte, Dallas, Denver, Memphis, Philadelphia, and Phoenix.

More broadly, the college has invested \$130 million of a recent \$210-million capital campaign yield in scholarships and financial aid. Twenty-six donors, many of them trustees, gave gifts of between \$1 million and \$20 million.

NEW MAJORS FOR NEW CAREERS

College leaders expect to see more boards taking a firmer hold on the institutional rudder.

At McDaniel College, in Westminster, Md., the board and provost-turned-president Julia Jasken focused on revamping academic offerings to better serve student demand.

A yearlong systematic review resulted in the elimination of five majors — art history, French, German, music, and religious studies — plus several minors. At the same time, McDaniel introduced 10 new majors geared to necessary skills in growing fields: actuarial science, American Sign Language, applied mathematics, biochemistry, biomedical science, criminal justice, health sciences, international business, marketing, and writing and publishing.

McDaniel took pains to make sure that any students enrolled in majors being phased out would be able to complete their work in those majors, and some of

the eliminated majors continue to be offered as minors. The college offered buyouts or early-retirement packages to six faculty members but was able to guide others into teaching courses in related fields.



McDaniel College cut five majors and added 10 new ones after a comprehensive review of its programs. Here, McDaniel students take part in a human-anatomy and physiology lab.

PHOTO BY MCDANIEL COLLEGE

Marty Hill, a real-estate developer who served on the board for 28 years, 12 of those as chair, says the program changes have been the most consequential action the board has taken in three decades. The board had come to understand, Hill says, that there were “opportunities to create career paths within the liberal arts without denigrating them.”

In 2019, the college also established the [McDaniel Commitment](#), a guarantee that every student, with a team of mentors and advisers, can build a tailored educational path. The four components include Your Place (a crash course in college and town offerings); Your Design (a blueprint for learning); Your Experience (engaging through study abroad, research, or internships), and Your Career (honing job skills and networking). In the fall of 2020, despite pandemic challenges, the revamped academic program, combined with the McDaniel Commitment, attracted the largest undergraduate enrollment in McDaniel’s 153-year history, more than 1,800 students.

The need for academic program changes, Jasken and Hill explain, had been under discussion for some time but it was a Hill-drafted directive, or “charge,” from the 39-member board in the summer of 2018 that got the ball rolling. A faculty committee led McDaniel’s so-called SWOT analysis — strength, weakness, opportunity, threat — with each department answering 15 to 20 questions about introductory, midlevel, and advanced courses. The results were sent to the provost and president, who pulled together a 400-page report that they then shared with the board. Trustees unanimously approved the suggested changes, with no abstentions, because they had been keyed into the program evaluation from Day 1. Hill remembers that, through the whole process, they “lived it along with Julia.”

A FOCUS ON RACIAL JUSTICE

At Dillard University, in New Orleans, Board Chair Michael D. Jones, a Dillard alumnus who became the first Black partner at the law firm Kirkland & Ellis, was instrumental in the firm’s gift of \$5 million to Dillard for its Center for Racial Justice. The center, founded in 2020 in response to George Floyd’s murder and other racial abuses, hosts prominent civil-rights and other speakers on legal and medical equity, subsidizes student internships in relevant fields, and plans to connect with New Orleans-area police, medical, and other first responders as well as local court and legal-aid personnel through training programs.

Dillard is among seven historically Black colleges and universities [sharing](#) \$12.5 million in statutory fees that Kirkland & Ellis won, [in 2021](#), in a \$577-million settlement with the State of Maryland. (Along with the Lawyers’ Committee for



PHOTO BY SABREE HILL / DILLARD U.

Michael D. Jones, chairman of Dillard U.’s Board of Trustees, helped the university establish its Center for Racial Justice in 2020.

Civil Rights Under Law, Kirkland represented pro bono for 12 years the students, faculty, and alumni of Maryland's four public HBCUs. The suit accused the state of providing inequitable resources.)

Dillard's president, Walter Kimbrough, says the new center, and the Kirkland gift enabling its founding in 2020, was Jones's idea. Jones, who joined the Dillard board shortly after Hurricane Katrina, says trustees have come to see how they "can be more proactively assisting the president without bumping up against the issue of micromanaging."

Other boards are also doing so, and at least some presidents welcome that more energetic involvement.

"Boards need to be a lot more hands-on than they have been."

"Boards need to be a lot more hands-on than they have been," says Bryon Grigsby, president of Moravian University, in Bethlehem, Pa. The enrollment demographics and liability risks are becoming more challenging, and college has come to be seen as "an adulting environment," he says, with students' academic and personal development more closely guided and monitored.

By design, with significant rotations in and out, the university's 26-member



PHOTO BY SABREE HILL / DILLARD U.

Participants in a voter-education summit organized by Dillard U.'s Center for Racial Justice gather with its director, Ashraf Esmail (center).

board, say Grigsby and the trustee Bill Schaninger, is now largely of the 53-year-old Grigsby's generation. Like presidents at most private colleges, Grigsby relies on his trustees for their judgment, devotion, generosity, and expertise on legal, financial, and other matters.

Reciprocally, with guidance from his cabinet, Grigsby treats each board meeting as something of a classroom, explaining to trustees various facets of Moravian's operations or the political and social campus whirlwinds around Covid, elections, Black Lives Matter, and other topics. Voting student members of the board bring alumni trustees up to speed, and the students get insights into college management.

When he assumed the presidency nine years ago, Grigsby persuaded the board to invest university savings in not just, say, large tech or energy companies, but in Moravian itself. They did, including about \$8 million channeled in part toward new student programs and wireless infrastructure.

What drives trustees to serve colleges? In Schaninger's case, he wants to pay it forward. An M.B.A. with a Ph.D. in management, he is a senior partner with McKinsey & Company. As a young man at loose ends, he had a rough time focusing at another college before he was recruited to study at, and wrestle for, Moravian. His father died at 40 of cancer, and "it was very

personal for me," Schaninger says. "Moravian put their arms around me literally days after my dad passed away. ... They gave me a second chance."

Now on the board, he laughingly refers to himself as "a regular irritant." He pushes for investment in student mental health, education, awareness around sexual harassment and assault, and programs that help Black, Latino, Syrian, Lebanese, and other first-generation students from the Lehigh Valley succeed. He wants Moravian to enhance programs in medical fields, teaching,

"Moravian put their arms around me literally days after my dad passed away. ... They gave me a second chance."

and other parts of the service sector that Covid hit hard.

"We're not just check writers and pre-siders," Schaninger says, reflecting the wider, more active trustee outlook. "We're bleeding with our time, too."

Questions or comments about this Case Study? Email us at ci@chronicle.com.

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1255 Twenty-Third Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037
(202) 466-1000 | [Chronicle.com](https://www.chronicle.com)