WILLIAM PATERSON UNIVERSITY

The Science & Art of Provostship During Faculty Retrenchment

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THE CONTEXT: None of us had a playbook for navigating a pandemic. But if you, like me, have devoted a career to the regional state university mission for a few decades, you know that many of us were on a steady enrollment slide post Great Recession. The pandemic just put it on steroids. I started as Provost at William Paterson University in July 2019, a public regional university of about 10,000 students in northeast New Jersey and about 30 minutes from New York City. We are both an HSI and an MSI, and serve a large number of first generation, low income students, many from immigrant family backgrounds. We were already confronting modest financial challenge pre-pandemic, but it went into overdrive roughly a year into the pandemic like it did for so many.

The Problem Common to Regional State Universities
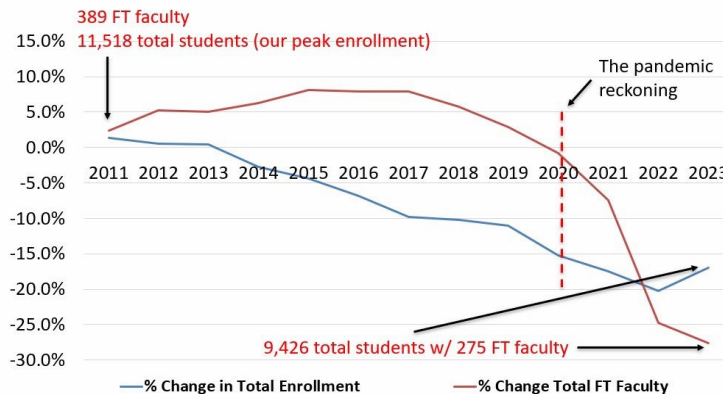
THE PROBLEM: Here is a visualization of our story. In brief, we had been at an enrollment peak in 2010, but then began a steady slide as reflected in the blue bar. For most of the decade, we did what many institutions did, grow the faculty (the red bar) with the belief that doing so would bring new students, attracting those high school students away from our competitors. Every year it did not happen, and thus the gap between the number one source of revenue (students) fell while the largest cost of delivering our mission increased (faculty), its peak size being 2017. Although we backed off on new hiring later in the decade, the gap only modestly closed as enrollment continued to decline. When the pandemic hit, our circumstance became untenable, and with a ballooning deficit, critical action was needed. I describe the actions we took in subsequent slides, but those actions resulted in an extraordinary turn around. We now have growing enrollments on an appropriately sized faculty. I can say hands down it was the worst few years of my professional life, but we are stronger for it. Our community is motivated going forward with results evidencing the benefits of tough choices, leading with empathy, and being relentless to vision a positive future state.

The Solution Science: Easily Understood Objectivity

- Active & transparent Union Engagement, and with HR & General Counsel.
- Departing with dignity options via transitions to retirement (hurts for roughly 6 months and then it ends).
- Layoff as last resort, but follow policy exactly.
- Similar actions on staff side.

Department	2010 Total Enr	2010 FT Faculty	2020 Total Enr	2020 FT Faculty	FTF to match 2010 Total Enrollment	Diff.
UNIVERSITY	**46130**	**380**	**37982**	**376**	313	**-63**
English	3563	27	2204	24	17	-7
Languages & Culture	2671	14	1214	12	6	-6
Mathematical Sciences	3051	18	1683	15	10	-5
Political, Legal, & Urban Sci	2141	18	1106	14	9	-5
Psychology	2976	23	2889	27	22	-5
Communication	2827	21	2314	22	17	-5
Kinesiology	1792	11	1507	14	9	-5
History	2360	21	1360	15	12	-3
SpEd, Counseling, & Disab Stud	888	11	861	14	11	-3
Teacher Education-Pre-K 12	2005	22	1183	16	13	-3
Econ, Fin, & Global Bus	1597	12	1637	15	12	-3
Community & Social Justice	3304	13	1793	10	7	-3
Chemistry	1053	6	575	6	3	-3
Philosophy (w/ liberal studies)	1328	8	1165	9	7	-2
Biology	1676	20	1398	19	17	-2
Environmental Science	443	4	307	5	3	-2
Accting & Law	1248	11	1112	11	10	-1
Mgmt, Mkting, & Sales	2157	18	2277	20	19	-1
Art	1608	21	1223	17	16	-1
Sociology & Criminal Justice	2330	18	2513	20	19	-1
Music	2078	18	1898	16	16	0
Comm Disorders & Sciences	493	5	623	6	6	0
Public Health	1115	7	1793	8	11	3
Computer Science	338	7	772	8	16	8
Ed Leadership & Prof Studies	338	10	877	12	26	14
Nursing	797	16	1805	21	36	15

THE SOLUTION SCIENCE: In an academic institution, data rules, but there is also "death by data". When it was clear that part of our cost reduction need was a smaller faculty (and not to substitute with adjuncts), I needed a straight forward way of capturing faculty/enrollment misalignment. We functioned fine in 2010 with the size of faculty we had, and a lot more students, and in 2020, more or less had the same program array. In consultation with the President, CFO, and HR VP colleagues, I created a simple table. I mapped total enrollments (duplicated butts-in-seats) by department since some were major heavy and others service course heavy, but both important. Using the total faculty in each department in 2010, I created a simple ratio and solved for X, the number of faculty in a department in 2020 that would be needed to match the proportion in 2010 using 2020 total enrollment. Subtracting that number from the actual number of faculty in 2020 created the yellow highlighted column. Whereas there are other ways misalignment could have been evidenced, the above became the basis for engagement with our Union. It also enabled faculty to see where overstaffing might result in layoffs. Furthermore, in a number of cases, senior faculty saw the efficacy of retirement, aided by transition-to-retirement options, and as a means of sparing junior colleagues who also sought opportunity for career success. We did in the end have some layoffs, but many fewer than might have occurred.
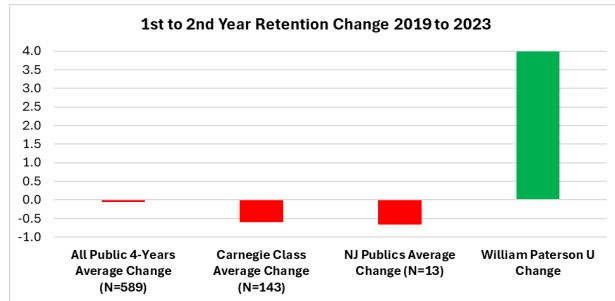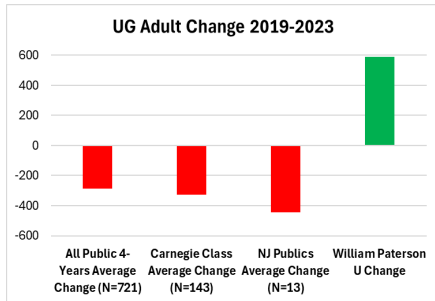
The Solution Art: Emotional Intelligence

6 TOP BEHAVIORS OF LEADERS WITH

HIGH EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

SOURCE: KORN FERRY (2017)   IMAGE BY: JACOB MORGAN

- Listen more than you talk
- Emphasize the how and why
- Engage and recognize team contributions
- Handle conflict with open communication & emotional awareness
- Understand what energizes people and create the right environments
- Encourage long-term team member satisfaction and effectiveness.

- Listen to and acknowledge pain.
- Affirm over and over that it is no one's fault and overstaffing is not a reflection on the quality of a person.
- Own mistakes, particularly with data that have real consequences.
- Reinforce how the university will be stronger for lasting service to the citizens of the state.

THE SOLUTION ART: Whereas easily understood objectivity was the solution science, emotional intelligence was the solution art. Most critical to that was a willingness to listen and to acknowledge pain. I found myself doing that a lot. Fortunately, one of my deep values is to first seek to understand before being understood. Data may aid thinkers, but emotional intelligence is a critical tool for engaging feelers, and in that moment, everyone was in feeling mode. Is my job at risk? Did I make the wrong choice to become an academic or to pursue a degree in this field? Am I a failure or the cause of this in some way? I have a young family, what will I possibly do if I am laid off? 2020 and 2021 were very dark years as we went through two rounds of alignment analysis, and it took a toll on me and others in leadership as well. By being honestly transparent about my enormous dislike of this task, and gently but repeatedly explaining why we simply had to do it, we navigated forward. In retrospect, my owning mistakes along the way – for example, a math calculation error based on incorrect data from 2010 and then forthrightly acknowledging it and changing it the advantage of the department – I think enhanced the legitimacy of the process. At one point, the President and I were invited to a Union meeting to speak directly to the community, I'm told the first time ever. I believe this would not have occurred without trust and that we had to work together on a pathway forward.

Outcomes of Process:
No votes of no-confidence.
Demotivation initially, but transparent financial & enrollment improvement.

Better sustainable metrics:
2019-23 S/F Ratios: 13.7 to 16.7

UG Adult Change 2019-2023

All Public 4-Years Average Change (N=721)	
Carnegie Class Average Change (N=143)	
NJ Publics Average Change (N=13)	
William Paterson U Change	

1st to 2nd Year Retention Change 2019 to 2023

All Public 4-Years Average Change (N=589)	
Carnegie Class Average Change (N=143)	
NJ Publics Average Change (N=13)	
William Paterson U Change	

Source: IPEDS.

THE OUTCOMES: Science and art together brought us to a much better place financially, perhaps best reflected in a student-faculty ratio that was among one of the lowest in the state, to one that was much more appropriate to our institution's mission. Furthermore, we made strategic choices to ramp up a focus on adult students, particularly through new online graduate and then later undergraduate offerings that serve the working professional much more effectively. William Paterson University has become a leader in serving adult learners as a result, a population much more robust than the declining one for high school graduates. Today, about 1/3 of our undergraduates are 25 or older, whereas a few years ago, it was much smaller. Furthermore, our redoubled emphasis on retaining the students we enroll as a key strategic goal has paid off via a variety of initiatives that made, and continue to make, a difference as we steadily reduce departers. Metric outcomes like this have shown that much can be accomplished if you set your mind to it, but growing our way out of our circumstance was not alone going to do it. I don't claim we did everything right, but I would be pleased to talk with whomever might like to know more about our transformative experience. I can be reached at powersj@wpunj.edu.

"The current financial trajectory of higher education is just not sustainable… I've come around to the belief that there's going to be a major disruption of the current market and the status quo, driven first by economics."

-Brian Rosenberg, *Whatever it is, I'm Against It* (2023).