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Ep.86: Reprise: Mergers and Major Cross-College Collaborations

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Many people in higher education recoil at the idea of merging institutions. And it's little wonder in most such arrangements, one institution swallows the other, which virtually disappears. But that doesn't mean the alternative is for every college to remain an island unto itself. Hello and welcome back to The Key Inside Higher Ed's News and Analysis podcast. This week we reprise an episode we originally ran more than a year ago, but the remains as relevant now as it was then. Last month, St Joseph's University and the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia formally completed a merger that was more than 18 months in the works. Last week, Inside Higher Ed's annual survey of College and University Business Officers, found that they were fewer than one in ten business leaders, said senior administrators on their campus had seriously discussed merging with another college in the last year. About half believed their institution should combine academic programs or administrative services with a peer institution in the next five years.

And last week ended with the intriguing news that Antioch University and Otterbein University in Ohio were teaming up to offer onlin graduate programs in a way that could lead to the creation of a new national system of non-profit colleges and universities. Those developments suggest that campus leaders are still looking for opportunities to work together in strategic and fundamental ways. At a time when enrollments are declining, federal recovery funds are running out. The pressure to experiment with new programs and approaches remains. So, let's return to a conversation we had last year with three leaders experienced in campus conversations about strategic partnerships. We're joined by John MacIntosh of SeaChange Capital Partners, a driving force behind the now new-ish Transformational Partnerships Fund. Art Dunning, former president of Albany State University, who oversaw that institution's merger with Darden State College, and Sister Margaret Carney, President Emerita of Saint Bonaventure University, who offers a cautionary tale about a merger that didn't happen and what went awry.

We start today's episode by welcoming in two people involved in the Transformational Partnerships Fund, which was established this year by the ECMC Foundation and SeaChange Capital Partners, with support from Ascendium Education Group and the Kresge Foundation. John MacIntosh is Managing Partner of SeaChange, which works with non-profit organizations that are facing complex challenges

that might best be met by working together with other groups. Art Dunning, one of the advisers who brings direct higher ed expertise to the fund, was president of Albany State University when the university system of Georgia more or less forced it to merge with nearby Dartmouth State College. John and Art welcome to The Key.

JOHN MACINTOSH:

Thanks so much for having us, Doug. Delighted to be here.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

So, John, please tell us a little bit about the Transformational Partnerships Fund, its goals, and how it will work.

JOHN MACINTOSH:

So, the Transformational Partnerships Fund is a new initiative to help institutions of higher education that are interested in exploring partnerships of various kinds get that done. And we're particularly focused on partnerships that have the potential to really improve how those institutions serve students of color, students from low-income families, and others who really would be the most vulnerable if the institutions that they are attending falter or in extreme cases, even fail.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

And Art, as somebody who sort of helped Shepherd University through a process like this. What are the things you think are important for a project like this to do to help campuses prepare?

ART DUNNING:

I think you really do need a safe place for some hard to facilitate at the highest level. The understanding of what you would get from a merger would also help people find a space to talk about the history and to talk about how we will engage privately and publicly. And one of the things I noticed in our process is that there was so much information we had to correct over time because of the platforms of the media. And we seem to be in an era of misinformation, disinformation, online. And as we look around the country, when people wish back against change in public policy, those are some of the tactics and processes that are used. The governing body and the administrative leadership are not on the same page. You will always play catch up. I think in hindsight we found ourselves underestimating passion, seething emotions, anger, resentment, and grievance. Those things that really come out of a process of deep, deep change.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Transformational partnerships can mean a lot of things to a lot of people. How do you define a Transformational Partnership?

JOHN MACINTOSH:

Yeah. It's probably worth stepping back just for one second to put this effort in context. So, SeaChange Capital Partners, which is the non-profit I lead. Our mission, we're a not-for-profit, and our mission is to help. We like to say champion other not-for-profits that are facing complex financial or organizational challenges. And one consistent challenge that institutions face is how to explore a partnership, or in fact, whether to explore it at all. And so, we've been active helping not-for-profits by providing a safe place for conversation by in some cases, providing grants, by providing referrals. Since 2008, we've seen more than 1,000 situations. We've made more than 250 grants. And so, the Transformational Partnerships

Fund is simply a way to take that work into the realm of higher education, because we recognize that higher education is different in some ways. I think the same in others. So, what does a Transformational Partnership mean? To me, it's the wrong question to ask. Do you mean a merger?

What about a teacher? What about a shared back office? What about co-curricular? Sure, that's the form it can take. But it's really the answer to a question which is, given where we are, what should we do to best serve our students, particularly the students that would be vulnerable? If we don't do the best thing for them, how should we move our organizational boundaries or change our legal structure or cooperate in different ways? So, to me, it's really the answer to a question, and the form it takes is gonna differ because in some cases really the right answer, difficult though it may be, maybe a preferred teacher or a merger, but in other cases, it may be sharing your back office. I think you have to start with the question, which is, given where we are, what is it that we should be doing or exploring to best serve the students and to best take our mission forward? I think if you come at it form first, you'll get distracted on where the real issue is, where are we, and what should we do for the students.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

What you're describing then is a situation where an institution first has to recognize that the current and future moment may require it to do things differently to continue to fulfill its mission effectively.

JOHN MACINTOSH:

The real issue, as you've said, is do we have a common understanding, and if not, can we develop a common understanding of where we really are, where we've been, and where we are? And do we have the collective will to act on it in a way that we probably know we should, but can be, as Art will say more than anybody, can be very difficult? And I think, clearly, the collective will probably include some modicum of the board trustees, and the collective will probably include the administration, and the collective will probably include the faculty. But to me, it's really about understanding and will more than this group versus that group. The last thing I guess I would say is these are not corporate entities, not for profits. I've worked with a bunch with synagogues. I've worked with not-for-profits. These people have, and I do have a deep emotional connection to their alma mater, to the university whose board they sit on. You can make sense of the college town, but the town has a deep connection.

And so, it's really, really hard to do this work.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

The merger that you were involved with was largely, if I'm correct, presented to you, as opposed to the institution deciding for itself that going through a kind of process like the one John just described and deciding that it needed to think about a new way of operating. In general, the process that you are envisioning through the Transformational Partnerships Fund is something different. An institution, its collective constituencies coming to some kind of realization and making something of that choice to at least explore it. And I guess, I'm curious what you envision that process as being like, having worked with institutions as you have. It's got to be a hard road to travel to get people's heads around what could be a pretty serious alteration of how they operate.

ART DUNNING:

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, I worked in the university system office, for 13 years in Atlanta. And those two campuses we've talked about have been less than four miles apart while they separate. But it was viewed as such a complex environment politically, economically, and socially. And no one, I think,

wanted to touch it at that point in time. But when it was finally decided, all of those things that people had feared over the years really came out. And it was complicated because of the external environment. You have a community of supporters for both campuses, both campuses, and students. So, not saying wouldn't be nice to do around the issue, a lot of data, a lot of logic, and reason about why this makes sense for the well-being of students. And it was a very student-driven process in terms of outcomes. But in the midst of all of that, you had to work through and navigate through all of those historical issues that have been developed over time. These two campuses, I think, or the people who live in that community, had no cordial and pleasant relationships over the years, but adversarial relations.

But it added another layer of complexity as these campuses viewed themselves as having such differences in the past. We did not give them time to talk about a common future. We started the execution implementation process right away. And I've often thought if we had a place for leadership and leadership at governing body level to sit and to walk through a process of a lot of data, reason, logic, why this makes sense, how to leverage emphasis for a good outcome for students. And the longer it takes, let's get a common view of the future. And I don't know if that would have worked, but it surely would have been better than just, I think, going directly into a process in a community where. And Doug, in order to understand this is a part of the plantation agriculture of the South. This is being hierarchical around the issues of race. I think a place for roots being in the room to talk about the next 25 years, the next 15 years, what this community could look like economically, what it could look like on skills, knowledge, and jobs of the future.

These two entities have a role in making that happen. Somehow that would have been very helpful to have a safe place for a hard discussion.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

We're speaking about the Transformational Partnerships Fund with John MacIntosh of SeaChange Capital Partners and Art Dunning, former president of Albany State University. John, how do you envision the fund working with institutions at the beginning, not on the form and structure process that you said you thought should come second, but on the initial exploration around, is something really not working, and do we need to make a major change in how we fulfill our mission?

JOHN MACINTOSH:

You know, if the word in your heart is, no, no, never. No, never will we even share our back office, let alone discuss the merger. I don't judge you. That's fine. But let's move on. If it's yes, but, or even maybe but, how do we start that first discussion? What if the word leaks out? What sort of consulting assistance do we need? The mode or number of partnerships discussions that most leaders have been through is zero. That's the most common, I'm sure. OK. Franklin & Marshall was a merger, but none of the people who run Franklin & Marshall were involved. So, I think part of this is to say, listen, if you've got yourself in whatever process to the point where you're saying, maybe there's something to discuss with those folks down the road or across the country, now what? That's the call we want and where we hope that, as Art said, we can be a confidential, safe place to help you understand where things are and what might be the next sensible step, and to consider a grant to help defray those costs.

Let me tell you, I guess three quick things. The biggest tragedy is that you just start too late. You might have got to the Promised Land, but you started too late. The second biggest tragedy is that you spend 12 months and decide not to move forward with something that you could have known wasn't gonna work one month in. And so, really trying to get the process right to minimize the likelihood that you spend a

lot more time than necessary to ultimately not move forward. Because lots of institutions don't have the time to get it wrong more than once or twice. And what that issue is, it may be, look, where the Jesuits know the Franciscans. And the big issue here is that it could be, is the real estate worth 5 million bucks or 50 million bucks? The big issue was that it mean, who knows what the bigger issue is? But our strong view is try to figure out what the big issue is, and as quickly and quietly as you can make some progress on that because you really don't want to spend 12, 24 months on something which doesn't happen.

Not because it's bad that it didn't happen, but because if you could have known much earlier your degrees of freedom and your time to make wise choices and to have control over your destiny rather than simply being ruled by events may be much, much reduced.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

What are the conditions that need to be in place for an institution to choose to do this, to believe it needs to change fundamentally and to reach out to you thinking that some kind of significant partnership is worth considering?

JOHN MACINTOSH:

And we're new to higher education. I think we know some things, but we don't know a lot of things which is why we're blessed to have Art and others with us on this journey. The underlying energy source that animates all this needs to be a passion to do right by the students. I think that's where you have to start. In the same way that, I don't know, a corporation, its shareholder value, or whatever it is in that religious fervor. I think that the energy source that's gonna drive you through all the other barriers is, look, what's right for the students here. And let's not pretend that there are not other considerations, nostalgia, alumni, et cetera. But I think the energy source has to be a real desire to do what's right for the students. Also, often a sense that the status quo isn't tenable, or at least is far from optimal, and that therefore, by changing the status quo, you can do better for students. And I hope it's not tenable. If not, tenable means there's no way we graduate our seniors.

We're on watch. This is over in six months. I mean, that's the wrong kind of untenable. But just a recognition that the status quo isn't tenable over the sort of medium-term or is far from optimal and a real desire to do best for the students. I think if you have those two things, it's a conversation. If you think the status quo is fully tenable or if, you know, as a real person, as a human being, other issues, rather than deep concern for students are really what is dominating your thinking, then it's gonna be very hard to take action until it's too late, and it's certainly not a situation that we would knowingly support.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Thinking about my sense of the landscape over 35 years, many more institutions are likely to have checked the first box and somewhat fewer in the second. We just published our annual survey of college presidents, and about half of presidents said that they believe their institution could and should come out of the pandemic having made transformational changes. But one in five said they thought they could return to normal. Probably two-thirds or more said they needed to change what they do pretty significantly. But when you look at the kinds of solutions they're looking at, transformation isn't the way you would define most of those. So, I guess, I'd ask you how hard is it to get either for presidents themselves or presidents recognizing the environments they operate in and all those other barriers to get their own heads around the need for potentially drastic change, acknowledgment that the status

quo isn't working, as John described it. What are the biggest impediments to that acknowledgment and acceptance?

ART DUNNING:

Doug, I've spent a lot of time speaking to groups around George on the two campuses, and it occurred to me how to talk about the challenges facing the campuses and ways that people would not stop listening soon as you start to talk about how to make. Well, a lot of people at both. I tried to communicate cause and effect. If we continue down this path of enrollment, decline, the graduation rates and thus as a consequence over time. And so, trying to create not an unreality but a reality that kind of faces as institutions, it was hard for people to digest that because those who sat in the audience listening with love, passion, and emotion for the institution. Yet here you are saying we cannot continue to do this. And so, taking those things that presidents worry about daily is the fiscal support, how efficient and effective we are with the resources equity process that we have gone through. Value added for students, all of those things that many people just sort of tune you out when you start to talk about it.

I really tried to find so many ways to talk about this to make these groups allies and supporters of very deep change. And that was what I was alluding to earlier about a safe place for hard discussions. And now, over time, we saw them maybe an ad hoc way of doing this over the years and never put a sort of the mosaic together for people to understand this competitive world of higher education. And if we don't take the time to do that, find ourselves in the midst of a process of change and execution, and there's pushback on almost every decision, whether it's all of the uniforms, whether it's the school and song. I mean, there's things that became very sort of significant when should have been insignificant over time, because I think that the reality of what we were facing was not as deep to understand.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

John, what is the continuum of potential forms here that you would envision this fund and its grants enabling?

JOHN MACINTOSH:

Let me tell you what's happened outside of higher education, in my experience. And my sense is it happens here. Someone uses a broad word like partnerships, but then all really people talk about are mergers, and all they think about are takeovers of the weak by the strong. And we're really committed to kind of re-inflating the concept. And as we said in our grant eligibility as a sort of structural matter, I can see situations where everything from consolidating business and administrative services, real articulation agreements that sort of matter and are taking advantage of shared facilities, things which are mergers in form and in practice, things like well-planned out, thoughtful, funded teach-outs. I think we see all of those things as being potentially transformational for students in a certain set of circumstances. And so, I think, it's clearly not buying pencils together, which is a beautiful thing, both because why spend more on pencils than you need to, but because I think it sends a signal that we're serious.

I don't think that's transformational, but I don't think that you collapse right into the merger space. If you think about the five colleges. I'm sure what they did at the time was viewed as transformational. That's how we're seeing it. And I hope that when you call us up in three or four years and say, how did it go? That we have seen and I hope funded a pretty wide range of things. Look at what we're doing in New Mexico. Very interesting. I think I have the facts right, like six colleges, both two-year and four-year

coming together. That looks from what I can see, is successful to be transformational, to meaningfully change their ability to serve students and the cost at which they do it. And that's not a merger. So, we're pretty open to a wide range of things depending on the circumstances.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

A reminder that we're talking to John MacIntosh of SeaChange Capital Partners and Art Dunning, formerly of Albany State University, about the new Transformational Partnerships Fund. Most of the mergers that we've seen in higher education are essentially takeovers. They result in one institution largely disappearing as a visible entity, which is one reason why a lot of people associated with the college tend to see mergers as a last resort. How do you overcome that?

JOHN MACINTOSH:

You know, I think there can be situations where you could argue that the institution doesn't continue but is still been the right wise decision and transformational for the students involved. Because look at Green Mountain in Prescott, that was a teach-out. But I think if you called up and investigated, I believe you conclude that that was a success and philosophers could differ. Does Green Mountain continue? Yes or no, evidence for or against? I don't think the framing is, let's define what we mean by institutional continuation. And let's say if the institution doesn't continue, by our definition, it's a failure. I go back to where did things stand, particularly for more vulnerable students. What were they getting? What would the status quo have given them? And how did this arrangement change that?

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Art, do you think that most people at an institution, a typical institution, can step away enough from, and open to use a harsh word of their sort of selfish perspective, either as a faculty or staff member or a trustee or an alumnus, to view it through the prism that John is talking about?

ART DUNNING:

Look, I think it's hugely difficult for people, whatever category you are in, and it starts to develop communities of people. To step away and to say, let me examine whether or not I should continue this. I would be viable for the future. What can you do with those different groups to move you to a place where you see the status quo? And what you're doing will lead to the demise of the universe, and that would not exist in the next 3 to 5 years.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

You're listening to The Key With Inside Higher Ed. Be sure to subscribe to this free podcast on your favorite platforms, including iTunes, Stitcher, and Google Podcasts. I'm joined now by Sister Margaret Carney, President Emerita of Saint Bonaventure University, and only in New York, about 70 miles south of Buffalo. Sister Margaret led the Franciscan University from 2004 to 2016, and one of her last major efforts there sought to create a formal alliance with Hilbert College. It is just the sort of effort the Transformational Partnerships Fund is designed to foster. Sister Margaret, welcome to The Key.

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY:

Thank you, Doug.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

So, as the president of Saint Bonaventure University, you led its discussions with Hilbert College, another

Franciscan institution in upstate New York near Buffalo, about a possible collaboration or partnership several years ago. Can you tell us a little bit about those talks and why they were ultimately stymied?

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY:

The collaboration or to use the term that we adopted, the strategic alliance that we tried to formulate was between Saint Bonaventure University, which had been founded in the middle of the 19th century, and Hilbert College, which had been founded in the 1920s in Buffalo. Both were sponsored by Franciscan Religious Orders. And the other President, Dr Cynthia Zane, and I have become friends following her appointment in Hilbert simply because I was able to give her some assistance with understanding the mission. And so, it was actually a set of conversations initiated by Dr Zane, who was very focused on data about the future of higher education in general, narrowed that to the Northeast, narrowed that to the city of Buffalo, where there were six other Catholic colleges. And it did not take a clear voient to realize that sooner or later the sustainability of this was going to be a huge issue. And so, she, having served on the Faculty of Detroit Mercy, which was a highly successful merger of two preexisting Catholic colleges, felt that it was really important for her institution to ready itself for such a possibility.

And as she looked at it, it seemed to her that the DNA of both Saint Bonaventure and Hilbert were much closer aligned. And so, she invited me to begin to think seriously. Could Saint Bonaventure open up to this possibility? And while in the beginning, I could feel some hesitation within myself. The more she and I talked, the more I realized that this was an opportunity for Saint Bonaventure to be a first mover in something that was hardly a trend at the time but was probably the first indication of what would become a future trend. And so, I agreed to enter into those conversations. And then, the next step was that we needed the leaders of both of our boards and both of our religious sponsoring institutions to be willing to at least say yes to a period of exploration. But we then went through a very carefully orchestrated series of stages. First, the agreement to enter into the exploration, a very intensive due diligence study on the part of both institutions. A beginning set of understandings of what might be some outcomes that we could look at that would be very positive for both.

What would be some major stumbling blocks, minor stumbling blocks, and what would be the methodologies that we would use to address all of those? After two years of very intensive work with multiple forms of consultation, we had reached the point where we needed board consent to actually begin the legal process of bringing the two institutions together. And at that point, there was enough of a level of misgiving on the part of both boards that as much as the two presidents felt and the two provosts, which was extremely important, the four of us really felt that this was doable but we had failed to convince our boards. And so, the final board votes were to step down and stand back a bit. And it was, of course, crushing.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Tell us a little bit about kind of what it was that you had wanted the boards to agree on and then maybe go to what some of those impediments were.

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY:

What Dr Zane and I had explored, along with any number of really excellent consultants and our own internal resources, would have been a merger. And we had actually worked out very early on some of the ways in which a merger of that type could be palatable to both institutions by removing some of the points that tend to get people really upset, you know, the loss of a mascot, the loss of an athletic

program, that sort of thing. However, as we were getting really close to that final board decision-making, it became clear that there might be an alternative structure that would work better for us, but we never got to put that alternative in front of our boards. In other words, might we have created something like a tripartite model in which there would be a corporation of higher education, let's call it the Catholic Education Corporation of Western New York, and it would hold these two institutions and bring certain services into a model that would have been more economical? But we never even got to that point in the discussion because the level of concern was already so high on the part of both boards that it was probably too late to move to another alternative, even though to this day I think that could have worked and worked very well.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

What were the impediments and barriers for the two institutions? Were they different or were they the same at the board level?

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY:

One of the main problems was that Saint Bonaventure University was in a position to see itself as able to manage the challenges of the era and move through them successfully because it had a 160-year history of doing that. And it is just far enough away from other competition that some of that we stand alone and we stand tall feeling gets reinforced. On the other hand, if you are on a Catholic campus in Buffalo where you can literally almost walk to the next-door campus, which was originally the women's college, and over here was the men's college. That comfort doesn't exist because you're meeting your competition at Wegmans. It would have to go far to figure out what the competition is like. So, I think embedded within the Bonaventure psyche was a sense of we're going to a whole lot of trouble, but do we really need to make these changes and alienate people and have all of these problems? And that fear outweighed any growth prospect.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

We're talking with Sister Margaret Carney, President Emerita of Saint Bonaventure University. You've talked a lot about the challenges you had getting the board to buy into this idea. The other group that sometimes bristles at restructuring like this is the faculty. Because your process was quite public, the faculty had a lot of input into the process at Saint Bonaventure. How did that play out?

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY:

I think on the Hilbert side, that support was a tad more elevated because I think it was a much smaller faculty, and perhaps the chance for advancement or even adding faculty positions would open up through this process. That's a theory on my part. On the same Bonaventure side, it was far more mixed. The faculty were very, very worried and cautious about this. And although we did multiple forms of communication bulletins, town hall meetings, you know, meetings with faculty Senate leaders, there really was kind of an allergic stance. And I made the decision early, which could be blamed now for some of the failures, that we should not try to create a lot of committees or commissions of faculty members in the earliest stage, because it would make no sense for them to spend hours and hours working if the board did not signal that it would be willing to endorse the merger. Now, we did create a joint faculty exploration team. We had about eight or ten members from the two faculties, and their project was, can you come up with academic opportunities that could be created by bringing the strengths of our two faculties together?

And they did. We asked for two or three. They had ten. And any one of those ten could have been a real feather in our mutual caps. So, once faculty got to sit with each other and start thinking about abundance instead of scarcity, they began to be alive to the possibility.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Thinking back about the process that you went through. As you think about it again, pick a number, dozens, scores, or 100s of institutions that could or should be thinking about some kind of meaningful alliance partnership merger. Again, thinking about that whole continuum. What kinds of advice do you have for presidents and other senior leaders and maybe board members? What should they be thinking about here?

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY:

Alright. I would say in the first place, Doug, that undoubtedly more time spent with the board on this topic might have yielded a better outcome. I think that boards, as we know, have extraordinarily heavy agendas when they come together and you try to shoehorn an extra ten minutes for anything, and your board chair and secretary are just, you know, losing their minds. So, something of this magnitude means a board has to be willing to give significant additional time to the normal framework of their meetings. And you need to give people the time to do that. So, I think that the Hilbert board clearly had discussed the theory of this for a longer period of time than the Bonaventure board had. And so, there was a gap in there just in understanding and thought and looking objectively at the benefits or the difficulties had not been an exercise, the same one Bonaventure had gone through prior to this becoming an actual question. Would we like to do this? Would we be open to doing this? So, I think time with the board is very important.

I would say the other piece of advice is that Cynthia and I waited too long to hire a project manager. Once we had the initial authorization from our boards to do the first feasibility study stage, which did not commit us to a decision but prepared the way. And so, we were burning ourselves out and in kind of a state sometimes crises arise or misunderstandings or a word in communication becomes a civil war. And it's just you're doing too many things. Once we had a project manager in place, we were able to do a much better job of organizing, communicating, stratifying what needed to be done. I would say that the third was the fact that we might have benefited if we had cast a wider net in terms of thinking about possible structural models beyond the merger. And we know that now, and I'm forever when people call me, I'm always recommending read this, read this, talk to this person because there are certainly far more options to look at that could provide a significant change for a college or university short of the intensity of the full asset merger.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

There are pick a number, dozens, scores, maybe 100s of institutions that seem to be at least somewhat at risk financially, and they might benefit from this kind of exploration in the next few years. What are some of the models those institutions might be looking at to ensure sustainability?

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY:

Coming from a Catholic sisterhood, I've had the opportunity to observe rather closely some of the benefits of what has happened as small, independent Catholic hospitals moved into larger systems, and were able to benefit from having a large system level, the best of legal care, the best of ethical moral expertise, the complexities of finance, of construction, of renovation, of meeting state and federal regs, all of that being supported by a very top performing systems set of offices. Seems to me to have enabled

tons of really good places to keep their doors open in neighborhoods and in places where their services were critical. So, I find it strange that nobody seems to be looking at that in the private sector. The state sector is that de facto, but it's also a politically controlled entity. And I would love to see the privates and some of the faith-based start to look more broadly at what could happen if we had the nerve and the will to emulate what has happened in the health care field.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

In the conversation with John Mackintosh and Art Dunning, they said that the two key conditions that needed to be in place for colleges and universities to choose to explore some kind of transformative collaboration were putting student needs at the center of the equation and acknowledging that the status quo isn't working. How present do you think those two conditions are at most of the institutions that might be in need of this sort of analysis?

SISTER MARGARET CARNEY:

One of the things that I pondered very often in my days as a president was how quick we are to say we're here for the students. It is all about the students. They're our joy. They are our purpose for being. But when you look at the org chart, they're not there. And if you want to look at a university in the hierarchical pyramid that it is, there at the bottom. So, what I would do when I was faced with certain decisions was I would mentally turn the pyramid upside down and say, really? Students are first. They should be, in a sense, at the top. Now, that doesn't mean you go back to the medieval model where, you know, they could ride in the streets and throw their professors out. But I do think an intention in an administration to center the students always is not as easy as it sounds. I do think that looking at any one of these opportunities from the standpoint of how can it benefit our students may be the very most important question to be asked.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

That was Sister Margaret Carney, President Emeritus of Saint Bonaventure University. The discussions we just heard reinforce for me both A, the wisdom of colleges thinking long and hard about whether they're on viable paths to keep serving their students well. And B, the impediments that may lie ahead as they consider diverting significantly from their traditional ways of doing things. In case you're wondering if the issues raised in this episode from last year are still timely in the middle of 2022, please join us for next week's episode where we'll discuss the results of Inside Higher Ed's recent survey of College Business Officers, which explores how colleges are addressing the enrollment and financial pressures that many of them face. That's all for this week's episode. I'm Doug Lederman. And until next week, stay well and stay safe.