

The Bridge

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New Goddard President Addresses Challenges

By Cat Cutillo

On November 1, 2018, Dr. Bernard Bull unpacked his bags and rolled up his sleeves as the new president of Goddard College. His life had been temporarily paired down to exactly two pieces of checked luggage, a backpack, and a carry-on bag. He was a thousand miles away from his wife and two children, ages 11 and 14, who are finishing the school year in Wisconsin. But for Bull, who has lived his entire adult life in the Midwest, there was an immediate sense of belonging to the quiet Plainfield campus, which was between residencies. It was a calm before the storm that was on its way in. Winter was arriving early this year.

In mid-October, word broke publicly that Goddard had been placed on probation by the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) and given up to two years to stabilize its financial resources, leadership, and governance or it would lose its accreditation. If a college loses accreditation, it is no longer eligible for federal funding, including student financial aid.

"I knew the challenges of Goddard before I accepted the role," says Bull. "What I knew was that Goddard has a truly unique offering to the world, and it's one that's incredibly timely. It was literally launched in response to the growth of fascism in the West and the belief that the best way to fight fascism was to equip people who think for themselves and have a deep sense of ownership and agency."

Known for its low-residency model, Goddard offers bachelor of arts (BA), bachelor of fine arts (BFA), master of arts (MA), and master of fine arts (MFA) degrees on its Plainfield campus and has instructional locations in Port Townsend and Seattle in Washington. Bull says the college is also unique in that it gives narrative feedback instead of operating on a grade system and invites students to be co-creators in what they learn by having a voice in shaping their own curriculum.

"A narrative feedback system is much more authentic and tied to a culture of learning because it fits with how we learn. It's like I'm learning from a parent, a friend, or a colleague," says Bull.

As charted by the National Center for Education Statistics, enrollment at Goddard in recent years has dwindled from 802 students in the fall of 2010 to 409 students enrolled this fall, according to Goddard College officials

"I'm less than a month in and part of my job is to dig in and figure out what changed," says Bull. "If you look at the concerns from the accretor in the reports, there's nothing about academics there. In fact, Goddard continues to be a model in many ways."

Bull speculates that the growth of online institutions over the past decade, which spend millions on marketing campaigns to recruit a similar kind of student, has impacted Goddard's enrollment, as has the fact that Goddard doesn't have a strong endowment and is tuition-dependent.

"If that tuition fluctuates 10 or 20 percent, that's a massive problem for the organization," says Bull. "We're not like some of the elite colleges on the East Coast or other parts of the world where they have these massive endowments that fund their annual operating budget."

His immediate course of action is to partner and network with affinity groups and strategically launch more digital marketing. "I believe strongly, deeply that what we have to offer is of incredible value," he enthuses, "and there are many people who just don't know we exist or that we're an option."

He says he will even reconsider the current format.

"Right now, we focus very much on our low-residency program, which really meets a niche, and we've chosen not to focus upon the residential population. But that's another thing. We can look at the appropriate mix," says Bull.

Bull has been a scholar and student of alternative and innovative experimental models in education for almost two decades. He spent a dozen years at Concordia University in Wisconsin, most recently

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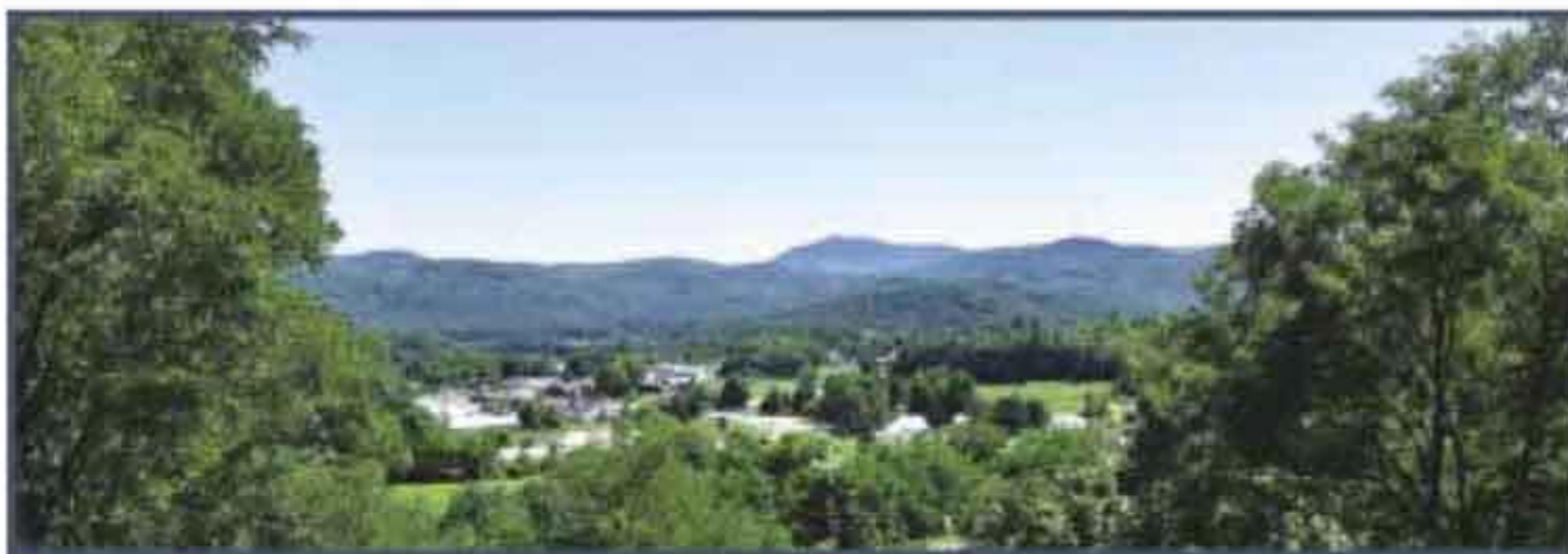
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New Goddard President Tackles Challenges Continued from Page 1

serving as chief innovation officer and vice provost for curriculum and academic innovation. There, he focused on serving post-traditional learners through off-campus locations and online and low-residency programs.

He has written several books, including *Missional Moonshots: Insight and Inspiration in Educational Innovation*, *What Really Matters?: Ten Critical Issues in Contemporary Education* and *Adventures in Self-Directed Learning*. He holds a doctorate of education in instructional technology from Northern Illinois University and two master's degrees.

He wasn't actively looking to leave Concordia, which is his alma mater, but he couldn't deny his immediate intrigue when he caught word that Goddard was looking for a president.

"This is a college that I know well. And any of us who study experimental and alternative models of education, we know Goddard really well because Goddard was the place where many of the innovations that have been embraced by colleges around the country were started," says Bull.

In fact, he says he carries the first book written about Goddard's formation and its first president, Tim Pitkin, *To Know For Real*, around in his backpack, and that he's read it a half-dozen times. For a man who admittedly clocks a hundred books per year on his reading list, that's a highly scrutinized short-list to be on.

"I'm drawn to models that celebrate the unique gifts, abilities, and passions of each individual and that seek ways to nurture that as opposed to the mass-production model of education where we're going to get as many people with as many degrees as possible—a broad, lifeless matrix that some people seem to get focused on, or standardized tests that become the tail of the wag that educates the dog," says Bull.

Giving back to education is something that resonates with him personally. When he was 12 years old, his father died of a massive heart attack, and he says it was the people in the schools that were there for him.

"Contributing to the growth of an education system that's deeply humane and that is there for people in critical times of their lives and that helps them to discover their strengths and their passions that they can use for their own well-being and to benefit others in the world, that's really meaningful work and it was deeply personal," says Bull.

The lesson came full circle 14 years ago with the birth of his daughter, when Bull began studying innovative schools and visited his first project-based, alternative high school. Something took hold, and Bull felt compelled to become a champion for alternative and experimental education.

"Because of the fact that I was a parent at that time, too," says Bull, "I just remember looking at it through those eyes and thinking this is the kind of education that I would love for my children."

He says at the core of every alternative and experimental education institution is a deep sense of learner agency. He defines this as a type of education that centers on learners realizing their voice matters and that they have the capacity to set their own goals. He says the real challenge any learning organization faces is to make sure its community is a culture of learning and not a culture of earning.

"One thing that happens in traditional education is that learners go through a process of learning how to play the game of school," says Bull. "Oftentimes what's most rewarded is how well I comply or I conform to the rules of the game."

"A culture of earning is one in which people are driven or compelled to earn the grade, achieve the point, and that's why I use that word 'game' intentionally," says Bull. "I've visited hundreds of communities and done thousands of interviews with people who lead these culture-of-learning type of communities and when you visit them you can literally feel it. It's such a tangible difference."

Bull says Goddard is one of only a dozen colleges in the country that embraces this learning-versus-earning culture. Still, it is not the only college in Vermont trying to weather a storm right now. The College of St. Joseph in Rutland was also placed on probation earlier this summer.

So how does a small college survive in Vermont these days? "The first thing I believe a college has to do whenever it finds itself in this new landscape is to really pause and ask the questions: Is what we're offering still needed and of value in the world? And are there people in the world who want what we have to offer?" says Bull.

"It's not only my belief that Goddard can survive and thrive well into the future, but my conviction that it should and needs to."



Goddard President Bernard Bull
Courtesy of Goddard College

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