

FLOURISH!

Planting a Seed to Serve
Underrepresented Communities

By **Andrea P. Cook**
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MUCH IS BEING SAID

about the stressors stretching the higher education fabric across our country. Some say that as the financial margins grow thinner and competition thickens, a bubble in our industry will burst. I have given 37 years of my life to the academy and have had the privilege of serving alongside some of the brightest minds, many of whom are suggesting that the math doesn't add up. The prediction is that many institutions will not be able to adapt quickly enough to the tides of change, and financial challenges will lead them to close.

I agree that this epoch of change in higher education will be dramatic. Some of the change variables can be controlled internally, such as a response to the demand for online education and MOOCs (massive open online courses), controlling the discount rate, etc. However, many of the changes will be driven by the need to respond to external variables, such as state and federal accountability measures, student loan markets, etc.

Transcending everything, though, will be the reality that our country's student demographics are changing rapidly.

More than any other group of institutions, I believe the CCCU's institutions are better poised to respond to and meet the needs of an emerging generation of students who will be more diverse than any other generation in American history.



Dr. Andrea Cook



Since long before I became president of Warner Pacific College, the institution has been committed to providing a Christ-centered liberal arts education that challenges students to see the interrelatedness of all things. Whether a student was passionate about the city, looking for a second chance, or desiring career advancement, our faculty and staff at Warner Pacific were and are exceptionally equipped to challenge students to think critically, adapt readily, and lead courageously.

However, early in my tenure at Warner Pacific, I began to develop concern that the institution was not fully capitalizing on the strategic position God had placed it in. Historically, Warner Pacific's enrollment has fluctuated. I quickly realized that our inability to grow was tied to our lack of clarity regarding our institutional

identity. When we considered our urban location, the changing racial demographics in our region, and our commitment to reflecting Jesus in our community, we became convicted that we were not intentionally creating strategies to serve underrepresented students from our region.

Jesus said the kingdom of God is "like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade" (Mark 4:31-32). **I've been struck that the most common images Jesus used to describe life in the kingdom of God were things that grow.** When you drop a mustard seed into the ground, it is nearly impossible to see. If it is in your pocket, it may be impossible to find. How could something so small become so impactful? Jesus

is challenging his followers to remember that the kingdom of God requires initiative and time. In due time, all will see the seemingly insignificant flourish!

In order for Warner Pacific College to live out our calling to serve students from diverse backgrounds, in 2008 we decided to plant a new seed at the college. We lowered tuition by 23 percent and launched a partnership to bring the Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative to the college.

Since then, the seed has sprouted, and Warner Pacific is growing. In the last five years, we have completely altered our institutional trajectory as we consider our strategic future. Our revenue and cost model has shifted, and we are investing much differently than before. We have pivoted our focus, and instead of hedging against the impact of the city, we are now rethinking how we serve students



who otherwise would never dream of receiving a private, Christ-centered liberal arts education. This shift is evidenced by the fact that this fall, 52 percent of the students in our incoming freshman class are students of color, and perhaps for the first time in the history of Warner Pacific, our campus community reflects the ethnic diversity of the world in which we live.

The kingdom of God, Jesus of Nazareth's central message while on earth, is reflected in a now-but-not-yet reality. This upside-down worldview practiced by billions of Christ-followers all over the world calls for a value system different than social norms. **I wonder if it is time for Christian higher education to explore how we determine what we value as we serve the next generation. In the year 2023, according to U.S. Census Bureau data, there will be more children of color in America than Caucasian children, and I am convinced that now is our most strategic window to commit our best thinking to serving students of color beyond the strategies we have employed in the past.**

At Warner Pacific, as we have increased our intentionality in serving students of color, it has become clear that we still have a lot to learn. In many ways, we are just getting started. Whether it is our financial aid philosophy, our first year learning



communities program, or how we think about student support on campus, we are rethinking how the entire Warner Pacific model works so that both the students we serve and the institution we love will flourish in the days to come.

Many of my colleagues in the CCCU would agree that Christian colleges and universities have operated from a dominant structure perspective. Will what we have done in the past work in the future? How might we take new risks now that will prepare us for tomorrow? Might now be the time to shift from a perspective of majority practice to one that is counter-cultural? Perhaps to flourish is to seek the answers to these questions: **Who did God make us to be? How do we engage an increasingly diverse world as we live fully into our mission?**



Of course, all variables are not the same across all of the CCCU's institutions. However, in spite of our differences, we do share a common commitment to serving Christ as we prepare students to lead. We challenge our students to take risks upon graduation. We challenge them to step courageously in the name of Jesus into the unknown future.

Now is our time to lead with courage. Now is our time to take new risks. We must consider how our hiring practices, our financial decisions, and our mission commitments will reflect our commitment to our king and his kingdom. The future of our country and the future of higher education will be beautifully diverse. What seed are you planting today so you might flourish tomorrow? **VA**