

Bennett College Joint Statement
Gladys A. Robinson, Chair, Board of Trustees
Suzanne Elise Walsh, President
March 20, 2021

Designing for the Future at Bennett College

A Blueprint for HERstory

For the past 18 months, the Board of Trustees, President, Senior Leadership, faculty and staff have been engaged in an exciting and challenging process to advance Bennett College while continuing to invest in the future. All of this futuristic thinking was done in the midst of a pandemic. The Board of Trustees greatly appreciates the work of the entire Bennett College team during this time of transition.

The collective learning from the past 18 months has led us to an extraordinary opportunity for a new Strategic Direction for Bennett College, approved today by the Board of Trustees.

A Strategic Direction is not the same as a Strategic Plan. The Strategic Direction is the framework for the development of the Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan requires engagement of all stakeholders to bring the Strategic Direction to life.

Bennett College has a history of radical transformation—we were founded as a co-educational institution in 1873 and became an all-women’s college in 1926. This VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) moment calls for not just radical transformation but a profoundly different approach to strategic planning. Bennett College is poised and ready for this new Strategic Direction and poised and ready to lead.

In an ever-changing world that is thirsting for extraordinary women who are ready to lead – especially during this time of a global pandemic, an economic crisis, deep polarization and calls for racial justice across the country – Bennett’s mission feels more relevant than ever.

The strategic question is can we be agile enough to respond to change and complexity in VUCA times, today and in the decades ahead, so that we can effectively assess risks and seize opportunities that Bennett College will face going forward?

Bennett stands at an inflection point. We must identify new and powerful ways of delivering on Bennett’s promise, which is the promise of a great education and an enduring commitment to the world around us. We must ensure that Bennett is agile and responsive to the everchanging marketplace and that this institution is well positioned for success. That is why we are developing a blueprint for transformational change. We continue to need the help of the entire Bennett community to strengthen this institution today, while at the same time create an exciting, inclusive future that provides high-quality education to our students, who are often those with enormous promise but limited opportunities or resources.



We have developed a Strategic Direction that we can all be both confident and excited about. It builds on the hard work, deliberation, and piloting that faculty, staff, and Senior Leadership have undertaken in beginning to reimagine, reinvent and in fact, redesign Bennett College. It also builds on conversations the President has had with students, families, and alumnae.

The new Strategic Direction provides clarity and focus as we continue to move forward together. This framework is focused on five priorities to help Bennett to be a healthy and antifragile institution into the future. The five priorities include:

- A Right-Sized Micro College Model
- A Healthy, Whole Student Experience
- Open to and for the Future
- Data, Measurement, and Learning Consciousness and Conscience
- The New Frontier of Social Justice, Civil Rights, and Technology

Commitment to a Bold New Strategic Direction

Like many institutions of higher education over the past decade, the college has faced enormous challenges. As the President has shared with the Board, faculty, staff, students, families and alumnae, in order to transform, the College must be willing to zag when others are zigging and must be ready, willing and able to make tough and strategic decisions to differentiate ourselves and better serve our students for the long-term. We have done that. In fact, the College community has spent the last 12 months focused on zagging while others were zigging:

- We were ahead of the curve on how higher education would address the pandemic. We took a proactive approach and were the first institution in North Carolina, and one of the first in the country to announce we would be virtual in fall of 2020. We understood the critical importance of this for our student population and we quickly pivoted to an online learning model.
- **Bennett was accepted as a member of the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS) October 26, 2020.** TRACS, an organization aligned with our vision and mission is recognized by both the United States Department of Education (USDOE) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the only national organization focused exclusively on providing higher education accreditation and quality assurance.

TRACS requires that member institutions meet national norms in the areas of curriculum; programs; faculty credentials; and measured student learning outcomes at the course, program and institutional levels. Our official candidacy status recognizes that the institution is in basic compliance with the TRACS standards and criteria, has been evaluated by an on-site peer team, and in the professional judgment of the evaluation team and the Accreditation Commission, this institution provides sound instruction and student services. TRACS membership means our students will continue to be eligible for Title IV federal student aid funds administered by the US Department of Education and our faculty will continue to be able to apply for and receive

federal grants from the Department of Defense, National Science Foundation and other federal agencies.

- At Bennett, we have an opportunity and a responsibility to address the significant racial disparities and exclusion in health care and outcomes, especially as it relates to gender and cultural stereotypes. We recognize the importance of emphasizing a **holistic** approach to support Bennett's student body, focusing on physical, emotional, social, economic, and spiritual well-being even in a virtual environment.

We view this with both a short- and long-term lens: 1) there is a direct correlation between modest improvements in college campus prevention efforts and gains in graduation rates; and 2) when our graduates leave Bennett, we want them to be healthy and antifragile so that they are empowered to proactively make the best choices for themselves, and have the tools they need to ensure longer, healthier lives for themselves and their communities.

- We redefined the semester: Breaking sixteen weeks into three minimesters enables students to take one or two classes at a time to help reduce cognitive load.

We have made a series of important strategic decisions regarding the operations of Bennett College to further set us up for success. We have made numerous difficult financial decisions that will enable us to improve our bottom line in the long-term by strategically allocating resources going forward. We are working to build a sustainable and flexible business model for the road ahead:

- We are planning how best to optimize the debt forgiveness of more than \$26M and CARES Act support.
- We have set realistic goals and expectations regarding future enrollment.
- We are thinking much bigger and more broadly about fundraising, which means expanding our pool of donors and advancing innovative partnerships that can and will enable us to have a much more secure financial future.
- The partnership with a new accreditor, TRACS will provide enormous support to Bennett to verify that we operate with quality and rigor thus ensuring we have a bright future.

While this new Strategic Direction will continue to require enormous discipline and tough decision making, we have momentum from the work that has already started this past year. This new path forward is setting the stage for a very bright, transformational future for Bennett, and one that we hope will be embraced and co-created by our current students, alumnae, faculty, staff, donors and this entire community.

To the future of Bennett College!

Chair Gladys A. Robinson

President Suzanne Elise Walsh



A Message from Dr. Tim Eaton, TRACS President

“As an all-female institution of higher learning, delivering quality education to women of color, Bennett College’s entrepreneurial spirit combined with its leading-edge vision for the future make it a natural fit for accreditation with TRACS,” said Timothy Eaton, Ph.D., M.Ed., TRACS President. “Bennett’s collaborative, inter-disciplinary environment is aligned with TRACS’ missional ethos and values. The immediate ongoing significance of membership with TRACS is that it enables the institution to continue access to federal student aid through Title IV funds. Our TRACS team is proactively engaging with faculty, staff, and students. We look forward to continuing to collaborate in the coming months in a deliberative, thoughtful process that allows Bennett to transition into an accredited institution.”

TRACS Membership

TRACS is comprised of 89 independent missional institutions: 76 accredited and 13 candidate institutions representing a wide range of diversity across private higher education. The membership includes institutions of divergent religious backgrounds. There are six Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), at least five predominately black institutions, numerous Title III schools, and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSI). There are four international members located in Albania, Hong Kong, Malawi, and Taipei, Taiwan. Just over half of the members participate in Title IV federal student aid.

Bennett College Board of Trustees Action Statement from Dr. Gladys A Robinson, Chair, on Behalf of the Board of Trustees

When we recruited President Suzanne Walsh to Bennett College in 2019, we sought a visionary leader with business acumen who would embrace our entrepreneurial spirit, address our most challenging issues and develop and implement a Strategic Direction that creates a college for the future and ensures our long-term sustainability.

President Walsh has exceeded our expectations in her ability to reimagine what’s possible for Bennett. In collaboration with the entire Board of Trustees and other key stakeholders, she is creating an exciting new framework for the future. It includes redefining success for this institution; creating a new model of micro colleges that will have macro impact and can be replicated in other academic settings; improving our financial position by streamlining operations, optimizing debt relief and developing new sources of revenue; and establishing a powerful partnership with our new accreditor, TRACS.

As mentioned above, a critical component of this transformation is accreditation. The Bennett Board of Trustees recently unanimously approved a resolution to withdraw its membership from SACSCOC. In February 2019, the Board made the decision to file a federal lawsuit against SACSCOC to preserve its accreditation and to address SACSCOC’s violation of Bennett’s due process rights. Despite long odds, Bennett prevailed in the litigation, keeping its SACSCOC accreditation in place for the last two years. Our success in the litigation gave us the time and flexibility to assess the best long-term accreditation partner for Bennett. Ultimately, the Board made the decision that TRACS accreditation will best position the college to continue to innovate as it moves forward with its new Strategic Direction.