WHY COLLEGES DIE

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A Case Study in How Higher Education Leaders Can Save Small Institutions

Joshua D. Reichard

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By Joshua D. Reichard

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Dedication

To Hollis L. Green, a lion of a man who had the audacity to found Omega/Oxford Graduate School, to innovate limited residency and distance adult learning before it was fashionable, and who, through many years of sacrifice, sustained the institution he founded with his own two hands. His breakthrough book, "Why Churches Die," was the inspiration for the story I tell in this book.

Of course, without Dr. Green, there would be no Omega Graduate School to turn around in the first place.

This book is dedicated to his memory.

Foreword

From 2020 to 2026, I have sat across the microphone from more than 500 college and university presidents on The EdUp Experience Podcast. I have heard every version of the turnaround story. Most of them are told from the far side of the finish line, polished, with the hard parts sanded off as talking points.

This is not that book.

When Josh Reichard told me the story of Omega Graduate School, I heard parts of a turnaround story where the hard things were celebrated, not hidden.

Here's the thing. Colleges rarely die from one catastrophe. They die slowly, from a pile of problems that everyone has learned to live with. Debt that quietly eats the future, a board that keeps deferring the hard vote, processes nobody remembers designing, or comfortability and entitlement. Josh Reichard names this pattern with uncomfortable precision: decline becomes normal, and normal becomes fatal.

When Josh took the presidency of Omega Graduate School, he took it without pay, at what he calls perhaps the lowest point in the school's history. Enrollment had fallen to 47 students. Nearly a quarter of them had financial holds. Then a pandemic arrived.

What follows is not a miracle, it is a set of decisions: selling most of an underused campus to wipe out the debt, separating governance from management, rebuilding programs around a mission rather than abandoning it, and planning for the day the turnaround team is gone.

What I respect most is Josh's honesty. He does not oversell; he tells you plainly what his evidence proves and what it doesn't. He calls the turnaround real but fragile and he says what too few

leaders will: institutions do not save themselves, and they do not kill themselves either. People do both.

If you are a president, a trustee, or a cabinet member at a small, tuition-dependent institution, read this with a pen in your hand. The three mandates and eight practices give you a working framework you can use. Josh is also clear that not every college should survive, and that deciding whether to renew, merge, or close is part of responsible stewardship too.

Higher education does not need more eulogies. It needs more leaders willing to look at the numbers, tell the truth, and act before the options run out.

This book shows you what that looks like.

Dr. Joe Sallustio
Co-Founder, The EdUp Experience

Commendations

Having spent much of my career leading higher education institutions through growth, transformation, and change, I have learned that the greatest threat to an institution's future is not always the challenges it faces, but its willingness to accept the status quo. In *Why Colleges Die*, Dr. Joshua Reichard offers a compelling and refreshingly candid examination of what happens when institutions lose their ability to adapt. He clearly addressed what courageous, disciplined leadership can do to change that trajectory. Through the remarkable turnaround of Omega Graduate School, Dr. Reichard reminds us that financial sustainability, academic relevance, organizational effectiveness, and student success are not competing priorities. They are inseparable responsibilities of institutional leadership.

What resonates most deeply with me is Dr. Reichard's recognition that preserving an institution's mission does not mean preserving every tradition, practice, or structure of its past. True stewardship requires the courage to make difficult decisions, the humility to confront uncomfortable realities, and the vision to reimagine what an institution can become. Ultimately, our responsibility as higher education leaders is not simply to ensure our institutions survive, but to ensure they remain relevant, sustainable, and worthy of the students who entrust us with their futures.

Why Colleges Die is an important and timely reminder that meaningful transformation begins with leadership willing to challenge what is, in service of what could be.

Dr. Shawntel D. Landry
Chief Academic Officer, Vocate Education Solutions
Former College President and Provost

Higher education is facing some difficult questions about institutional sustainability, leadership, and the future of colleges and universities. In *Why Colleges Die*, Dr. Joshua Reichard brings these challenges into focus through a candid and thoughtful account of Omega Graduate School's incredible turnaround. His experience offers a powerful reminder that institutional renewal requires courageous leadership, sound judgment, and a willingness to make difficult decisions. Perhaps most importantly, he demonstrates how an institution can remain deeply committed to its mission while rethinking the structures and practices needed to sustain it.

One of the strengths of this book is Dr. Reichard's ability to connect the realities of institutional leadership with practical lessons that others can apply. His framework for healing institutional wounds, restoring foundational strengths, and adapting for the future provides a useful perspective for leaders navigating financial pressures, organizational challenges, and changing expectations. I especially appreciate his emphasis on institutional stewardship and the responsibility leaders have to consider both the immediate needs of their institutions and the generations of students who will follow.

Why Colleges Die makes an important contribution to the conversation about the future of higher education. It is a compelling reminder that institutional renewal demands thoughtful leadership, a clear sense of purpose, and the courage to act when circumstances require change. I highly recommend this book to presidents, trustees, academic leaders, and anyone committed to building institutions that remain relevant, resilient, and sustainable.

Dr. Eric Klein
Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
American College of Education

Why Colleges Die: A Case Study in How Higher Education Leaders Can Save Small Institutions is a book written for such a time as this. Dr. Reichard offers a true success story and core, researched principles that other leaders can follow. For the many small colleges facing confusion and challenges, he provides a proven road map.

I had a front-row seat to the before and after of the Omega Graduate School turnaround, and this book tells the facts without embellishment. As it details, this was a long journey of systematically addressing core issues with persistence, focus, and discernment. What I saw was that the most important part of the journey was the trust Dr. Reichard built. He provided steady leadership, slowed the process so everyone could get on board, and was never afraid to speak hard truths with love. People trust a leader who listens. People trust a leader who has "skin in the game." People trust a leader who shows that he loves the people he leads. Dr. Reichard exemplifies all of these.

Leading a graduate school is complicated. It is a public role with many diverse constituents; many of whom feel they should have "line-item veto" power over each of the president's decisions. This difficulty is amplified by the tectonic shifts currently facing higher education. This book doesn't offer a magic solution that is easy and fast. Instead, it offers a time-tested process, with significant detail and examples, that any leader can follow, whether committed to saving a struggling school or taking a healthy one to greater heights.

Dr. Brad Smith
Chancellor and Former President
Bakke Graduate University

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Introduction. Why Colleges Die and How Leaders Can Save Them

Colleges do not die because of one event, decision, or leader. Decline usually begins when weak finances, falling enrollment, deferred maintenance, unclear strategy, passive governance, and loss of mission focus reinforce one another. An institution may keep its accreditation, faculty, programs, and reputation while losing the capacity to fulfill its mission or plan a credible future. A crisis of decline plagues American higher education.

Oxford professor Luke Bretherton names two dimensions of this crisis.[1] A crisis of institutional agency leaves people "acted on rather than able to act in the world": they lack the collective capacity, authority, resources, and relationships needed to change their conditions. A crisis of institutional imagination leaves them unable to envision and build the institutions required to address long-term problems. Agency without imagination can produce efficient action toward an inherited and failing model; imagination without agency can produce compelling possibilities that no one can enact. Small colleges need both: the capacity to act together in the present and the capacity to imagine, test, and institutionalize a faithful future.

[1] Bretherton, L. (2026, September 10). Made for participation. *Comment Magazine*. https://comment.org/made-for-participation/

This book recounts the recent history of Omega Graduate School (OGS), a small, faith-based nonprofit graduate institution founded in 1981. Eight years ago, we faced an existential crisis: enrollment had dropped to 47 students, 24% of our student body was on financial hold, and our graduation rate had fallen to 36%. Our retention rate sat at 69%. We carried heavy debt, no remaining capacity on our line of credit, a deteriorating campus, and friction across our administrative processes, student onboarding, and academic support. Closure was not inevitable, but the trajectory was unsustainable: we had little room for error, and incremental change would not be enough. It was clear that to fulfill our educational mission, we needed to realign our entire operation.

As a certified clinical sociologist, I approached the presidency with a diagnostic perspective. Clinical sociology connects individual experiences with organizational structures, histories, incentives, and patterns of power. That perspective helped me apply both the sociological imagination and institutional imagination to OGS's turnaround. The sociological imagination connected immediate problems such as low enrollment, debt, deferred maintenance, and weak systems to wider organizational and historical conditions. Institutional imagination helped us ask a second question: given those conditions, what kind of college could OGS responsibly become, and what programs, practices, relationships, and structures would make that future possible? Social research disciplined both tasks by helping us test explanations, identify opportunities, and distinguish plausible alternatives from wishful thinking.

Today, OGS is in a fundamentally different operational reality than it was eight years ago. As of 2026, we have grown our enrollment to nearly 130 adult learners (a 155% increase over our 2018 low point) while driving our retention rate to 98%, bringing our graduation rate to 99%, and reducing student financial holds from nearly 25% to just 3%. Our internal assessments show student satisfaction scores consistently hovering above 4.7 out of 5 across admissions, academics, and core philosophy. We have eliminated all debts and grown our endowment fund. We

have steady cash flow. We sustained healthy external financial audits. We achieved reaffirmation of accreditation. We expanded with new degree programs. We successfully led a digital transformation by adapting our distinctive learning method during the pandemic and have since sustained technological innovations to aid continuous institutional improvement and expand access for our students. [2] We have fostered a healthy organizational structure and culture, a high-functioning executive team, a healthy governing board, and an engaged and enthusiastic faculty.

On paper, these metrics describe a successful turnaround: we have expanded our reach, stabilized our balance sheet, cleaned up operational friction, and restored the internal alignment required to carry out our mission. The results show that the institution's operating condition improved. They do not, by themselves, prove academic quality, long-term stability, or the effect of any single intervention. Those judgments require evidence from finances, enrollment, student outcomes, faculty work, governance, and succession.[3]

As small-college presidents know, operational metrics alone do not guarantee immunity from the structural realities of modern higher education. This turnaround is real, but it is fragile. Small, faith-based institutions operate in an ecosystem defined by demographic shifts, volatile student markets, administrative overhead, and the constant pressure to balance tuition

[2] OGS's niche in American higher education has been its adaptation of the "Oxford Tutorial Method"; a signature practice that has been central to its teaching and learning methodology since its founding, and its integration of religion and society through social science research that leads to "constructive social change."

[3] Balogun, J., Hope-Hailey, V., Johnson, G. (Ed.), & Scholes, K. (Ed.). (2008). *Exploring strategic change* (3rd ed.). Prentice Hall.

See also a chapter I contributed to an edited volume documenting our turnaround in greater detail. Reichard, J. D. (2025). Hope for higher education on the edge: A case study in lean transformation through the Change Kaleidoscope. In S. Buszka & T. Ewest (Eds.), *Meaningful work in a post-Covid age: The impact of new technologies* (pp. 171–190). Emerald Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80592-228-520251010

dependence with academic mission. The capacity we have built since 2018 has restored our institutional agency and given us the room to act; it has not rendered us invincible. Our current stability is a hard-won platform that allows us to plan a credible future, provided we maintain the discipline, institutional imagination, and rigorous focus that brought us back from the edge.

What This Case Covers (and What It Does Not)

OGS differs from a four-year undergraduate college. We serve only graduate students, whose age, program structure, faculty relationships, financial aid, regulatory requirements, recruitment, persistence, and professional goals may differ from those of undergraduates. These differences limit how directly other institutions can apply our experience.

OGS is nonprofit, but gifts provide only a small fraction of our operating budget. Donors supported accreditation and authorization, student assistance, and selected transitions before operating revenue could cover them. Recurring operations depend mainly on tuition, enrollment, and expense control. Restricted gifts could not be used as unrestricted cash. Philanthropy therefore supported defined needs during the transition rather than serving as the main source of operating revenue.

Participation in federal Title IV student-aid programs widened access and increased our responsibilities. Graduate students do not receive Pell Grants, so many rely on loans or other financial commitments. We therefore treated accurate administration and candid discussion of cost, borrowing, repayment, academic expectations, and withdrawal as part of our educational duty. Financial aid decisions had to account for student risk, administrative capacity, mission, and public requirements.

Our case offers eight practices for other leaders to adapt: accurate diagnosis, disciplined finance, clear governance, mission focus, process simplification, staged innovation, organizational health, and strategic succession. The three mandates organize these practices into a usable sequence while showing how

institutional agency and institutional imagination depend on one another. *Heal the Wounds* restores agency by helping people diagnose connected causes, regain financial control, clarify authority, and repair relationships so the institution can act rather than merely react. *Restore the Foundations* joins agency to imagination by identifying what must endure and redesigning programs, processes, technology, and organizational life around that purpose. *Adapt for the Future* institutionalizes imagination through succession: it preserves resources, knowledge, authority, relationships, and the capacity to keep learning after current leaders leave. The mandates identify dominant emphases rather than exclusive categories; action and imagination recur throughout all three. Leaders should apply this framework within their own missions, regulations, resources, and student populations rather than copy OGS's financing, aid, programs, delivery model, or fundraising.

What Other Leaders Can Learn from Our Case

The argument is based on one institution I know from the inside. OGS is not a universal model, and other colleges should not copy its path without considering their own students, resources, regulations, and culture. The case is useful because many leaders face the same core problems: recognizing danger, governing under pressure, restoring financial stability, aligning programs with mission and demand, and making improvements last.

The evidence includes audited statements, enrollment and accreditation records, board materials, program documents, institutional communications, and reflections written during the turnaround. Each source answers different questions. Audits evaluate financial reporting, enrollment records show participation rather than quality, and leadership communications present decisions from leadership's perspective. I therefore distinguish documented facts, reported results, interpretations, proposals, and claims that still require evidence.

Our priorities changed as conditions improved. The practices overlapped rather than belonging exclusively to one stage, and quantitative claims still required supporting evidence.

Institutions Are Not People; People Are Their Stewards

I use the terms institutional agency and institutional imagination throughout this book, but neither term should imply that a college is a person. A college is a legal and social entity through which people coordinate action across time. It acts only through regents, executives, faculty, staff, students, policies, resources, routines, and relationships. Institutional agency therefore means the organized capacity of those people to interpret conditions, make legitimate decisions, mobilize resources, and sustain action in the institution's name. Institutional imagination means their shared capacity to envision forms of institutional life not exhausted by inherited arrangements and to translate those possibilities into governable practices. When a college declines, survives, or renews, those outcomes arise from what people do, fail to do, permit, correct, imagine, and sustain.

For that reason, institutional stewardship is a human responsibility. People are entrusted to carry out the mission, govern authority, protect resources, maintain records and systems, care for relationships, and correct decisions that place the institution at risk. Shared responsibility does not mean equal authority: boards govern, presidents lead within delegated limits, faculty exercise academic authority, staff administer essential work, and students and other stakeholders contribute evidence from their experience. Clear governance, reliable information, defined roles, workable systems, and accountable relationships help people fulfill these obligations beyond any one leader. Debt, poor reporting, confused authority, weak systems, neglect, and fear do not simply happen to an institution; they persist because people create them, tolerate them, or fail to correct them. Institutions cannot kill or save themselves. Only people can do so through the quality of their stewardship.

The Book's Main Argument

When I became president, I gave the Board of Regents and other stakeholders three mandates from which I would lead: *heal the wounds*, *restore the foundations*, and *adapt for the future*. Together, they required us to repair institutional damage, recover our educational purpose, and change the means of carrying it forward without abandoning the mission.

The three mandates organize the story; the eight practices explain the work. The chapters show how those practices overlap, reinforce one another, and make the mandates operational rather than assigning each practice to a rigid stage. Enrollment serves as a practical test of whether the framework is working as a whole.

I accepted the OGS presidency with great reluctance. The Board of Regents asked me to step into the role without compensation at perhaps the lowest point in the institution's thirty-year history, and I had no way of knowing that a global pandemic was just around the corner. I accepted as a matter of conviction and stewardship because I believed OGS was worth saving. Leading the turnaround became one of the greatest challenges of my life, but also one of the most rewarding. I had the privilege of serving alongside a supportive board, our chancellor and founder, and an executive team that stood by me through repeated setbacks, difficult decisions, and hard-won progress. We reached this point together and learned these practices through shared work. I wrote this book to share what those experiences taught us with others who may be leading small institutions they, too, believe are worth saving.

Though the situation was dire and I inherited serious problems, I chose not to blame-shift. Instead, I did my best to honor those who came before me as both pioneers and protectors of the institution I was now tasked with saving. One of my first acts shortly after my appointment by the board (and a month or so before my official start date), I invited the founder and past presidents to a summit on-campus to acknowledge past contributions and commit to supporting the turnaround ahead. Healing the

wounds is not just about addressing structural problems, but healing relationships as well.

Identifying a Problem and a Response

The chapter titles echo Hollis L. Green's *Why Churches Die* by pairing a recurring problem with a practical response. The three mandates supply the larger structure, and the eight practices carry the transferable lessons. Rather than offering a formula, the chapters show how OGS corrected damage, recovered institutional purpose, and changed the means required for survival.

How the Book Is Organized

Part I, *Heal the Wounds*, shows accurate diagnosis in Chapter 1, disciplined finance in Chapters 2-4, and clear governance in Chapters 4-5. Part II, *Restore the Foundations*, uses enrollment in Chapter 6 as a test of the full framework, then develops staged innovation in Chapter 7, process simplification in Chapter 8, mission focus in Chapter 9, and organizational health in Chapter 10. Part III, *Adapt for the Future*, presents strategic succession in two dimensions: Chapter 11 preserves usable financial capacity, and Chapter 12 transfers authority, records, operating knowledge, relationships, and leadership responsibility. This arrangement follows the chapter sequence while making clear that each practice has a primary home but also supports the other mandates.

Alignment of the Three Mandates, Eight Practices, and Chapters

PRACTICES	CHAPTER(S)
HEAL THE WOUNDS (INSTITUTIONAL AGENCY)	
ACCURATE DIAGNOSIS	1. Colleges Die When Decline is Normalized; Leaders Must Diagnose Real Problems
DISCIPLINED FINANCE	2. Colleges Die When Debt Constricts Choice; Leaders Must Restore Financial Flexibility 3. Colleges Die When Cash Runs Short; Leaders Must Align Revenue and Expenses 4. Colleges Die Without Financial Accountability; Leaders Must Embrace Audits
CLEAR GOVERNANCE	5. Colleges Die When Governance Delays Action; Leaders Must Drive Board Reform
RESTORE THE FOUNDATIONS (INSTITUTIONAL AGENCY)	
STAGED INNOVATION	7. Colleges Die When Degrees Do Not Meet Student Needs; Leaders Must Revise Academic Portfolios
PROCESS SIMPLIFICATION	8. Colleges Die When Technology Disrupts Learning; Leaders Must Prioritize Methods Over Means
MISSION FOCUS	9. Colleges Die When They Lose Distinctiveness; Leaders Must Protect Institutional Identity
ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH	10. Colleges Die When Teams Cannot Work Together; Leaders Must Clarify Roles
ADAPT FOR THE FUTURE (INSTITUTIONAL IMAGINATION)	
STRATEGIC SUCCESSION	11. Colleges Die When the Present Consumes the Future; Leaders Must Protect Resources 12. Colleges Die Without Continuity; Leaders Must Plan for Succession
CROSS-FRAMEWORK TEST	
ALL EIGHT PRACTICES	6. Colleges Die When Enrollment Declines; Leaders Must Propel Recruitment and Retention

Part I: Heal the Wounds

Before our turnaround, Omega Graduate School (OGS) sustained unresolved financial, operational, governance, and relational damage. *Heal the Wounds* applies the first three transferable practices most directly. Accurate diagnosis names connected causes rather than isolated symptoms; disciplined finance restores control over debt, liquidity, recurring revenue, expenses, reserves, and reporting; and clear governance assigns authority, requires reliable evidence, and turns decisions into accountable action. Chapters 1–5 show these practices stopping further damage and reopening choices that debt, scarcity, secrecy, and delay had closed. Mission focus, process simplification, organizational health, and strategic succession also appear here as safeguards: repair must protect the institution's purpose, reduce avoidable burden, rebuild trust and coordination, and avoid creating new dependencies for future leaders. Healing therefore establishes the control and credibility required to restore the foundations.

1. Colleges Die When Decline is Normalized; Leaders Must Diagnose Real Problems

OGS was already on an unsustainable trajectory. Its financial, enrollment, facility, and operating constraints reinforced one another and threatened the school's ability to meet payroll, maintain programs, satisfy regulators, and remain independent. We began by mapping how enrollment, cash, debt, facilities, programs, compliance, and staffing affected one another. Then we identified the constraints making the other problems worse and addressed the risks in order. Other leaders can use the same method: map the major risks on one page, identify the binding constraint, assign a responsible leader and deadline, and review progress each month.

We Inherited Limited Options

Omega Graduate School was founded on a distinctive mission: equipping working adults to conduct rigorous social research without uprooting their lives or careers. Long before

online and hybrid learning became common in higher education, OGS pioneered a limited residency model tailored specifically for adult learners. The model combined intensive, short-term on-campus residential seminars with independent, guided field research; the institution created a pathway for full-time professionals to earn terminal degrees. This approach carved out a unique niche at the intersection of practical social science, research methodology, and faith-informed practice.[4]

For decades, dedicated leaders and board members stewarded this mission with deep commitment, steering the institution through changing regulatory environments and evolving academic standards. They built a warm community culture and established a legacy of applied research that served practitioners across various fields. However, like many small, independent graduate institutions, OGS faced growing structural pressures over time. Maintaining a physical campus footprint created ongoing operational overhead, while shifting demographics, increasing administrative compliance costs, and changing expectations for digital delivery began to strain institutional resources.

By the time I stepped into the presidency, the institution had reached an inflection point. The core limited residency model remained sound, but the administrative and financial models supporting it needed urgent modernization. Overhead expenses were consuming revenue that needed to be reinvested in academic technology, student support, and strategic growth. Enrollment had declined and plateaued, and the school was carrying unmanageable debt tied to its physical infrastructure. The dedication of those who came before me had kept the doors open and the mission alive. However, the reality was clear: OGS required a fundamental operational transformation to ensure its survival, honor its founding vision, and secure its long-term future.

Thus, my choices were already narrow. Too little recurring revenue had to support accumulated obligations and neglected needs, leaving almost no capacity to absorb another setback or invest in recovery. Each problem fed the next: weak cash flow

[4] From its founding, OGS was distinctively *not* a seminary and did not teach theology or biblical studies as part of its curriculum.

encouraged delay, delay increased future costs, and those costs further reduced room to act.

The condition of our facilities and technology taught us that deferred maintenance is not simply a financial calculation. It shapes safety, access, confidence, and the quality of daily work. A realistic capital plan makes visible what has been postponed, what may fail, who carries responsibility, and what renewal will cost. Shared or leased facilities can serve well when access and responsibility are dependable. Deferral may sometimes be unavoidable, but repeated deferral quietly metastasizes into an obligation passed to others.

OGS did not face one isolated problem. It faced a system of reinforcing problems. That distinction matters because a narrow remedy can make the overall condition worse. An enrollment campaign cannot fix a cost structure that turns new revenue into recurring deficits. A loan can ease immediate pressure while increasing long-term risk. Deferred maintenance can preserve cash this year while creating a larger bill later. Leaders must evaluate how a proposed solution shifts costs and risks across the institution.

When Leaders Treat Decline as Normal

Decline accelerates when leaders redefine recurring problems as normal. A deficit appears manageable because it has lasted for years. A maintenance backlog is part of everyday campus life. Small enrollment losses seem tolerable even when their cumulative effect is severe. Leaders then mistake lower expectations for resilience. Resilience means sustaining the mission under pressure. Normalization means accepting weaker performance without an adequate response. Turnaround leadership therefore requires change deep enough to alter the habits and assumptions that produced the decline, not only adjustments at the margins.[5]

[5] Quinn, R. E. (1996). *Deep change: Discovering the leader within*. Jossey-Bass.

The first task in a turnaround is to determine which conditions are temporary, which are structural, which are symptoms, and which are causes. For OGS, a delayed tuition payment or an unexpected repair could create a temporary cash shortage. However, the exhausted line of credit and the mismatch between recurring revenue and recurring expenses were structural constraints. Low enrollment was both a visible symptom and a cause of further weakness: it reduced tuition revenue, narrowed cohorts and course options, raised per-student costs, and made investment in recruitment, technology, and student support more difficult. Deferred maintenance was likewise a symptom of scarce cash and delayed decisions, yet it became a cause when deteriorating facilities demanded larger future expenditures and weakened confidence in the institution. We therefore did not treat each problem with a separate quick fix. We mapped how enrollment, debt, liquidity, facilities, governance, and operating systems reinforced one another, identified the constraint most likely to worsen the rest, and acted in sequence (for example, controlling recurring costs and addressing debt before committing scarce resources to any expansion). That distinction kept us from confusing short-term relief with recovery: a loan might bridge a timing gap, a one-time gift might pay a defined expense, and a recruitment campaign might produce inquiries, but none of those actions would correct an operating model that continued to consume more cash and capacity than OGS could sustain.

Leaders must also separate evidence from fear. Alarmism can produce indiscriminate cuts, defensive governance, and public claims that accelerate decline. Complacency can be just as damaging. Leaders should say only what the evidence supports: leaders may not know whether a college will close, but they may know that the current path is unsustainable; faculty may value a program academically, but its design may exceed available capacity; a tradition may express the mission, but its current form may no longer serve it.

Truthful Diagnosis Creates Better Choices

Truthful diagnosis identifies the conditions that threaten the institution, separates causes from symptoms, and shows how the problems reinforce one another. At OGS, we stopped treating low enrollment, debt, weak cash flow, deferred maintenance, and poor systems as separate issues. We mapped their connections, identified the constraint worsening the others, and set priorities accordingly.

For us, truthful diagnosis was driven by the sociological imagination: the discipline of connecting immediate experiences to wider structures and historical conditions. It also prepared the ground for institutional imagination. Once we could see how enrollment, debt, facilities, governance, and operating systems had combined to produce OGS's crisis, we could ask which arrangements were contingent rather than essential and what different institutional forms might address the same mission more faithfully. Social research practices familiar to OGS faculty and students, including triangulating records, testing competing explanations, distinguishing correlation from causation, and revising conclusions when evidence changed, disciplined both the diagnosis and the alternatives we considered. As president, I used those skills to help leaders move from anecdote and blame toward a shared account of the problems and a credible range of actions.

Institutional decline is neither wholly chosen nor wholly imposed. External conditions create real constraints, but leaders' responses determine how quickly those constraints narrow the future. Our turnaround began when we treated OGS's problems as a connected system and acted in a deliberate order.

Chapter Summary

Colleges lose options when leaders treat connected problems as isolated events or accept recurring decline as normal. The practical response is to build a one-page risk map linking

enrollment, cash, debt, facilities, programs, compliance, and staffing; identify the constraint worsening the others; assign one accountable leader; set a deadline; and review the evidence monthly. Leaders can reinforce this sequence by creating urgency, forming a guiding group, clarifying the direction, removing barriers, and consolidating early gains.[6] Recovery is more likely when leaders address causes in a deliberate order rather than launch disconnected fixes. Once leaders can see the system clearly, they can confront the financial commitment most likely to narrow every other choice: debt.

[6] Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading change*. Harvard Business School Press.

2. Colleges Die When Debt Constricts Choice; Leaders Must Restore Financial Flexibility

Debt service consumed money OGS needed for recruitment, academic improvement, maintenance, and reserves, while a fully used line of credit left little room to absorb lower revenue or an unexpected expense. We listed every obligation, controlled recurring costs, separated essential work from inherited operations, sold the campus property, repaid prior debt, and began building reserves. The chapter explains how those choices restored financial flexibility and changed the risks the institution could responsibly accept.

Before accepting a new obligation, we learned to ask three questions: What capacity will the borrowing create? What recurring revenue will repay it? Which essential activities will be cut if the forecast is wrong? These questions made debt a board and leadership decision, not just an accounting matter.

Debt Exhausts Money Needed for the Future

Borrowing brings future revenue into the present. It works when the capacity created by the loan produces enough dependable revenue or savings to repay it. When the forecast fails, debt payments must come from money intended for other purposes. The larger the gap between forecast and performance, the more debt limits strategy instead of supporting it.

This risk is especially serious in tuition-dependent institutions. Enrollment can fall quickly, but many costs cannot. Faculty commitments, regulatory requirements, student support, insurance, technology, and facilities set practical limits on immediate cuts. Debt payments still come due on schedule. Revenue can therefore decline faster than the institution can reduce its obligations.

Cash on Hand Determines How Much Time You Have

A college may have enough assets to meet its obligations over time and still lack cash when a payment is due. It may own valuable land or buildings and still be unable to meet payroll, insurance, utility, or vendor payments. Assets that cannot be converted quickly do not replace operating cash.

Immediate financial flexibility asks whether the institution has enough available cash to meet near-term obligations. Our fully used line of credit showed how little flexibility remained. The line had previously covered short operational gaps between receipts and expenses. Once it was exhausted, a delayed tuition payment, unexpected repair, or regulatory cost could no longer be absorbed through short-term borrowing. We had to judge every decision first by whether we could pay for it.

Weak liquidity also shortens the period available for a remedy to work. Recruitment spending may take months to produce enrollment. New programs require approval, marketing, faculty preparation, and several admission cycles. Fundraising depends on relationships built over time. When cash is scarce, leaders

may be forced to favor immediate returns even when longer-term investments would improve the institution's position.

Financial Pressure Can Pull the Institution Away from Its Mission

Financial pressure can distort mission in two ways. Leaders may defend every existing program as essential even when its cost, scale, or delivery is no longer sustainable. Alternatively, they may pursue any program, partnership, or market that appears likely to generate cash, even when it weakens academic coherence or exceeds the capacity of faculty and staff. Mission should determine what leaders are trying to sustain. Disciplined finance determines whether they have the resources to sustain it.

We therefore separated educational purpose from inherited delivery methods. Our distinctive approach to teaching and learning required disciplined inquiry, direct exchange, and individual student attention. It did not require every existing schedule, location, technology, or travel pattern. That distinction allowed us to preserve the learning while changing forms that created unnecessary cost or barriers.

Boards Need a Clear View of Debt and Risk

Leaders cannot manage debt when reports are fragmented, assumptions are overly optimistic, or technical language hides the consequences. Boards do not need to do accountants' work, but they must understand total obligations, payment schedules, restrictions, available cash, and realistic revenue scenarios. Borrowing also distributes risk among current and future students, employees, donors, creditors, and future leaders.

Boards should ask what each payment prevents the institution from funding, which assumptions support new borrowing, and whether an asset can be sold or used without damaging the

mission. These questions keep the board focused on risk and purpose without drawing it into daily management.

Financial Recovery Must Follow the Right Order

Disciplined finance begins with a complete view of debt, cash, recurring revenue, and unavoidable costs. Leaders should separate temporary emergency measures from changes that improve the operating model, protect essential academic and regulatory work, and build enough liquidity to support later investments. For OGS, financial stabilization meant reducing obligations, matching recurring expenses to recurring revenue, and building reserves rather than postponing the next shortfall.

Cost reductions are necessary only when they improve viability. Cutting recruitment may save cash while accelerating enrollment loss. Deferring maintenance may balance one budget while increasing later costs. Reducing academic support may weaken persistence and reputation. Leaders should distinguish expenses that support recovery, expenses that can be redesigned, and expenses that no longer serve a defensible purpose.

Revenue growth also requires control. Additional students help only when tuition is collected, faculty and support capacity can serve them, added costs are understood, and academic quality is protected. New programs may diversify revenue but also create new fixed costs. Gifts may strengthen reserves or endowment, but restricted funds may not be available for operations. Leaders must consider the timing, reliability, restrictions, and cost of revenue, not just the total amount.

Offload Non-Revenue-Generating "Assets"

As if the situation I inherited at OGS was not dire enough, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred less than three months into my presidency. Because we were structured as a limited residency model, on-campus activities were essential to both sustaining enrollment and generating revenue. In the moment, it felt

like the pandemic was the death knell for OGS. Neither the infrastructure nor the capital was there to transition quickly to fully remote instruction.

The pandemic sent shockwaves through higher education and forced institutions to rethink their entire delivery model. Higher education institutions shut down their campuses and shifted to remote instruction. We lacked the resources to quickly follow suit.

However, our small administrative footprint and existing blended format allowed us to adapt quickly without losing momentum. We used the resources we had, including our proprietary learning management system and free platforms wherever we could find them. We protected our community, stabilized core operations, and ensured our doctoral students experienced little interruption in their research or residency requirements. Navigating that crisis forced us to streamline our administrative workflows, eliminate unnecessary bureaucratic friction, and accelerate our adoption of technological infrastructure. Surprisingly, the pandemic was the very catalyst OGS needed to offload its most draining, non-revenue-generating asset: its physical campus.

The reality was that the campus was grossly underutilized. Six buildings across more than twenty acres of land were used for short-term residencies twice per year. In fact, the campus was occupied only twelve weeks out of the year, and given the effective transition to fully remote instruction, water line breaks, roof repairs, landscaping, and repaving of parking lots suddenly seemed far less important. Because our campus had been remortgaged multiple times, debt service was crippling. Maintenance and insurance were disproportionate to utilization. Like most underutilized buildings, the campus was more of a liability than an asset.

To secure our long-term viability, in 2022 we made the hard decision to sell most, though not all, of our physical campus property. That single transaction changed our institutional trajectory completely. When we sold most of the aging campus, we liquidated costly real estate, paid off outstanding obligations,

eliminated all institutional debt, and had money left in the bank. We transitioned OGS into a nimble, debt-free institution, drastically lowering our overhead costs while keeping our academic standards and degree-granting integrity fully intact.

Debt Does Not Have to Determine the Future

Debt did not cause our decline by itself; enrollment, deferred maintenance, programs, governance, and sector pressures also mattered. Excessive obligations and exhausted liquidity nevertheless made every other problem harder to address. Financial recovery restored our ability to choose.

Reducing obligations, repaying prior debt, and establishing cash reserves changed what leaders could do.[7] These actions reduced immediate claims on revenue and created more room to invest and respond to problems. Transaction records and audited statements are still necessary to show exactly which obligations were eliminated and how the asset disposition affected OGS's finances.

Debt limits mission when past commitments consume the money and attention needed for current work. The answer is not to reject all borrowing or assume that growth will solve the problem. Leaders must judge each obligation by what it enables, how it will be repaid, and what will be cut if the forecast fails. For us, reducing debt was only the first step. We also needed recurring revenue to cover recurring expenses and leave cash for investment and unexpected costs.

[7] We used the proceeds of the campus sale to repay prior debt, and establishing cash reserves. Transaction records and audited financial statements remain the appropriate sources for the exact obligations eliminated and the sale's financial effect. We kept one building a few acres, which now helps our balance sheet as an asset with no associated debts.

Chapter Summary

Debt grows dangerous when repayment depends on optimistic enrollment or revenue assumptions and consumes funds needed for essential work. Leaders should maintain a complete schedule of obligations, payment dates, restrictions, and available cash. Before approving new borrowing, the board should require documented answers to three questions: what capacity will the obligation create, what recurring revenue will repay it, and what essential work will be reduced if the forecast fails? Debt reduction must also be paired with realistic recurring revenue, expense control, and reserve targets. Reducing debt restores breathing room, but leaders still need cash to arrive when obligations are due. Chapter 3 therefore turns from the size of commitments to the timing of money.

3. Colleges Die When Cash Runs Short; Leaders Must Align Revenue and Expenses

Limited cash kept leaders at OGS focused on the next payment rather than the next strategic priority. Low tuition revenue and no remaining credit meant that a delayed payment, repair, payroll cycle, or regulatory expense could create an immediate shortfall. We matched recurring expenses to recurring revenue, redesigned costs, increased enrollment carefully, and built reserves. The central lesson was simple: a balanced annual budget is not enough if cash does not balance when obligations are due.

Cash flow answers a basic operating question: Will the institution have enough available money, at the right time, to meet its obligations? An annual budget may balance even when the timing of receipts and payments repeatedly forces borrowing or delay. Reliable positive cash flow gave us the time to make and carry out longer-term decisions.

The Timing of Cash Determines What the Institution Can Do

Colleges do not receive and spend money evenly throughout the year. Tuition may arrive at the start of a term, while payroll, technology, insurance, utilities, debt service, and student support continue every month. Gifts may be seasonal, and grant reimbursements may arrive after expenses are paid. An annual budget can therefore be balanced even when the institution lacks cash at particular points in the year.

A short timing gap is not necessarily a structural problem. A line of credit can bridge a predictable interval between expenses and receipts. The danger is when short-term borrowing covers a recurring operating deficit. In that case, borrowing moves the deficit into the next period, adds interest, and leaves less credit available for the next shortfall.

More Cash Gives Leaders More Time to Decide

Immediate cash pressure changes which decisions leaders can consider. They tend to favor actions that produce quick savings or revenue. Some are necessary, but they can displace faculty development, program design, donor cultivation, preventive maintenance, assessment, technology planning, and partnerships. Those activities require spending now and may not produce results for months or years.

Positive cash flow does not prove that the strategy is sound. It does give the strategy time to work. Leaders should test whether recurring receipts cover recurring expenses, whether the remaining margin can withstand normal variation, and whether the margin is being used for reserves, repairs, and needed capacity rather than absorbed by new commitments.

You Cannot Control Cash You Cannot See

Leaders need more than annual budgets, audited statements, and balance sheets. They also need a current view of expected receipts, scheduled payments, restrictions on funds, and likely departures from plan. Forecasts should distinguish committed revenue from hoped-for revenue, unrestricted cash from restricted assets, and flexible expenses from obligations that cannot be delayed without serious consequences.

Conservative forecasting protects leaders from avoidable surprises. They should not assume that every admitted student will enroll, every student will persist, every pledge will arrive on time, or every expense will stay within estimate. They should model a credible range of outcomes, state the assumptions behind each one, and decide in advance what actions will follow if results depart from the central forecast.

Not All Revenue Is Equally Useful

Different kinds of revenue provide different levels of support. One-time gifts can meet urgent needs or fund a specific investment, but they do not support recurring operations. Restricted gifts can advance their designated purposes but may not be available for payroll or general expenses. Tuition is dependable only when recruitment, enrollment, persistence, pricing, and collection remain stable. Program revenue should be judged after the full cost of delivering the program is included.

Enrollment growth expanded OGS's potential tuition base, but it did not by itself establish financial health. Its value depended on tuition collection, student persistence, faculty capacity, financial aid, and the cost of serving more students. The supported conclusion is narrower: enrollment growth reduced one major constraint on recurring revenue. A stronger claim requires comparison of enrollment, collected tuition, expenses, and cash balances across the same period.

That distinction is especially important when leaders look to new programs for cash-flow growth. A program strengthens cash flow only when it converts demonstrated demand into collected tuition soon enough to exceed the added costs of approval, curriculum development, marketing, faculty, technology, administration, and student support.

For OGS, program innovation therefore had to do more than attract interest: it had to produce enrollment and persistence at a scale and pace that generated a dependable contribution to recurring operations. We tested demand, secured approval, confirmed faculty and delivery capacity, monitored the path from inquiry to paid enrollment, and delayed fixed commitments until actual results justified them. This staged approach allowed new programs to expand the tuition base without creating expenses that arrived before the revenue or locked the institution into another structural deficit.

Technology Changes the Cost of Serving Students Online

Program revenue depended not only on enrollment but on the cost of delivery. After downsizing the campus, OGS could serve additional students without a comparable increase in year-round facility, travel, and residency expenses. That advantage was conditional: remote and hybrid delivery still required reliable technology, faculty preparation, instructional design, technical support, and selected in-person residencies. We therefore treated delivery design as part of a program's full financial model rather than assuming that online access automatically produced savings.

For that reason, we assessed delivery choices by their net effects on both learning and cash flow. Lower cost did not justify a model that weakened persistence, tuition collection, or educational quality. At the same time, inherited facilities, travel, and scheduling patterns were not defensible if they absorbed the revenue enrollment produced. We identified which forms of

physical presence were essential, estimated the full cost of each option, and asked whether resulting tuition receipts would cover those costs and contribute to reserves.

Operating Margins and Reserves Create Stability

Positive cash flow should leave money available after current expenses. That operating margin absorbs normal variation without immediate borrowing. Unrestricted reserves protect against larger disruptions and allow leaders to respond before a problem becomes a crisis. Endowment may support long-term continuity, but restrictions, spending rules, and market exposure make it different from operating cash. Operating margin, reserves, and endowment all reduce risk, but they cannot be used interchangeably.

Reliable payments also strengthen confidence. Employees receive pay on time, vendors see invoices honored, students experience stable services, auditors receive orderly records, and donors see evidence of control. Cash alone does not create trust, but repeated payment failures quickly weaken it.

Boards Decide How to Use Financial Flexibility

When immediate cash pressure eases, boards face competing requests for deferred maintenance, compensation, technology, academic expansion, debt reduction, reserves, and endowment. Each may be justified. The board must decide which uses protect the institution's ability to meet commitments over time rather than spend every available dollar.

Boards should adopt policies for minimum liquidity, reserves, debt reduction, capital needs, and approval of new recurring costs. These policies should guide judgment rather than replace it. Their purpose is to prevent leaders from treating a temporary gain as permanent revenue.

Cash Flow Gives the Mission Time to Work

Improved cash flow did not turn OGS around by itself. Enrollment, programs, technology, governance, reporting, targeted philanthropy, and the work of faculty and staff all contributed. Because gifts supplied less than 10 percent of our operating budget, recurring tuition revenue and expense control remained the main sources of recovery. Positive cash flow gave us the time and flexibility to improve the rest.

Improved liquidity accompanied revenue growth, expense control, and process redesign. We reviewed business and academic work for duplication, unnecessary steps, and avoidable burden. Our policy was to keep recurring expenses within recurring revenue based on realistic tuition and enrollment. This policy supports a limited conclusion: cash improvement is more credible when revenue growth is paired with cost control and simpler processes. Audited statements are still needed to establish the size and duration of the margin.

Lean Process Improvement Reduces Unnecessary Expenses

Lean process design became especially important after the pandemic because OGS could no longer operate as though its inherited campus, delivery model, and administrative routines would return to normal. [8] In practical terms, we had to behave like a small technology startup: we were trying to build a sustainable operating model under extreme uncertainty, with little capital, limited staff, changing student expectations, and no margin for a long, expensive implementation that might fail. We therefore treated major changes as testable assumptions rather than permanent commitments. We built the smallest workable

[8] Ries, E. (2011). T*he lean startup: How today's entrepreneurs use continuous innovation to create radically successful businesses*. Crown Business.

version of synchronous instructional sessions, admissions workflow, student-support process, or internal system; measured whether students could use it, whether faculty and staff could sustain it, whether it improved persistence or conversion, and whether the resulting tuition and savings strengthened cash flow; then revised, expanded, or abandoned it based on the evidence. This build-measure-learn discipline let us preserve scarce cash while learning quickly. It also kept technology subordinate to the turnaround: the goal was not to imitate a software company, but to use startup methods to discover which combination of programs, digital delivery, staffing, and processes could generate dependable recurring revenue without rebuilding the fixed-cost structure that had endangered OGS before the pandemic. The same logic guided each workflow: eliminate work that no longer served a necessary purpose, simplify work by reducing steps and approvals, and automate only after the process was clear. Automating a poorly designed process would merely preserve the same burden in software.

The financial value of that lean discipline appeared in cash flow. Removing duplicate approvals, unnecessary handoffs, manual rework, and avoidable technology costs reduced the recurring expense required to recruit, enroll, teach, bill, and support each student. Faster admissions and billing processes also shortened the interval between a prospective student's decision and the collection of tuition. At the same time, clearer academic and support workflows reduced errors, delays, and withdrawals that could interrupt expected receipts. Lean process improvement therefore strengthened both sides of cash flow: it helped cash arrive sooner and more reliably, and it kept more of that cash available after essential work was completed.

These gains became institutional capacity only when recurring receipts continued to cover recurring expenses. They also had to leave funds for uncertainty, investment, and repair rather than being absorbed immediately by new commitments. Consecutive clean audits were one indication that the controls and routines supporting this stronger cash position were becoming repeatable rather than temporary for OGS.

Chapter Summary

A college can report a balanced budget and still fail because receipts do not arrive when payments are due. Persistent timing gaps force leaders into short-term decisions and can disguise a recurring operating deficit. Leaders need a rolling cash forecast that distinguishes committed from hoped-for revenue, unrestricted from restricted funds, and flexible from unavoidable expenses. Boards should set policies for minimum cash, reserves, and approval of new recurring costs, while directing temporary surpluses to resilience before adding commitments. Cash forecasts guide daily decisions, but boards and stakeholders also need confidence in the records behind them. Chapter 4 explains how independent audits provide that assurance.

4. Colleges Die Without Financial Accountability; Leaders Must Embrace Audits

OGS's financial improvement needed independent verification. Fragmented records, unclear restrictions, unrecorded liabilities, or optimistic assumptions could have hidden serious problems from the board and outside stakeholders. We improved documentation, monthly reconciliations, internal controls, board review, and annual external audits. Several consecutive clean audits showed that the institution could repeatedly produce reliable financial statements. However, they did not establish academic quality, sound strategy, future solvency, or the resolution of every operating risk.

A clean audit means that the financial statements are fairly presented under the applicable accounting rules. It gives the board and outside stakeholders a common set of financial statements to review, while the next section explains the opinion's scope and limitations.

What an Audit Does (and Does Not Prove)

A "clean audit" usually means that the auditor issued an unmodified opinion on the financial statements. The opinion indicates that the statements are fairly presented within the audit's scope and materiality standards. It does not mean that no error occurred, no control weakness exists, or fraud is impossible. It also does not establish that the institution's strategy is sound. The audit evaluates financial reporting; the board and administration must decide what the results require.

An audit is useful because its scope is defined. A clean opinion supports reliance on the financial statements, but it does not prove that the turnaround is complete. Leaders must consider cash flow, enrollment, debt, reserves, program results, and governance records together before drawing broader conclusions.

Preparing for an Audit Improves Daily Financial Practice

The benefits of an audit begin before the auditor arrives. Readiness requires documented transactions, reconciled accounts, tracked restrictions, recorded liabilities, and support for major estimates and judgments. When staff maintain these records throughout the year, the same information can guide current decisions. When they assemble records only at year-end, the audit turns into an avoidable emergency.

Small colleges often concentrate financial duties in a few people. One office may receive funds, record transactions, pay invoices, and prepare reports. When full separation of duties is not possible, the institution needs other safeguards, such as independent review, board oversight, external accounting support, documented approvals, limited system access, and regular reconciliation.

These practices also preserve knowledge when employees or leaders leave. Written procedures, approvals, and records allow successors to see how commitments were made and who was

responsible. Documentation does not replace judgment, but it reduces dependence on one person's memory.

Boards Must Use Audit Findings to Govern

A board's responsibility does not end when it receives an audit report. Regents should understand the opinion, review relevant findings, evaluate management's response, and compare results across years. They should ask which revenues recur, which obligations are growing, whether restricted funds are being treated as available cash, and whether a reported surplus coexists with deferred maintenance or unusual transactions. These practices turn audit evidence into clear governance.

Boards do not need to manage daily accounting. They do need to set reporting expectations, ensure that auditors can reach relevant records and personnel, meet privately with auditors when appropriate, and track corrective action. The board provides oversight by making financial claims open to review, not by directing individual transactions.

Consistently Clean Audits Build Credibility

One clean audit applies to one reporting period. A series of clean audits is stronger evidence that the institution can repeatedly produce reliable financial statements. Repetition matters because documentation, reconciliation, judgment, and oversight must work across several cycles rather than during one exceptional year.[9]

OGS's consecutively clean audits show that reliable financial reporting continued while enrollment, programs, technology, debt, and long-term funds changed. They do not remove financial risk. The audit reports and management letters remain the

[9] Michael Pecchia has served as CFO at OGS in recent years and has faithfully stewarded our resources, interfaced with auditors and compliance agencies, and helped secure our long-term financial stability.

proper sources for confirming the opinions and any reported weaknesses.

Accreditation is a separate form of external review and accountability that addresses policies, curriculum, faculty credentials, institutional effectiveness, student satisfaction, and financial health.[10] Accreditation and financial audits answer different questions, but together they provide evidence about organizational integrity.

Leaders should describe accreditation precisely. Accredited status is not the same as approval of every practice, freedom from monitoring, or proof of strong outcomes. It does not guarantee transfer, licensure, employment, financial stability, or future compliance. Public statements should match the accreditor's actual action.

Stakeholders ask different questions of the same financial evidence. Creditors focus on repayment, donors on restrictions and use, regulators on continuity, employees on candor and payroll reliability, and students on institutional stability. An audit does not answer every question, but it gives these groups a common set of financial statements.

Financial Reporting Must Explain What the Numbers Mean

Transparency does not require publishing every financial detail.[11] Large amounts of data without explanation can confuse rather than inform. In our annual reports to stakeholders, we supplemented narrative explanations with separate pie charts showing revenue sources and expense categories as percentages

[10] OGS received full reaffirmation after a self-study of policies, curriculum, faculty credentials, institutional effectiveness, student satisfaction, and financial health. Leaders later addressed recommendations concerning financial stability, policies and procedures, and organizational effectiveness, and the accreditor notified OGS that it had achieved full compliance.

[11] As a 501(c)(3) organization, OGS's annual Form 990 filings are also available for public inspection, giving stakeholders another source through which to disclose reported finances and governance.

rather than dollar amounts. The charts gave readers an accessible view of the institution's financial model (where support came from and how funds were allocated) without overwhelming the report with accounting detail or disclosing information that required confidentiality. Percentage-based reporting also made the relationship among tuition, gifts, program costs, administration, technology, and other uses easier to compare from year to year. Useful reporting states what is known, what is uncertain, which assumptions drive projections, and which risks could change the result. It should also protect confidential personnel, student, negotiation, and donor information.

The purpose of those disclosures was not merely to present favorable results, but to make stewardship understandable and open to review.[12] Showing the proportional use of funds helped stakeholders see that financial decisions followed stated priorities, and repeating the charts in annual reports gave them a consistent basis for comparison. Visibility built trust because stakeholders did not have to rely solely on assurances from leaders; they could compare the institution's explanation with its audited statements and public filings. Trust is tested most when the evidence is unfavorable. Leaders should report variances, explain their causes, distinguish temporary problems from structural ones, and state what they will do next. They weaken credibility when they claim credit for every positive result but dismiss every negative result as external or temporary.[13]

[12] OGS is an accredited member of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA) and adheres to ECFA's Seven Standards of Responsible Stewardship, including governance, financial oversight, responsible use of resources, transparency, compensation and related-party integrity, and stewardship of charitable gifts. See Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, 'ECFA's Integrity Standards,' https://www.ecfa.org/Standards.aspx.

[13] Willink, J., & Babin, L. (2017). *Extreme ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs lead and win* (Rev. and updated ed.). St. Martin's Press.

Trust Still Requires Independent Review

A successful turnaround can reduce scrutiny. After visible improvement, boards and stakeholders may be reluctant to question assumptions or challenge leaders. This risk grows when recovery is associated with one person. Confidence should make cooperation easier, but it should not replace review. Embracing accountability is an act of protection for the institution because it detects weak assumptions, control failures, emerging risks, and unsustainable commitments before they become another crisis. It protects the leader by creating a reliable record of the evidence presented, the authority delegated, the alternatives considered, and the results reported. A leader who works within clearly stated limits and makes decisions open to review is less vulnerable to unrealistic expectations, retrospective blame, or the claim that consequential choices were made without board knowledge. Accountability also protects the board by showing that it exercised informed oversight rather than merely trusting a successful executive or reacting after a problem became visible.

Regular reports, independent audits, board review, written policies, succession plans, and clear authority keep trust verifiable. These practices do not imply suspicion. They distribute responsibility appropriately: management explains conditions and decisions, auditors test financial reporting, and the board evaluates evidence, risk, performance, and corrective action. That structure allows problems to be disclosed and corrected without automatically treating every adverse result as personal failure, while still making negligence, concealment, or repeated disregard of policy visible when they occur. It is therefore in the best interest of all stakeholders.

Students and employees gain greater confidence in continuity and fair process; donors and creditors can see how resources are governed; regulators and accreditors receive dependable evidence; leaders receive clear expectations and protection from arbitrary judgment; and board members can demonstrate faithful fulfillment of their duties. Accountability does not weaken trust.

It protects trust from becoming dependency on personality, memory, or goodwill alone.

Evidence Keeps Confidence Grounded

Audits support clear governance by giving the board financial statements it can review, questions it can pursue, and corrective actions it can track. The audit does not decide strategy or guarantee stability. It gives leaders verified financial information for decisions about cash, debt, reserves, programs, and risk.

Disciplined finance requires reliable records and regular review. Audits make financial reports dependable enough for board use. The board then uses that information to set limits, assign authority, make decisions, and hold leaders accountable. Together, audit evidence and board action provide clear governance.

Chapter Summary

Financial improvement is fragile when records are incomplete, controls are weak, or leaders make claims that cannot withstand independent review. A clean audit supports the reliability of financial statements, but it does not prove sound strategy or future stability. Audit readiness should therefore be a year-round operating discipline: reconcile accounts monthly, document restrictions and liabilities, establish compensating controls where staffing is limited, give auditors direct access to relevant records, and require the board to track corrective action. Leaders should also state clearly what an audit establishes and what it does not. Reliable evidence is useful only when the governing body acts on it, which leads to Chapter 5 and the role of governing authority in preventing costly delays.

5. Colleges Die When Governance Delays Action; Leaders Must Drive Board Reform

Delayed decisions allowed the already connected financial and operating problems to worsen for OGS. During our turnaround, the Board of Regents used policy governance to define institutional goals, limits on executive authority, reporting requirements, and decisions reserved to the board. It then held one President/CEO accountable for execution. The aim was not faster decision-making at any cost; it was to ensure that every major issue had the right evidence, a clear decision-maker, and a deadline.

A board does not manage daily operations, but it creates institutional agency when it establishes priorities, requires reliable information, delegates authority explicitly, and holds leaders accountable. Agency is not speed or executive freedom alone. It is the organized capacity to interpret conditions, make legitimate decisions, coordinate action, and change course when evidence changes. These practices cannot guarantee survival, but they reduce drift and make timely, accountable action more likely.

Delay Devolves Into Inaction

Delay is sometimes necessary. A board may need more evidence, legal advice, stakeholder input, or time to compare options. Delay turns into drift when no one states what information is needed or when a decision will be made. Enrollment declines may be reported without considering program viability. Deferred maintenance may be acknowledged without entering the capital plan. A recurring deficit may be called temporary without defining what evidence would confirm that claim. Conditions then continue to worsen while the board preserves the appearance of future action.

Boards also allow drift when they treat recent decline as the standard for acceptable performance. High debt can seem normal because it has existed for years. Another small enrollment loss can seem manageable because the decline has been gradual. Poor reporting can escape notice because detailed reports were never expected. The board then compares current results with recent deterioration instead of the conditions required for the mission to continue.

The Board Governs; the Administration Manages

Under the Carver Policy Governance model, the board defines institutional goals, sets limits on executive action, monitors results, and holds the President/CEO accountable for the organization. The President/CEO directs the executive and administrative team. This division keeps governing authority with the board and operating authority with one accountable executive. The distinction is especially important in small institutions, where board members, executives, faculty, staff, donors, and volunteers often know one another personally and may occupy overlapping roles. Without clear boundaries, an individual trustee's advice can be heard as an instruction, routine operating questions can consume limited board time, and employees can receive conflicting direction from several well-intentioned

leaders. Policy-level governance protects the board's collective authority, while executive empowerment allows the president to act quickly within stated limits when enrollment, cash flow, compliance, staffing, or student needs change.

Because small institutions have fewer people, less financial margin, and little backup capacity, they cannot afford to refer every operating decision to the board or wait for the next meeting. Delegated authority shortens response time and makes accountability visible: the board judges whether defined outcomes and limits were met, and the president is responsible for choosing and coordinating the means. Executive empowerment is therefore not unchecked discretion. It is authority bounded by mission, policy, financial thresholds, legal and academic responsibilities, and regular reporting. When those boundaries are explicit, a small institution gains the speed of a compact organization without sacrificing oversight, and the board can focus its scarce attention on purpose, risk, performance, and long-term continuity.

Policy Governance Creates One Clear Line of Executive Authority

Our Board of Regents governed through policy rather than directives to individual employees. It appointed, evaluated, supported, and could remove one employee: the President/CEO. The board's policies established institutional goals, executive limits, reserved decisions, and reporting requirements; within those boundaries, I directed the organization and remained accountable for its results. This structure protected collective board authority while giving the institution one clear line of executive responsibility during urgent change.

Executive discretion remained limited. The board set the mission, policy boundaries, and measures of performance. The president selected the means within those limits. Clear policies and regular reports allowed action without removing accountability.

The board still retained responsibility for mission, integrity, finances, academic quality, and compliance.

This model also required the board to act collectively. Individual regents could question, advise, disagree, and offer expertise during deliberation, but they could not direct employees on their own. After the board made a decision, authority rested in that decision and the resulting policy. Such policies kept employees from receiving conflicting instructions and kept disagreements among regents inside the governing process.

For a small institution in crisis, this structure supported timely action. Once the board had set the mission, risk limits, financial boundaries, and reporting requirements, the president could reorganize work, simplify processes, negotiate operational changes, develop programs, and respond to new conditions without awaiting a board meeting for every step. The board could still review the decisions and results.

This governance structure supported the turnaround because it allowed the executive team to act without competing instructions from individual regents. It did not make the president the sole cause of recovery. The board set purpose, policy, risk limits, and expectations, while the executive team carried out the work.

Unclear boundaries produce two common failures. A passive board avoids decisions that belong to it and allows executive preference to determine institutional direction. A micromanaging board lets individual regents enter daily operations, weakens presidential accountability, and consumes time on matters that cannot be managed well through periodic meetings. Policy governance offers a clearer alternative: collective board authority, explicit goals and limits, reliable monitoring, and executive discretion within those limits.

Board Agendas Show What Gets Attention

A board agenda shows how an institution is prepared to govern. If meetings are dominated by past reports, ceremony, or operational detail, little time is left for decisions about future risk

and direction. Effective agendas separate matters requiring approval, strategic discussion, monitoring, and information. They also distinguish measures of past performance from indicators of emerging risk.

Boards need information that is timely, understandable, comparable across periods, and tied to defined risk levels. Enrollment reports should show inquiries, admissions, yield, persistence, program distribution, and revenue effects where data permit. Financial reports should separate recurring operations from unusual transactions and restricted funds. Academic reports should connect program quality, student outcomes, faculty capacity, and cost. Risk reports should address both likelihood and consequence. Data do not make the decision, but they show whether the board is acting from evidence or impression.

Difficult issues should not disappear when a meeting ends. Boards need a record of commitments, responsible parties, required evidence, and review dates. This record shows whether a decision failed, has not had enough time to work, or rests on assumptions that have changed.

Boards Must Consider Both Current and Future Consequences

Fiduciary responsibility is commonly described through duties of care, loyalty, and compliance. Care requires informed judgment. Loyalty requires decisions made for the institution rather than personal or factional interests. Compliance requires adherence to laws, governing documents, charitable purpose, and mission. These duties do not require preserving every current practice. They require the board to consider both present and future consequences.

Every major decision distributes benefits and costs across time. Borrowing creates current capacity and future payments. Deferred maintenance preserves current cash and raises later costs. Spending endowment can protect present operations and reduce future support. Refusing needed change can preserve

familiar practices and weaken continuity. The board should make these transfers visible and explain why they serve the mission.

Strong Board-President Partnerships Require Trust and Challenge

The relationship between a board and president requires both trust and challenge. Without trust, information is defensive and authority fragments. Without challenge, assumptions go untested, and accountability weakens. The president should be able to recommend bold action, and the board should require evidence, alternatives, risks, and measures for later review.[14]

The president must report risks candidly and promptly. The board must receive that information without reacting through indiscriminate intervention or automatic blame. Otherwise, leaders learn to manage the board's response instead of improving its knowledge. The board should distinguish emerging risk from negligence and hold leaders accountable for both disclosure and response.

Regular Presidential Evaluation Makes Trust Accountable

Each year, the executive team completed a 360-degree evaluation of me and reported the results to the Board of Regents.[15]

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[14] I am especially grateful to Board Chair Dr. Gary Nicholds and Chancellor Dr. David Anderson, whose unequivocal support throughout the turnaround sustained a strong board-president partnership and made possible difficult but necessary (and at times courageous) decisions in service of the institution's mission.

[15] Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2017). *The leadership challenge: How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations* (6th ed.). Jossey-Bass. The evaluation used Kouzes and Posner's Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart.

The review did not replace the board's formal evaluation of the President/CEO. It added evidence from people who worked with, reported to, governed, or otherwise engaged the office.

The annual review made presidential accountability recurring rather than occasional. It gave colleagues a protected way to identify patterns, gave the board evidence beyond the president's self-assessment, and required follow-up on repeated findings. The process was useful only when participation was adequate, responses remained confidential, results could be compared across years, and critical-constructive feedback received attention.

A 360-degree review is imperfect. Responses may reflect loyalty, fear of identification, recent events, or incomplete knowledge of the president's work. We therefore looked for patterns across raters and years instead of treating scores as precise measures. Even with those limits, the process gave the rest of the executive team a formal means of participating in presidential accountability. Because the board governed the institution through one accountable President/CEO, executives could not bypass that authority by taking ordinary disagreements directly to individual regents. The evaluation created an appropriate channel instead: team members could confidentially report recurring concerns about leadership conduct, communication, decision-making, delegation, workload, or adherence to board policy, and the board could consider those patterns as part of its own assessment of the president. In that way, executive colleagues gained a voice to the governing body without creating a competing line of command. Their feedback became evidence for the board to test against the president's self-assessment, institutional results, and prior evaluations, while responsibility for interpretation, follow-up, and any corrective action remained with the board collectively. For the process to work, participants needed protection from retaliation, clear confidentiality rules, and confidence that serious or repeated concerns would be reviewed rather than filtered through the president alone.

Crisis Makes Choices Clearer (and Can Distort Them)

In the early years of the turnaround, we had to make decisions quickly with little financial flexibility. The crisis made some tradeoffs easier to see and showed that small adjustments would not be enough. It also created risks. Urgency could concentrate authority, shorten consultation, and turn temporary exceptions into permanent practice. Board members therefore had to authorize enough executive action to address the crisis while continuing to review the assumptions, limits, and results.

For OGS, the dual crisis of its internal financial state and the external pandemic made that governance challenge concrete. It disrupted the limited-residency model on which we depended, forced an accelerated transition to remote instruction, and exposed how little capital and technical infrastructure we had for change. The later sale of most of the campus was also a crisis because it required us to release a familiar physical center, confront debt and underutilization directly, and redesign how the institution would teach, work, and maintain community. Nevertheless, these events became constructive catalysts for changes that were already necessary. Remote instruction demonstrated that our distinctive learning method could continue without year-round dependence on a large campus; the sale allowed OGS to eliminate debt, lower recurring overhead, strengthen liquidity, and redirect attention toward technology, programs, students, and institutional capacity. The Board of Regents chose not to treat crises only as disruptions to survive. It embraced crises as an opportunity to reconsider inherited assumptions, authorize decisive change within policy limits, and monitor whether those changes protected the mission and improved the institution's long-term position.

Crisis may justify broader executive authority, but the board should specify which decisions are delegated, for how long, within what financial limits, with what reporting requirements, and under what conditions the authority will be reviewed or ended. Without those limits, emergency authority can continue as the normal structure after the emergency has passed.

Boards Need Ongoing Education and Self-Review

A board is not effective simply by appointing competent people. Expertise in finance, law, education, philanthropy, technology, ministry, or organizational leadership can improve deliberation, but no member understands every issue. Regents must learn the institution's mission, educational model, regulatory environment, finances, and governing documents. They must also recognize when experience from another setting does not transfer.

Board composition matters because members interpret evidence through their experience. A board whose members share the same networks and assumptions may reach agreement quickly while overlooking important alternatives. The goal is a board with independence, relevant competence, commitment to mission, and enough range of perspective to test major claims. Disagreement is useful when it is evidence-based, mission-focused, and subject to collective decision.

Board development continues after appointment. Orientation, recurring review of fiduciary duties, education about higher education, and board self-assessment help members govern together. Self-assessment should evaluate the extent to which the board receives the right information, devotes enough time to strategy, respects governance boundaries, follows through on decisions, and contributes to or reduces institutional risk.

Recovery Creates New Governance Risks

Boards are often most attentive when failure appears imminent. Recovery creates a different risk: visible improvement can reduce scrutiny just as new proposals compete for newly available capacity. An institution can move from scarcity to overextension if the board relaxes discipline when options increase.

After recovery, boards should continue multiyear financial projections, liquidity and reserve policies, program review, capital planning, risk monitoring, presidential evaluation, and

succession planning. These practices should be normal governance rather than permanent emergency measures. They preserve lessons that would otherwise disappear when the people who experienced the crisis leave.

Several decisions show how this arrangement worked. The Board of Regents set the policy boundaries for new academic programs, mission language, degree names, institutional branding, and strategic planning. It held me accountable through the board chair and chancellor. The board established direction and approved policies where required; the executive team designed and delivered on the established goals.

We separated executive management, academic administration, faculty governance, and board-reserved decisions at OGS. Executive leadership handled strategy, compliance, assessment, budgeting, and coordination. Responsible offices handled individual student, employee, and interpersonal matters. The practical rule was to place each decision where the needed knowledge and legitimate authority met, then prevent other bodies from reopening it through informal direction.

Compliance should be managed through a recurring schedule rather than concentrated before deadlines. Accreditation reports, state authorization, federal reporting, faculty credentials, financial review, institutional assessment, calendars, and catalog revisions should remain standing leadership concerns. Each matter should have an owner, a review date, and a clear route to faculty or board action when authority lies there.

Strategic Planning Must Be Simple for Small Institutions

A strategic plan is useful only when it connects mission, evidence, resources, and responsibility. Because of our small size, at OGS we simplified that connection through a Balanced Scorecard organized around four perspectives: external stakeholders and relationships, internal processes, organizational learning

and capacity, and financial stewardship.[16] Using the scorecard's vocabulary forced us to state whether a goal was directed outward (such as enrollment, student value, partnerships, or stakeholder confidence) or inward (such as process reliability, employee capacity, technology, compliance, or financial discipline). That distinction made the logic of the plan explicit: internal improvements were not ends in themselves, but capabilities intended to produce stronger external results. In contrast, external ambitions had to be supported by sufficient internal capacity.

We limited the plan to two strategic goals in each quadrant. Eight goals were enough to address the institution as a whole but few enough for a small board and executive team to remember, discuss, fund, and monitor. The limit compelled us to choose rather than label every desirable activity as strategic. For each goal, we identified a measure, a current condition, a target, a responsible leader, a reporting schedule, and the resources or decisions required. A statement such as "improve enrollment" therefore had to be a measurable external result. Goals such as shortening admissions cycle time, strengthening faculty capacity, or maintaining recurring expenses within recurring revenue became measurable internal or financial drivers. The common vocabulary also made tradeoffs easier to see: a proposal could not claim strategic importance without showing which quadrant it served, how success would be measured, and what other priority or resource it might displace.

We needed this simplicity to succeed. OGS did not have the staff, cash, or managerial bandwidth to maintain a long plan filled with overlapping initiatives and measures that no one reviewed. A simplified scorecard let the board govern at the level of outcomes and risk while the executive team coordinated the work needed to reach them. It also made our adaptation disciplined rather than improvised. When evidence changed, we

[16] Kaplan, R. S., & Norton, D. P. (1992). *The balanced scorecard: Measures that drive performance*. Harvard Business Review, 70(1), 71–79. It is worth noting that the Balanced Scorecard aligns well with the Competing Values Framework; together, they are helpful tools for aligning both external strategy and internal management.

could revise a target, sequence the work differently, or replace a goal without losing sight of the relationships among external results, internal capacity, organizational learning, and finance. Budgets, enrollment, academics, technology, facilities, staffing, and risk still had to be considered together. However, the Balanced Scorecard gave us a simple, shared language for deciding what mattered now, who owned it, and whether the turnaround was producing measurable progress.

Good Governance Keeps Real Choices Open

Boards allow drift when inherited assumptions, delayed decisions, and unclear accountability determine what happens. They provide clear governance when they define purpose, require relevant evidence, assign authority, test strategy, and maintain accountability. Boards do not control every outcome. Presidents lead, faculty teach, staff administer, students choose, donors contribute, and external conditions impose limits. The board's responsibility is to decide how the institution will respond to those conditions.

Good governance does not guarantee a particular future. It helps the institution make timely, evidence-based choices while options remain. Clearer governance at OGS helped heal the wounds created by delay and ambiguous authority. It also made the next mandate possible: restoring the foundations.

Chapter Summary

Colleges die when boards postpone consequential decisions, blur the line between governance and management, or fail to hold one accountable executive responsible for implementation. The remedy is to define decisions reserved to the board, delegate operating authority in writing, organize agendas around approvals, risk, strategy, and monitoring, and maintain a decision log that records evidence requirements, owners, and review dates. Emergency authority should be time-limited, and the

President/CEO should be evaluated regularly. These practices create the conditions for action, but their value ultimately appears in the student experience. Chapter 6 acknowledges that survival depends on the extent to which students see enough value to enroll, remain enrolled, and complete their programs.

Part II. Restore the Foundations

Stabilization was not enough. OGS also had to recover the mission, educational method, student community, and organizational capacity that justified its continued existence. *Restore the Foundations* centers on mission focus and organizational health: leaders must define the commitments that make the institution worth preserving and build roles, authority, workload, relationships, and decision practices capable of carrying them out. Chapters 6–10 also make staged innovation and process simplification concrete. Enrollment serves as an outcome and test of the full framework; program changes proceed in stages as evidence supports them; and technology follows simplified educational and administrative work rather than automating confusion. Accurate diagnosis, disciplined finance, and clear governance remain active constraints, ensuring that renewed programs and systems respond to real needs, remain affordable, and have accountable owners. Restoring the foundations thus turns repaired capacity into a coherent operating model that can be adapted and transferred.

6. Colleges Die When Enrollment Declines; Leaders Must Propel Recruitment and Retention

For OGS, enrollment decline threatened both revenue and academic quality. Small cohorts reduced peer learning and course options, raised per-student costs, and made programs and services harder to sustain. We clarified programs, improved recruitment and admissions, expanded access through mediated technology and concentrated residencies, and treated retention as part of enrollment management. The relevant measure was not headcount alone, but movement from inquiry through completion and whether the institution could serve those students well.

Recruitment works only when the institution describes its programs accurately and can deliver the experience it promises. Clear expectations, consistent admissions decisions, candid financial information, responsive processes, and coordinated student support help prospective students decide whether to enroll and help enrolled students persist.

Total Enrollment Can Hide Serious Problems

Total enrollment is important, but it does not tell the whole story. A stable headcount can hide fewer new students, weak persistence, concentration in one program, higher discounting, delayed payments, or growing support needs. A temporary decline may instead result from a planned program closure, higher admissions standards, or another transition. Leaders should therefore evaluate enrollment as a series of stages rather than one number.

The enrollment pathway includes inquiry, application, admission, enrollment, payment, participation, persistence, and completion. Each stage needs an owner, a conversion measure, and a record of obstacles. A useful dashboard connects these transitions to student experience and net revenue so leaders can see where the institution's message is unclear, where the process fails, and where students encounter barriers.

Enrollment Decline Weakens the Institution's Ability to Fulfill Its Mission

A mission statement can remain unchanged while the institution loses the capacity to carry it out. Low enrollment can reduce course options, administrative support, technology, library resources, and faculty time. A college may continue to promise individualized instruction, mentorship, community, or specialized scholarship while providing less of the work those promises require.

Enrollment pressure can also push an institution to pursue students it is not prepared to serve. Leaders may add programs because a market looks promising, lower admissions expectations, make claims that exceed faculty or system capacity, or use discounts instead of improving value. Enrollment growth is not renewal when students cannot be served well or when recruiting them weakens the program and mission.

Students and Institutions Must Be a Good Match

"Institutional fit" should not mean preference for applicants who resemble current students. Admissions should use published, mission-consistent criteria and comply with nondiscrimination law. The relevant questions are whether the applicant is prepared, whether the program matches the applicant's goals, whether the applicant can meet academic, technical, and residency requirements, and whether the institution can provide reasonable support. Applicants should receive these expectations and the available appeal, accommodation, and complaint procedures before enrolling.

Recruitment and admissions must state academic expectations, delivery formats, residency requirements, tuition, time commitments, technology requirements, and available support before enrollment. If an admitted student has identified needs, the institution should determine whether it can meet them and explain the responsibilities of both sides. Clear information does not eliminate attrition, but it reduces preventable mismatch.

Students encounter the institution through catalogs, websites, handbooks, recruitment materials, and enrollment agreements. These sources should provide one consistent account of mission, status, programs, requirements, costs, aid, delivery, services, and complaint procedures. When conditions change, leaders should approve and communicate the change. Personal assurances should never exceed published commitments.

Transfer credit and prior learning should be recognized when qualified academic reviewers can verify the level, currency, content, and relevance of the previous work. The institution should explain the decision and its limits. Recognition is not automatic, and no college can promise how another institution or licensing body will treat its credits or credentials.

Recruitment Shows Whether the Institution Can Explain Its Value

Recruitment teams cannot communicate clearly when leaders and faculty cannot explain what the institution offers, whom it serves, and how its education differs from plausible alternatives. General claims about excellence, transformation, leadership, or community are not enough. Recruitment is credible when the institution connects a defined educational method to a recognizable student need and supports that claim with evidence.

Our unique teaching and learning method distinguishes OGS's programs only when we explain how it works. For us, tutorial education involves sustained exchange, individual accountability, and direct engagement with a tutor. Recruitment should tell students what they will do, what the method requires, and how mediated and face-to-face work support that relationship. An institution's name alone is not enough for branding; consistent practices and student experiences provide the evidence.

The Enrollment Pipeline Shows Where Students Get Stuck

Recruitment data should show where prospective students stop moving forward. Few inquiries may point to weak visibility or an unclear market. Many inquiries but few applications may mean that the message attracts attention without showing enough relevance. Many applications but few admissions may indicate poor targeting or unclear prerequisites. Strong admissions but weak enrollment may reflect cost, timing, competition, or doubts about credibility. Early withdrawal may show a gap between recruitment promises and student experience.

Each problem requires a different response, and visibility problems do not automatically justify a permanent marketing hire. Low visibility may call for stronger referrals, clearer digital

information, partnerships, or a time-limited test of specialized marketing leadership. Application problems may require simpler processes without weakening academic review. Enrollment decisions may improve through timely faculty contact, clear financial information, and a specific account of the learning experience. Website traffic, social media, inquiries, and event attendance matter only when they help explain movement toward appropriate enrollment.

We tested that option at OGS by engaging a fractional Chief Marketing Officer for a limited period. We could not afford a full-time CMO or a permanent marketing position, and committing to either before we understood the work would have added a recurring expense to an already constrained operating model. The fractional arrangement gave us temporary access to senior-level expertise in positioning, digital outreach, campaign design, lead tracking, and coordination between marketing and admissions. Just as important, it functioned as a practical experiment: we could observe which messages generated qualified inquiries, where prospects stopped moving through the pipeline, which tools and channels fit our scale, and what work our internal team would need to sustain after the engagement ended. Not every tactic transferred directly, but the experience improved our judgment and helped us revise subsequent strategies without assuming that one consultant or campaign would solve enrollment. Other small institutions may find the same approach useful when they need expertise but cannot responsibly add a full-time executive position: define the problem, scope the engagement, establish measures and a stop date, require knowledge transfer, and use the results to decide what to retain, adapt, or discontinue.

That experiment helped us strengthen marketing without confusing temporary expertise with permanent capacity. During and after the engagement, program inquiries and applications increased substantially, indicating stronger visibility and movement toward application. Those results did not by themselves establish enrollment growth, student fit, persistence, or a case for adding a full-time position. Instead, they gave us evidence about which strategies deserved further investment and which

responsibilities could be adapted within our existing structure. Marketing can enlarge the prospect pool; admissions follow-up, program clarity, affordability, and student support determine whether prospects enroll and remain.

Tuition Discounts Can Expand Access

Income-sensitive discounts can widen access, but only under a clear, approved policy. The policy should state its purpose, eligibility rules, decision authority, limits, renewal terms, and relationship to other aid. Students should receive accurate information, and similar cases should receive similar treatment.

The test is whether discounting improves access without weakening revenue, academic standards, student support, or fair treatment. Leaders should track net tuition, student debt, enrollment, persistence, completion, and the cost of serving additional students. Awards must also be documented and student financial information protected.

My pragmatic starting point during our financial crisis was that "any revenue is better than no revenue," but only when the institution had unused capacity and could serve the student well. An empty seat produces no tuition, contributes nothing toward fixed costs already being paid, and brings no student into the academic community. By contrast, an enrolled student who pays something can make a positive contribution when the additional tuition exceeds the incremental cost of instruction, support, aid administration, technology, and other services. For a small institution with underfilled programs, the relevant comparison is therefore not always full tuition versus discounted tuition; it may be some net revenue versus none.

Leaders can be creative within approved policy by using documented discounts, payment arrangements, and funded or institutionally supported scholarships to remove barriers to access. That creativity must still be disciplined. Before offering an award, leaders should confirm available academic and support capacity, calculate the student's expected net contribution, apply

consistent eligibility and decision rules, disclose terms accurately, and avoid discounts that create unfunded obligations, displace full-paying students, weaken standards, or promise support the institution cannot sustain. Funded scholarships are preferable when donors or designated resources cover the award. Unfunded institutional aid can still be rational when it uses otherwise idle capacity and the remaining tuition contributes to cash flow, but its total cost must be visible in the budget and monitored across cohorts.

Leaders should therefore review discount policy against its stated purpose and results, asking whether it expands access, improves enrollment and persistence, supports net tuition, treats similar students consistently, and remains affordable over time. An enrolled student paying an appropriate amount can be better for both the student and the institution than an unfilled place producing no revenue, but lower prices cannot create educational value, student support, or a sustainable program.

Strong Programs Are the Best Recruitment Tool

Marketing cannot compensate for a weak or unclear program. For OGS, the more durable enrollment strategy was to improve the programs and student experience continuously through institutional-effectiveness data. Faculty and administrative leaders reviewed evidence from applications, enrollment, persistence, completion, student work, learning outcomes, course and program evaluations, complaints, withdrawals, time to degree completion, and student-support records. The purpose was not to collect data for compliance alone, but to identify where students encountered confusion or delay, test whether programs delivered their stated outcomes, and revise curriculum, scheduling, advising, technology, faculty support, or administrative processes when the evidence showed a recurring problem. Faculty and staff still had to explain each program's purpose, maintain a coherent curriculum, demonstrate credible outcomes, and offer a schedule and delivery model suited to the intended students.

Graduate students consider subject matter, residency expectations, faculty access, completion requirements, professional relevance, and the opportunity cost of participation, so leaders should judge program changes by academic rationale, student progress, cost, faculty capacity, and student work, not enrollment alone.

Retention is the most dependable foundation for steady enrollment growth because each student who persists protects tuition already in the pipeline, stabilizes cohorts, supports more predictable faculty and service planning, and reduces the number of new students required merely to keep enrollment level. Strong retention also makes word-of-mouth recruitment credible: students and graduates who experience clear expectations, meaningful faculty engagement, responsive support, and visible progress can describe OGS to prospective students in specific terms. For a specialized institution, those informed referrals may carry more weight than broad advertising.

Word of mouth is earned rather than free. Responding to institutional-effectiveness evidence, OGS worked to make enrollment growth depend less on permanently high acquisition costs and more on an experience students and graduates could describe with confidence.

Better Access Brings More Students into the Community

Geography can prevent students from joining a specialized graduate institution. Relocation, continuous campus attendance, employment, caregiving, disability access, and travel costs all affect enrollment. Technology can reduce some barriers only when the institution also provides accessible materials, suitable technical support, predictable interaction, and realistic requirements for devices and connectivity.

For that reason, expanding online access did not lead us to eliminate physical presence. OGS moved almost entirely online because remote instruction reduced geographic, employment,

caregiving, and cost barriers. However, we retained a concentrated residential component for educational work that gained value from people sharing time and place. Residencies provided scholarly immersion, sustained conversation, informal exchange, access to specialized resources, and relationships that could deepen later online instruction. They also allowed students and faculty to encounter one another as whole persons rather than primarily as names, images, messages, or submissions on a screen.

We believe face-to-face human experiences are more important as online education becomes increasingly depersonalized and as enthusiasm (or "AI hype") encourages some institutions to treat speed, scale, personalization, and automated production as substitutes for teaching and learning relationships. We have certainly not rejected Artificial Intelligence or digital tools wholesale; we reject the assumption that a more automated experience is necessarily a better educational one. AI can assist inquiry, organization, feedback, and access. It can also tempt students to outsource difficult thinking and institutions to replace accountable human judgment with generated responses, automated monitoring, or simulated interaction.

A residential component therefore serves as a deliberate counterweight for OGS. It creates space for unhurried dialogue, intellectual challenge, embodied community, serendipitous conversation, and the mutual responsibility through which students and tutors learn to recognize one another's reasoning, limits, and development. Its value was not nostalgia for a traditional campus or a belief that learning requires constant co-location. It is our conviction that selected forms of presence protect the relational core of our learning method at a time when online systems can make education feel transactional, and AI can make human exchange appear optional.

However, because residencies also impose travel, scheduling, disability-access, and financial burdens, we kept them concentrated, stated their requirements clearly, and evaluated whether each one accomplished work that could not be achieved as well remotely. In this way, short residential components add value by

humanizing an otherwise fully remote program without recreating the cost and access barriers of a full-time campus model.

Retention Is Part of Recruitment

Recruitment does not end when a student enrolls. Students test recruitment promises through advising, feedback, billing, technology, administration, community, and progress toward the degree. Some reasons for leaving are outside institutional control, but delayed responses, unclear expectations, inconsistent faculty contact, administrative burden, and unresolved technical problems can turn manageable difficulty into withdrawal. In this book, persistence describes continued student progress; retention describes the institution's coordinated work to support that progress. Because retention depends on decisions across academic and administrative areas, OGS created the Chief Student Success Officer role as a member of the executive team rather than locating student success only within a service office.[17]

The Chief Student Success Officer focuses executive attention on the conditions that influence whether students continue making satisfactory progress. The role monitors patterns in onboarding, engagement, academic standing, registration, finances, accommodations, research milestones, complaints, leaves, and withdrawals; coordinates timely outreach and referrals; and brings recurring barriers to the executive team for decisions about policy, staffing, technology, scheduling, communication, or resources. Executive membership matters because many retention problems cannot be solved by encouragement or individual case management alone. If students repeatedly encounter the same billing confusion, feedback delays, inaccessible process, research bottleneck, or breakdown in communication, the institution must change the system producing the problem. The Chief Student Success Officer gives those patterns an accountable owner and a direct route into strategic and budget

[17] I am grateful to Dr. Brenda Davis who has served as CSSO at OGS the past several years and had patiently stewarded student retention.

decisions. Retention should not depend on lowering standards, discouraging responsible withdrawal, or pressuring students to remain when departure is appropriate. It should focus on removing avoidable barriers, identifying difficulty early, protecting privacy, and pairing academic rigor with clear guidance.

The Chief Student Success Officer coordinates evidence from admissions, tutors, academic leaders, and administrative staff, confirms follow-up, and reports recurring barriers to the executive team. Cohort patterns, student feedback, progress indicators, and the effects of interventions guide review. This keeps retention connected to program quality, staffing, technology, budgeting, and enrollment strategy rather than treating it as a response only after a student is at risk.

Build Community Intentionally

Students do not form a community because they share an institutional name or use the same online platform. Community develops through regular intellectual exchange, shared practices, recognition, and responsibilities beyond earning a credential. We therefore used synchronous online meetings for purposes that went beyond individual student support and administrative communication at OGS. Student presentations brought students and faculty together to hear developing research, ask questions, test arguments, and recognize one another's scholarly progress. "Virtual chapels" created another recurring point of connection through reflection, institutional mission, shared concerns, and the acknowledgment of important events in the life of the community. Virtual chapels did not reproduce every benefit of being physically present; they gave students and faculty a dependable rhythm of seeing, hearing, and responding to one another as members of the same institution rather than as isolated participants in separate online activities.

Small scale makes each student's participation visible and allows OGS to give presenters substantive attention, recognize participants by name, and adapt meetings in response to

feedback. Growth requires us to preserve that contact through purposeful residencies, peer exchange, forum presentations, virtual chapels, and clear communication. These practices should support belonging without assuming that every student shares the same beliefs, schedule, circumstances, or preferred form of participation.

Financial Pressure Can Lead to Unethical Recruitment

Financial distress creates ethical pressure in recruitment because every prospective student can appear to represent needed revenue. Recruiters may overstate outcomes, minimize cost, hide instability, pressure applicants, or admit students unlikely to benefit. These practices may produce short-term tuition but increase withdrawals, complaints, reputational damage, and student harm.

Institutions under financial pressure need clear safeguards. Program and outcome claims should be supportable. Costs and requirements should be visible. Admissions decisions should remain academically grounded. Incentives should not reward enrollment without regard to persistence or student fit. Leaders should review complaints and withdrawals for recurring problems and should never use faith, mission, or personal calling to pressure students to ignore financial or academic risk.

Resolving Student Complaints and Grievances with Integrity Supports Retention

Because OGS is small, we can often address student complaints relationally while still following established complaint and grievance procedures. Small scale makes it possible to understand the student's circumstances, clarify what happened through direct conversation, and identify a remedy suited to the issue rather than treating every concern as an impersonal transaction. A relational approach does not mean making exceptions

without authority, bypassing academic standards, or deciding cases through personal preference. Students should receive clear notice of the applicable procedure, an opportunity to present relevant information, timely review by the responsible office or body, a written explanation of the outcome, access to appeal where policy provides it, and protection from retaliation. Within those boundaries, leaders can listen carefully, acknowledge institutional mistakes, correct misunderstandings, and respond in a spirit of goodwill toward the student's unique needs.

Our conviction is that goodwill tends to reproduce itself. When an institution approaches a concern with patience, candor, and a sincere desire to reach a fair resolution, students are more likely to understand the institution's reasoning even when they do not receive the outcome they requested. That understanding can protect trust, persistence, and the student's willingness to speak fairly about the institution. The reverse is also true: an unresolved or dismissively handled complaint can carry extraordinary reputational weight. As a practical rule of thumb, we assume that one dissatisfied student may require at least two satisfied students to offset the effect of negative word of mouth. The exact ratio is not a scientific measure, but the principle matters for a small institution whose recruitment depends heavily on personal referrals. Complaint resolution is therefore part of retention and recruitment, not merely a compliance function.

Goodwill does not guarantee agreement, and some grievances require formal findings, corrective action, or an outcome one party considers disappointing. Relational engagement should never pressure a student to abandon a complaint, conceal misconduct, or accept an informal resolution when policy or law requires formal review. Its purpose is to make the process humane without making it arbitrary. We document the concern, distinguish informal problem-solving from a formal grievance, identify the person or body with authority, preserve relevant evidence, communicate timelines, and look for patterns across cases. Approaching issues in this way typically, though not always, produces mutual understanding because each side has a clearer account of the facts, responsibilities, constraints, and

available remedies. Even when the parties do not agree, the institution can demonstrate that it listened, followed its procedures, explained its decision, and used what it learned to improve the student experience.

Enrollment Growth Must Be Understood, Not Just Reported

OGS's enrollment growth increased participation and expanded the potential tuition base, showing that more students chose our programs and delivery model. Evaluating educational quality and long-term renewal, however, requires annual enrollment by program, new-student counts, persistence, completion, collected tuition, student characteristics, geography, and student-experience data.

The increase likely reflected several interacting changes. New and revised programs may have clarified our relevance. Technology widened access. Improved finances and clean audits may have increased confidence. Board and presidential leadership created greater consistency. Faculty and student relationships may have generated referrals. The current evidence supports a cumulative conclusion: recruitment improved as OGS became clearer, more accessible, and more credible.

Recruitment Reflects the Health of the Whole Institution

Enrollment is a result and test of the eight practices, not a separate recovery practice. Leaders should read enrollment, persistence, completion, net tuition, complaints, referrals, workload, and student experience together. These measures show whether the institution's programs, finances, governance, processes, and people can deliver what recruitment promises.

A fractional marketing specialist can help test messages and channels without creating an unaffordable permanent position.

What happens after a prospect responds determines whether stronger visibility becomes sustainable enrollment.

At OGS, institutional-effectiveness data guided continuous internal improvement, while retention protected tuition already in the pipeline and supported credible referrals. Synchronous community gatherings, concentrated residencies, and relational complaint resolution helped humanize remote education. Together, these practices made our identity tangible throughout the pathway from inquiry to completion.

Chapter Summary

Enrollment decline is rarely a marketing problem alone. It often reveals unclear programs, weak student fit, preventable barriers, inconsistent support, or a gap between institutional promises and the student experience. Leaders should manage one enrollment pathway from inquiry through completion, assign an owner and conversion measure to each stage, publish accurate expectations and costs, analyze withdrawals and complaints, protect academic standards, and evaluate growth through net revenue, persistence, completion, workload, and student experience. Recruitment may bring students to the institution, but sustainable enrollment depends on programs that address a clear need and can be delivered well. Chapter 7 turns to the design and review of those programs.

7. Colleges Die When Degrees Do Not Meet Student Needs; Leaders Must Revise Academic Portfolios

Some inherited program titles and descriptions at OGS no longer told prospective students what they would study or how the programs fit together. Low-demand offerings still consumed faculty time, administration, recruitment, and student support. We distinguished the mission from inherited program forms, revised an existing major, developed a new doctoral program through formal review and authorization, and expanded commitments only when evidence supported them.[18] Program review therefore focused on six questions: What need does the program address? Whom does it serve? What will students learn? What

[18] The program was the Doctor of Social Leadership (DSL), developed through formal review and authorization. The program was a subset of our existing Doctor of Philosophy program, a very traditional 72-credit hour program with a rigorous dissertation requirement. The DSL degree provided an alternative pathway that is less expensive with a faster completion time.

will it cost? Do we have the faculty capacity? How does it advance the mission?

Innovation may involve a new degree, but it may also require revising curriculum, changing delivery, clarifying program language, consolidating offerings, or ending a program. Leaders should judge each change by whether it improves learning, clarifies the program's purpose, fits the mission, and can be sustained.

When Programs No Longer Meet Current Needs

Every established program reflects earlier judgments about student needs, important knowledge, faculty capacity, and institutional resources. Those judgments may still be sound, but they should not be permanent assumptions. Financial pressure and changing patterns of inquiry required us to re-evaluate OGS's longstanding programs against the needs of both prospective and current students. We had to ask whether program names communicated clearly, whether pathways matched the goals and circumstances of working adults, whether requirements created unnecessary barriers, and whether the knowledge and methods we already taught could serve additional groups of students: disciplines, professions, student populations, technology, and regulation change. A program can remain intellectually valuable while becoming harder to explain, deliver, or sustain. Continuous review therefore helped us distinguish between an enduring academic commitment and an inherited presentation that no longer reached the students who could benefit from it.

Existing programs also carry accumulated commitments: faculty expertise, catalog language, approvals, alumni identity, donor expectations, course materials, and administrative systems. These commitments justified caution, but they did not require OGS to offer the same academic assets in only one form.

We did not abandon our flagship Doctor of Philosophy program or the research preparation, tutorial method, and scholarly identity it represented. Instead, we surveyed what prospective

students found difficult to understand or access, what current students needed to progress, and which parts of the existing curriculum, faculty expertise, research methods, and support systems could be reorganized into clearer pathways. In some cases, adaptation meant revising program language, sequencing existing learning differently, clarifying concentrations or outcomes, or packaging related strengths under a title and structure that spoke more directly to a new market of potential students. A new degree program was not a novelty for its own sake and did not mean diluting the PhD. It meant using what OGS already did well to create additional entry points for students whose professional aims, preferred credential, or practical needs differed from those of the traditional doctoral audience. Restructuring and repackaging existing capacity reduced the risk and cost of innovation because we were not starting from nothing; we were extending proven intellectual resources into forms that were easier to understand, recruit for, and sustain. Past investment therefore became a foundation for adaptation rather than a reason to resist it. The governing question was whether each pathway preserved academic integrity, met a current student need, fit the mission, and could be supported by available faculty and institutional capacity.

Keep the Mission, Change the Program

Programs should be reviewed against mission before leaders consider expansion. Mission fidelity identifies the educational commitments that must remain. Staged innovation then tests whether a new or revised program can carry those commitments for a defined group of students at a sustainable cost. This order prevents the institution from treating demand or novelty as sufficient reasons to add a program.

We overhauled our academic calendar at OGS to better support working adults who juggle demanding professional lives. We structured our terms into sub-terms to accelerate student completion and moved asynchronous course residencies into

efficient weekend formats. We shifted coursework to adjusted formats, allowing students to balance their studies with full-time careers without sacrificing faculty interaction or academic rigor.

Program review is possible when leaders separate the educational commitments that must endure from the forms that may change. They can then identify which features carry the program's value and which now obstruct the purpose they once served. In our case, our distinctive learning method is what we determined must endure through any program revision or innovation at OGS; no single degree title, schedule, platform, residency pattern, or travel requirement can define it completely.

Start with a Clear Student or Social Need

"Innovate" is too vague to guide academic development. It can encourage colleges to copy competitors, adopt fashionable language, or add programs wherever early interest appears. Institutional imagination begins differently: it asks what educational, social, scholarly, professional, or institutional problem is not being addressed well; why this institution is qualified to respond; what learning would provide an adequate response; and which students would benefit under what conditions. These questions do not license fantasy. They discipline imagination through mission, evidence, faculty capacity, authorization, cost, and assessment.

A defined problem limits the program's claims, identifies the knowledge and abilities students need, clarifies required faculty expertise, and is a basis for assessment. It also helps the institution reject opportunities outside its competence. This discipline is especially important for a small, specialized "niche" institution such as OGS. We cannot spread limited faculty time, recruitment funds, technology, student support, and administrative capacity across every promising subject or audience. Nor can we compete with a comprehensive university by offering the same breadth of programs, electives, facilities, and services.

Our strength depends instead on serving a clearly defined group of students with depth, a recognizable educational method, and expertise that larger institutions may not organize in the same way. A precise problem statement helps prospective students understand why OGS is relevant to them, helps faculty design coherent learning rather than a collection of loosely related topics, and gives recruiters language that distinguishes the program without exaggeration. It also protects the portfolio: each proposed pathway must show how it extends existing strengths, shares usable capacity, and reinforces the institution's identity rather than creating an isolated program that requires new staffing and systems. For a niche institution, focus is not merely a branding choice. It is a condition of academic quality and financial sustainability. The market may be narrower, so small institutions must know the students they can serve unusually well, reach them with clear language, retain them through a strong experience, and resist attractive opportunities that would dilute the mission or exceed capacity.

Use Demand Data without Letting It Decide the Program

Tuition-dependent colleges must consider demand when developing programs. A program with too few qualified students cannot support faculty, technology, administration, and student services indefinitely. Demand, however, does not prove educational value. Students may want credentials the institution cannot provide responsibly, and an apparent market can disappear before the program reaches stable enrollment. Market evidence should inform academic judgment, not replace it.

Useful evidence may include inquiry patterns, applicant questions, needs identified by employers or communities, competitor offerings, occupational data, alumni experience, faculty scholarship, and existing institutional strengths. Each source has limits. Interest does not equal enrollment. Employment projections do not prove the value of a curriculum. Competitor growth

may depend on conditions OGS does not share. Leaders should proceed when demand, mission, academic rationale, and capacity support the same conclusion.

Program Names Should Explain What Students Will Learn

Program language matters when it clearly describes an actual educational purpose. A useful title helps students understand the problem the program addresses, the fields it draws on, and what graduates should be able to do. For OGS, a new degree nomenclature made our work in social research, leadership, and constructive change easier to understand.[19]

A new program is credible when its purpose, curriculum, learning outcomes, faculty capacity, student results, and finances support one another. Clear language can improve visibility, but it matters most when it accurately describes what students will learn and do.

New programs require planning, internal academic reviews, and external authorization before advertising, enrollment, instruction, or credentialing. After those steps, an initial cohort can reveal problems that planning could not predict. OGS's leaders innovated a new doctoral program from planning and authorization to initial enrollment and then fuller implementation, approving each stage before launch and using evidence before expansion. [20]

Test New Programs before Expanding Them

Staged innovation separates exploration, design, authorization, launch, and expansion. At each stage, we tested whether the

[19] The title was Doctor of Social Leadership. OGS defined social leadership as the disciplined use of influence to lead constructive change.

[20] The Doctor of Social Leadership moved from planning and authorization to initial enrollment and then fuller implementation.

educational need remained credible, the design was coherent, authorization was complete, implementation was sound, faculty and institutional capacity were sufficient, costs were sustainable, and early results justified further commitment. This sequence allowed us to revise or stop before uncertain assumptions became permanent expenses.

The review points made each commitment provisional. Evidence at any stage could justify revision, delay, or discontinuation before the program created permanent costs.

Understand the Full Cost of Every Program

Costs and available resources limit a program's educational possibilities. Revenue is not the only measure, but leaders must understand the full cost. Instruction is only one expense. Advising, library resources, technology, assessment, recruitment, compliance, administration, faculty development, and student support also contribute. Some costs are fixed, some change with enrollment, and some are shared. Without these distinctions, leaders may overstate either a program's burden or its contribution.

Cross-subsidy can serve the mission. A financially strong program may support a smaller program with sufficient scholarly or institutional value. The problem is not subsidy but lack of visibility. Boards and academic leaders should know which programs contribute revenue, which require support, why the subsidy is justified, and what conditions would trigger review. A mission-based subsidy has a stated purpose, amount, and duration.

Faculty Capacity Determines Whether Innovation Works

Programs depend on faculty work. An institution can approve a curriculum before it has enough expertise, workload capacity,

consistency, or assessment practice to deliver it. This risk is especially high in a small college where the same people carry several programs and administrative duties. A program that depends on chronic overload is not sustainable.

Faculty should help define the educational need, design the curriculum, set standards, and review outcomes. They also need preparation for the delivery model. OGS faculty working across mediated and face-to-face settings need shared expectations for intellectual exchange, feedback, student responsibility, documentation, and the relation between remote and in-person learning. Academic quality depends on these practices, not on the platform or location alone.[21]

We also evaluated the extent to which faculty preparation matched assigned work. Titles and long service do not replace demonstrated competence for a course or research assignment. Faculty responsibility for curriculum, standards, learning outcomes, and program review matters because academic quality must be judged by people who understand the work. Orientation, evaluation, development, and support are necessary parts of the faculty role.

Review Programs before Problems Become Permanent

Program review should be defined during authorization, before enrolled students and faculty assignments make change more difficult. The review should ask whether the original need exists, students achieve the stated outcomes, demand is sufficient, costs are sustainable, and the program strengthens the portfolio. Otherwise, a new program can become permanent before its assumptions are tested.

Academic leaders should revise a decision when operating evidence contradicts its intended benefit. For example, if an

[21] Distinguished faculty member Dr. David Ward has faithfully served OGS for nearly 20 years and through many ups and downs; his dedication to student success and his embodiment of our tutorial method demonstrate why people, more than programs, define the academic experience for students.

asynchronous format repeatedly causes clarification problems, inconsistent schedules, and a less coherent student experience, a common synchronous format may be more effective, subject to faculty review. The point is not that synchronous delivery is always better. It is that leaders should reverse a decision when the evidence shows that it is not serving its purpose.

We also addressed inconsistencies in syllabi, assignment names, developmental-reading expectations, grading timelines, dissertation milestones, and faculty use of our teaching and learning method. Reducing avoidable variation let faculty spend less time clarifying procedures and more time on student learning. Standardization supplied a common structure without eliminating individualized student support.

Weak results do not always require closure. They may reflect poor recruitment, unclear curriculum, inadequate faculty support, bad timing, or unrealistic expectations. The response may be revision, investment, consolidation, suspension, teach-out, or closure. Leaders should diagnose the cause before choosing the remedy. Continuing without change is also a decision and should require evidence. Before closing a program or institution, leaders must meet approval requirements, protect students through an adequate teach-out, and preserve essential records.

Such program reviews led OGS to place one program in abeyance with our accreditor because enrollment remained low and prospective-student interest did not justify continued recruitment and routine delivery. Abeyance was a disciplined pause rather than an attempt to conceal weak results or declare the program permanently closed. It allowed us to stop admitting new students, avoid assigning scarce faculty and administrative capacity to an offering without sufficient demand, and preserve the option of later revision or reactivation if mission, market evidence, curriculum, and resources again supported it. We followed the accreditor's requirements, communicated the program's status accurately, and protected any affected students through appropriate advising, records, and completion arrangements. The decision also created a defined period for learning: we could determine whether the problem was the program's

underlying purpose, its title and positioning, its structure, or a student market that had materially changed.

For a small institution, leaving a low-interest program nominally active is not neutral. It consumes attention, complicates catalogs and recruitment, and can create obligations without producing enough educational or financial value. Placing the program in abeyance made that tradeoff visible and kept future action contingent on evidence.

We also revised an inherited degree whose title no longer matched most of the curriculum and was difficult to explain to prospective students and employers.[22] Faculty and board members aligned the title with the program's academic focus while preserving the mission and allowing students to pursue several related areas of study. The broader lesson is to name degrees for the work students actually do rather than for inherited language that outsiders cannot readily interpret.

Make Sure the Programs Fit Together

A college can have several defensible programs and still lack a coherent academic identity. Each program may attract students and cover costs while dispersing faculty attention, complicating systems, and communicating no common purpose. Portfolio review asks how programs relate: which share intellectual foundations, faculty, methods, audiences, and support; which create useful pathways; and which add administrative burden without enough mission value.

Coherence is especially important at OGS because we are a specialized institution. We cannot compete with a large university by offering the same breadth. Our advantage must come

[22] The Board of Regents voted to change the DPhil/PhD major from Integration of Religion and Society to Social Research. Though using the British nomenclature of DPhil (and MLitt for our master's degree program) was deeply rooted tradition at OGS, we recognized that we must broaden the appeal by using PhD (or MA for the master's) interchangeably. We sought and gained approval from our accreditor accordingly.

from depth, clear purpose, and a recognizable educational method. New programs extended our reach without weakening our distinctive learning method that connects our overall academic portfolio.

Measure Program Quality, Not Just Growth

Enrollment growth can show that students recognize a need, but it does not prove that the program meets that need well. Rapid growth may strain instruction, advising, assessment, technology, or faculty. Slow growth may be appropriate for a specialized program built around intensive engagement. Measures should follow the stated purpose: learning, scholarly quality, persistence, completion, responsible application, financial contribution, and portfolio coherence.

Program sponsors can interpret every positive result as confirmation and every negative result as temporary. Boards and faculty bodies should therefore set measures, review dates, and conditions for revision before launch. Quality reviews make the program open to evidence without treating review as opposition to innovation.

Update Programs without Losing Their Purpose

Staged innovation reconnects program form with institutional purpose. Programs are outdated when institutions keep inherited forms after the need, audience, or capacity has changed. Leaders should define the educational problem, separate mission from program form, use academic and market evidence, stage commitments, protect faculty capacity, and review results. The purpose is not constant novelty. It is to restore the academic foundation while testing each change before it becomes a permanent commitment. Program design expresses what students should learn. Process simplification determines how people, records, and technology support that learning without unnecessary burden.

Chapter Summary

Programs are liabilities when inherited titles, curricula, delivery models, or costs no longer match a clear student need, mission, demand, or faculty capacity. Every program should state the need it addresses, the students it intends to serve, the learning it promises, its full cost, the faculty capacity it requires, and its contribution to mission. New commitments should move through exploration, design, authorization, launch, and expansion only as evidence supports them. Measures and review dates should be set before enrollment so leaders can revise, consolidate, suspend, or close programs when results no longer justify the commitment. A sound program defines the educational work; Chapter 8 considers how processes and technology can support that work without distorting it.

8. Colleges Die When Technology Disrupts Learning; Leaders Must Prioritize Methods Over Means

For OGS, technology had to support adult graduate students at a distance without weakening our distinctive tutorial method. Disconnected tools, poorly maintained custom systems, or unclear ownership could cause missed requirements, duplicate work, insecure records, and inconsistent learning. We designed systems around our method, combined remote instruction with concentrated in-person experiences, simplified processes before automating them, and assigned responsibility for accessibility, privacy, security, documentation, and recovery. The test was not whether a tool was innovative, but whether it made essential academic and administrative work more reliable. Methods should not be built around means. Technology should serve the method, not the other way around.

That priority reflected a choice made during the pandemic: rather than use grants and our limited discretionary resources to

double down on an underused physical campus, we invested them in the technology required to keep teaching, communication, records, and student support functioning across distance. The pandemic catalyzed this change, but digital transformation at OGS became more than an emergency move to remote instruction. It developed into an ongoing redesign of the institution's educational delivery, administrative workflows, student support, data practices, and operating model around durable digital capacity.[23] Years later, we continue to refine connected systems, synchronous learning, admissions and support processes, and selective automation as programs and student needs evolve. The decision did not make technology an end in itself. It redirected scarce capital toward infrastructure most likely to preserve academic continuity, widen access, and support ongoing innovation while keeping every tool accountable to the learning method.

Technology design should begin with the work students and faculty need to do together. For OGS, that work includes preparation, questioning, feedback, revision, and growing independence. Technologies are useful only if they support those activities reliably and without unnecessary burden.

Learning Depends on Engagement, Not Just Location

Physical proximity does not by itself create educational presence. People can share a room while attention is scattered and expectations are unclear. Students and tutors in different locations can still engage closely when both prepare, concentrate, and remain accountable. In-person contact offers experiences that technology cannot fully reproduce, but the quality of the

[23] Antonia Scholkmann, Dorothy Sutherland Olsen, and Sabine Wollscheid, 'Perspectives on Disruptive Change in Higher Education: A Critical Review of Digital Transformation during COVID-19,' *Higher Education Research & Development* 43, no. 6 (2024): 1355–1369, https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2325140. The authors characterize digital transformation in higher education as a multidimensional, ongoing process that the pandemic accelerated rather than initiated.

learning depends on what participants do, not only where they are.

That distinction led us to make transactional distance an explicit concern in program and technology design.[24] We understood distance not simply as miles between student and tutor, but as the psychological and communication space in which expectations can be misunderstood, dialogue can weaken, and students can be isolated even when a platform is functioning properly. OGS therefore tried to balance sufficient structure with sustained dialogue and growing learner autonomy. Clear schedules, assignment guidance, records of feedback, and defined next steps reduced avoidable ambiguity; regular synchronous instruction, timely responses, and opportunities for community reduced isolation; and increasing responsibility for inquiry helped students be more independent without being left unsupported. Our commitment was to ask of every digital process whether it narrowed or widened the distance between people engaged in learning.

OGS's learning method requires four kinds of engagement. Students and tutors must sustain attention to a question, text, problem, or argument. They must recognize one another as responsible participants in the same inquiry. We must provide consistent support and standards. Some work also benefits from shared places, materials, and informal interaction. A coherent program decides which medium supports each kind of engagement well.

Disconnected Tools Create a Fragmented Experience

Online education is fragmented when separate decisions accumulate without coordination. One office adopts a

[24] Moore, M. G. (1993). Theory of transactional distance. In D. Keegan (Ed.), *Theoretical principles of distance education* (pp. 22–38). Routledge. OGS also introduces students to the theory of transactional distance in one of their first courses so that they can understand and participate intentionally in the institution's distance-learning model.

communication tool, another selects file storage, faculty use personal applications, and students receive instructions through several channels. Each tool may work on its own, but together they force students and employees to assemble the process themselves.

Not everyone bears that burden equally. Students with reliable equipment, flexible schedules, and strong technology skills may manage several systems easily. Others spend time finding information, interpreting inconsistent instructions, and recovering from missed messages. Faculty compensate with extra email, duplicate records, and improvised support. What looks like user error may be a system that requires individuals to perform coordination the institution should provide.

Choose Teaching Methods before Technology

Technology planning should begin with a clear account of how students learn. In our distinctive learning method, the central activity is a disciplined exchange about a student's developing work. The student prepares an interpretation or argument, responds to questions, revises the work, and takes responsibility for the next stage. The tutor directs attention, tests reasoning, identifies limits, and helps the student become more independent.

A system designed for this method should show preparation, preserve continuity between instructional practices, support substantive feedback, record next steps, and let tutor and student trace progress over time. It should reduce administrative work without automating human judgment. Features such as discussion boards, analytics, artificial intelligence, and multimedia are useful only when they improve this sequence rather than distract from it.

Technology Should Support How Students Learn

Technology should fit the institution's teaching method. Generic platforms work well for courses, modules, assignments, deadlines, and grades, but they may not support specific methods, mentoring, or cumulative scholarly work. For OGS, conventional course structures did not fully fit our distinctive learning method, so we built a learning environment around our specific learning method.

A custom system may fit institutional needs more closely than a commercial platform, but our rationale at OGS extended beyond customization for its own sake. Commercial systems are generally designed for large institutions organized around semesters, course sections, standardized assignments, grades, and layers of administrative roles. OGS needed a smaller set of connected functions organized around our instructional methods, cumulative scholarly work, dissertation progress, admissions, student support, and institutional reporting. Adapting a generic product to those needs could require several subscriptions, paid configuration, workarounds, duplicate data entry, and staff time spent reconciling systems that did not share the same logic. Focused custom development allowed us to begin with our actual work, build only the functions we needed, connect information across a small number of workflows, and revise the system as our programs and processes changed.

Small scale made focused custom development feasible because OGS served a limited number of programs through a common educational method. The people who understood academic work, student experience, compliance, and technical design could work in direct conversation, release a narrow usable version, observe how it performed, and revise it quickly. That proximity also allowed the system to preserve institutional knowledge about our teaching and learning methods, student progress, and handoffs among admissions, registration, academics, and support. A larger institution might require extensive governance and integration to make the same change; at OGS,

proximity shortened the distance between a reported problem and a system response.

Customization also helped control costs when we treated total cost rather than purchase price as the measure. It reduced recurring license fees for features and user tiers we did not need, limited the number of separate vendors, and allowed one improvement to remove manual work across several offices. A well-designed admissions or academic workflow could reduce duplicate entry, routine follow-up, correction of inconsistent records, and time spent moving information among forms, spreadsheets, email, and disconnected platforms.[25] We could also prioritize improvements according to student impact and cash flow rather than a vendor's release schedule. These savings were real only when the system remained maintainable.

However, custom development can create hidden costs through dependence on one developer, weak documentation, security gaps, inaccessible design, or deferred upgrades. We therefore had to keep the technical footprint small, document ownership and dependencies, maintain backups and recovery procedures, preserve source and system knowledge, and buy common functions when an established product was less expensive or less risky. The cost advantage did not come from building everything ourselves.[26] It came from customizing functions that expressed our distinctive method or removed recurring administrative burden, while avoiding unnecessary subscriptions, integrations, and fixed staffing that our scale could not support.

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[25] I am grateful for Richard Gamble, who has served as Registrar at OGS and effectively managed both electronic and physical records to ensure a positive student experience; Richard was a faithful operational leader at OGS during the turnaround.

[26] Although, our current systems represent a long "labor of love" of software development over more than 20 years; I developed the first version of our learning management system in the early 2000s, and continue to assist with its maintenance and development today. David Richardson now serves leads OGS's IT efforts and has modernized and expanded our systems substantially; he continues to find affordable and innovative technological solutions to reduce organizational frictions and improve user experiences.

Faculty, students, administrators, and technical staff contributed different evidence to system design. Limited pilots let us test changes before committing to wider implementation.

We aligned systems with the sequence of academic work by concentrating course loads, clarifying assignment timing, and simplifying dissertation procedures. These changes freed time for feedback, integration, and progress.

A close pedagogical fit did not excuse weak security or poor continuity planning. Custom ownership made these obligations ours rather than a vendor's.

Simplify Processes before Adding Technology

A small or long-established college does not have to accept rigid technology. It can reduce fixed costs, shorten development cycles, remove administrative burden, and build custom tools only where its educational method requires them. Unlike a startup, however, a college must also protect accreditation, academic records, privacy, accessibility, continuity, and educational quality.

A mature custom learning environment shows that digital change does not always begin with a new purchase. Over time, a tailored system can embody institutional knowledge about specific instructional practices, assignments, feedback, dissertation progress, and student records. Continuing development allows the system to change as the educational methods change.

The same approach can improve application and admissions work. Instead of using disconnected forms, messages, and spreadsheets, a small institution can create one pathway for inquiries, applications, decisions, and enrollment follow-up. Custom ownership is useful only when it fits the actual workflow, can be revised affordably, and connects recruitment information with institutional reporting. Leaders should evaluate conversion rates, staff time, data quality, applicant experience, security, and total cost.

A lean technology portfolio follows three rules: build only when the institution has needs that generic systems cannot meet, buy common functions when suitable products already exist, and integrate both so users do not have to move between disconnected tools. The right choice is the least costly option that preserves mission, security, continuity, and usability.

Our experiments with generative AI reinforced a simple rule: tools may assist judgment, but people remain responsible for consequential decisions. Institutions should define permitted uses, disclosure, authorship, privacy, and academic-integrity expectations. Admissions, grading, advising, and assessment require human responsibility, and confidential information should not enter unapproved systems. Because generated content can be inaccurate or biased, important uses require human review and an accessible alternative.

Lean process design favors a manageable technical footprint and the removal of features that do not serve the mission. Novelty alone does not justify another tool.

This sequence was especially valuable for recurring manual tasks such as routine agreements, status notifications, audit-participation records, assignment tracking, forms, digital syllabi, and support requests. Once the underlying process was stable, automation could remove repetition without hardening confusion into the system.

Synchronous Learning Requires Clear Expectations

Synchronous video allows OGS tutors and students to question, clarify, explore texts, and respond in real time without continuous travel or relocation. Its importance follows from a relational disposition toward both students and faculty. We do not understand education primarily as the delivery of content, the completion of modules, or the exchange of written submissions. We understand it as accountable inquiry conducted among people who come to know one another's questions, intellectual habits, responsibilities, and development over time. Students should

be recognized as persons whose professional, family, community, and academic circumstances shape how they participate. Faculty should likewise be treated as scholars and mentors exercising judgment, not as interchangeable providers of standardized content. Regular live conversation makes that conviction visible by allowing participants to hear tone, ask an unplanned follow-up question, notice uncertainty, correct misunderstanding before it hardens, and respond to the particular work and needs of the person present. For adult graduate students with work, family, and community responsibilities, synchronous video therefore expands access without requiring OGS to surrender the immediacy and mutual responsibility of its distinctive learning methods.

Video still differs from a shared room. It narrows the visual field, reduces informal interaction, depends on equipment and bandwidth, can expose private surroundings, and may produce fatigue or divided attention. Those limits make intentional practice more important, not less. For OGS, effective synchronous instruction requires clear expectations about preparation, materials, timing, and participation. Faculty should minimize competing tasks, draw students into sustained dialogue rather than extended presentation, give them time to reason, and close with clear revisions or next steps.

The institution should schedule live work predictably, provide accessible alternatives when circumstances warrant, and avoid treating constant connectivity as constant availability. Recording requires a stated educational purpose and appropriate rules for consent, privacy, candor, access, and retention. Used this way, synchronous video does more than reproduce a classroom on a screen. It creates a regular place for recognition, challenge, encouragement, and shared responsibility, helping OGS sustain a relational culture among students and faculty who may rarely occupy the same physical space.

Use Residencies for Learning That Requires Being Together

In a hybrid program, residencies should do work that is difficult to accomplish remotely. Useful purposes include sustained scholarly work, access to specialized library resources, extended discussion, informal exchange, community practices, and peer-faculty relationships. Because face-to-face residencies require time, travel, and expense, any limited residency should have defined educational goals.

Residencies should provide specialists, sustained scholarly work, and other resources that fit the curriculum.[27] Leaders should judge each experience by its stated objectives, student preparation, scholarly products, later academic work, and participant evidence. A prestigious location does not by itself establish learning.

Residencies also showed us that visiting a prominent institution is not enough. Students need dependable access to collections, databases, materials, and expert help that fit the curriculum. Resource planning should therefore remain connected to program design, enrollment, scholarship, and assessment. Partnerships are valuable when they provide reliable educational access, not simply association with a respected name.

Online Access Requires More Than an Internet Connection

Online delivery can reduce geographic barriers while creating others. A student may be able to connect but lack a quiet workspace, reliable broadband, current equipment, flexible work hours, accessible documents, or confidence with unfamiliar systems. Video can increase bandwidth costs and expose

[27] At OGS, a required domestic research residency at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC gives students access to collections, archives, specialists, and a major research setting.

private living conditions. Residencies can create barriers involving travel, disability, work, caregiving, immigration status, or cost. Leaders should evaluate access across the entire program, not infer it from the availability of an internet connection.

Design should anticipate different circumstances. Materials should be accessible, navigation consistent, captions and transcripts available when appropriate, deadlines and live-session requirements clear, and technical support responsive. Alternative forms of participation may be needed when they preserve the same learning objective. These measures maintain rigor while removing barriers created by delivery.

Authorization to distance learning does not establish that institutions can deliver it effectively or students can access it effectively. Faculty availability, student support, learning resources, accommodations, complaint processes, technical help, identity verification, privacy, records, assessment, live-session requirements, and residencies all affect participation. Claims of comparable quality should rest on evidence from student experience and learning.

Faculty Practices Make the System Work

No platform can compensate for inconsistent teaching. Faculty need a shared understanding of how to prepare students, sustain instruction across media, document feedback, set communication boundaries, and recognize progress. Without common practices, students experience a collection of individual arrangements rather than one educational method.

Remote education also creates work that may not appear in schedules. Messages arrive outside of the typical workday, written feedback expands, technical problems interrupt academic work, and constant digital access can imply constant availability. Institutions should set reasonable response times, count preparation and follow-up in workload, provide technical support, and monitor whether enrollment growth makes faculty work unsustainable.

Responsible Data Use Builds Trust

Digital systems create records of submissions, feedback, attendance, messages, recordings, access, and academic progress. These records can support advising, assessment, compliance, and improvement. They can also expose personal information or encourage conclusions the data do not support. Platform activity is not the same as learning, commitment, or character.

Institutions should state what data they collect, why they need it, who can use it, how long it will be kept, and how it will be protected. Students and faculty should receive clear notice of important uses. Security should match the sensitivity of the records, and analytics should support human review rather than produce unchallengeable conclusions.

Student records are most important when a student needs them, a system fails, or a program closes. The institution must preserve accurate, retrievable records of admission, progress, credit, completion, and awards. It should assign responsibility for access, correction, backup, recovery, and long-term preservation so transcripts remain available when technologies or institutions change.

Plan for System Failures and Vendor Changes

When teaching, records, communication, and administration depend on technology, system failures are an academic and operating risk. Outages can interrupt instructional delivery, delay feedback, block records, and weaken confidence. Custom systems require source control, documentation, backup, succession, and technical expertise. Commercial platforms create other dependencies, including price changes, altered features, data practices, and vendor failure.

A continuity plan should identify essential systems, recovery priorities, backups, responsible people, alternative communication channels, and acceptable outage periods. Documentation should allow another qualified person to maintain or restore each

essential function. The goal is not to prevent every interruption. It is to keep a foreseeable technical failure from stopping the institution's work.

Assess Technology against Its Educational Purpose

Technology should be assessed against the reason it was adopted. A system intended to ensure continuity should be evaluated through preparation, feedback, revision, and progress. Live video intended to extend access should be evaluated through participation, barriers, quality of exchange, and persistence. Residencies intended to deepen scholarship should be evaluated through student work and its effect on later inquiry.

Generative AI should meet the same standard. We are using Generative AI selectively at OGS while resisting its dehumanizing aspects. The question is not whether a tool can produce an answer quickly, but whether it helps students ask better questions, test assumptions, practice difficult reasoning, and return to human tutors better prepared for dialogue. We acknowledge that students and faculty are using generative AI, and we are striving to give them tools and guidance to understand its limits, disclose its use appropriately, and employ it as support rather than as a substitute for authorship, scholarly judgment, or relationship.[28] For that reason, AI initiatives should be assessed as educational supports within the larger learning environment, not celebrated merely because they are novel or convenient.

User experience matters because confusing or inaccessible systems can obstruct learning. It should not be the only measure. Students may prefer convenience that weakens necessary academic work, and faculty may prefer tools that reduce immediate effort while fragmenting records. Evaluation should combine

[28] As one practical support, OGS introduced well-trained chatbot tutors to students at no additional cost. These tools were intended to extend opportunities for guided practice and inquiry, not to replace faculty judgment, human tutorials, or student responsibility.

user experience with evidence about learning, access, persistence, faculty workload, reliability, security, and total cost.

Assessment is useful when faculty and academic leaders define what students should learn, review several kinds of evidence, and change curriculum, support, or resources when the findings require it. Persistence, completion, scholarly work, professional application, satisfaction, and enrollment each provide information, but none alone establishes learning.

Choose Technology the Institution Can Sustain

Technology can reduce some costs while creating others. Remote instruction may lower travel and facility demands, but institutions still pay for development, licensing, hosting, support, cybersecurity, accessibility, training, integration, and replacement. Custom systems may preserve a distinctive method but lose the economies, support networks, and interoperability available from larger vendors. Leaders should compare total cost over time, not only the initial price.

Cybersecurity compliance and insurance are especially important for small institutions because a single breach, ransomware event, payment diversion, or prolonged outage can consume limited reserves and interrupt teaching, payroll, admissions, financial aid, and access to student records. Small institutions hold sensitive academic, financial, identity, employment, and donor information but often lack a large security staff or redundant systems. Compliance obligations therefore provide a necessary operating discipline: identify the data and systems that require protection, limit access, use multifactor authentication and timely updates, train users, review vendors, maintain tested backups, document incident response, and meet applicable notification and recordkeeping requirements. Cyber insurance can add financial and technical support for forensic investigation, legal and regulatory response, notification, recovery, business interruption, and third-party claims. It does not replace sound controls, and coverage may depend on the institution accurately

representing the safeguards it maintains. For a small institution, the best approach is to treat compliance as everyday risk management and insurance as a backstop against losses that responsible preparation cannot fully prevent.

Custom design is justified only when it supports education more coherently, accessibly, and sustainably than available alternatives—and the institution can maintain it.

At OGS, connected learning, admissions, research, and reporting systems supported a relational model across distance. We increased enrollment only as people and systems could support it.

Good Design Connects Remote and In-Person Learning

Our combination of synchronous online learning and concentrated residencies suggests that process simplification and technology contributed to renewal when they extended, rather than replaced, our distinctive learning method. A stronger conclusion requires evidence from student experience, faculty practice, system records, costs, and learning outcomes.

Chapter Summary

Technology weakens learning when institutions automate unclear processes, fragment academic work across disconnected tools, or adopt platforms without the capacity to maintain security, accessibility, records, and continuity. Leaders should begin by defining the educational and administrative work, removing unnecessary steps, standardizing essential handoffs, and then building or buying the smallest sustainable set of tools. Every essential system needs an owner and a backup, and its value should be measured through learning, usability, reliability, security, faculty workload, recovery, and total cost. Technology can extend a teaching method, but it cannot explain why an institution is distinctive. Chapter 9 asks whether changed practices remain anchored in mission.

9. Colleges Die When They Lose Distinctiveness; Leaders Must Protect Institutional Identity

Pressure to increase enrollment could have pushed OGS toward generic program language, copied models, borrowed prestige, or remote education detached from our distinctive learning method. Those choices might have generated short-term interest while making the institution harder to distinguish. That risk is especially serious for a small, specialized institution. OGS cannot compete with comprehensive universities through breadth, scale, facilities, or advertising budgets; it must give prospective students a clear reason to choose a focused institution whose programs serve a narrower market. When a niche institution adopts the same language, delivery patterns, and academic forms as larger competitors, it gives up the very advantage that can offset its limited resources. Distinctiveness also improves discipline inside the institution by helping leaders decide which programs to develop, which technologies to adopt, which

partnerships to pursue, and which expenses genuinely support the mission. We therefore identified the commitments that had to remain, separated them from practices that could change, clarified mission and program language, designed technology around our approach to teaching and learning, and retained in-person experiences where they added educational value. Distinction came from observable practices, not slogans. Once those essential commitments were clear, fidelity no longer meant preserving every inherited form; it meant judging each practice by whether it still carried the mission effectively.

Leaders should treat inherited practices as evidence of how earlier stewards carried the mission, not as permanent definitions of fidelity. They should preserve practices whose benefits remain visible, revise practices that can carry those benefits more effectively, and end practices whose costs or constraints now obstruct the purpose they once served. Each decision should be supported by evidence from actual institutional work.

Identity Is Shown in Daily Practice

Institutions describe their identity through mission statements, histories, symbols, and public language. Those statements matter, but daily decisions show what the identity means. Curriculum, teaching, admissions, budgeting, leadership conduct, conflict, and measures of success reveal the institution's actual priorities.

When an institution's stated identity does not match its practices, stakeholders receive conflicting messages. A college may describe itself as relational while students encounter impersonal administration; claim academic rigor while outdated standards impede thoughtful innovation; present itself as adaptable while entrenched procedures block necessary change; or invoke a faith-based identity without clearly showing how that identity shapes curriculum, governance, and conduct. Such inconsistencies make it difficult for people to understand what the institution truly values and intends to preserve.

Imitating Other Institutions Can Look Practical

Imitation often appears to be a practical response. A larger university adopts a platform, program, faculty structure, or campaign, and a smaller college assumes the same choice represents modernization. The problem is that the model may depend on scale, staffing, students, capital, brand recognition, regulation, or teaching methods that the smaller institution does not share.

Identity cannot be imitated because it is not a package of visible features that another institution can adopt. It develops through a particular history, mission, student community, educational method, relationships, constraints, and repeated choices about what the institution will protect when convenience or revenue points elsewhere. Institutional imagination draws on those inherited commitments without treating inherited forms as fixed. A college may borrow a useful platform, program structure, phrase, or practice. However, borrowing is credible only when leaders understand why it worked in its original setting and translate it into their own commitments and conditions. Otherwise, imitation produces resemblance without substance: the institution sounds distinctive while its students and employees experience no coherent difference. OGS has learned from other colleges, but its identity had to arise from the way our people practiced our distinctive learning method, social research, faith-informed inquiry, relational support, and responsible adaptation. The goal is not to look like a respected peer; it is to imagine and build forms through which the institution can become more fully and consistently what it is responsible to steward.

Benchmarking is useful when leaders define a problem, compare several responses, and identify the conditions needed for each one to work. Imitation begins when leaders adopt a form because respected peers use it, without showing how it solves a local problem. Leaders then use similar language and programs while competing on terms that favor larger colleges and universities.

Distinctive Practices Make Identity Real

Identity lasts when people can point to specific practices rather than slogans. A distinctive teaching method, scholarly approach, community practice, or governance process can put mission into action. Our distinctive learning method at OGS achieves this through preparation, questioning, revision, direct engagement, and increasing student independence. A practice carries identity only when people can explain it, teach it, adapt it, and assess whether it is occurring. Leaders must distinguish the essential features from the parts that can change. Otherwise, the practice is only a label. Distinctive practices must remain recognizable as enrollment, technology, leadership, and programs change.

Define How the Mission Shapes Education

A faith-based institution should explain how faith affects education and institutional responsibility. The term may refer to theology, ethics, traditions of inquiry, community practices, governance, or service. If leaders leave these meanings undefined, they can invoke faith selectively to support preferred decisions, resist criticism, or distinguish insiders from outsiders without stating the standards being applied.

Faith should support careful inquiry, ethical responsibility, accurate description, care for people and communities, and honest scrutiny of belief and practice. It should not place factual claims beyond evidence or treat responsible disagreement as disloyalty. Academic freedom operates within published mission, doctrine, policy, and professional duties. Those boundaries should be clear, consistent, and open to fair review.

Given the heightened political and religious polarization in America, the OGS Board of Regents added “nonpartisan” to our descriptions as nonprofit, nondiscriminatory, and

nonsectarian.[29] We acknowledge that we must apply that commitment consistently. It should prevent institutional endorsement of political parties or candidates while allowing evidence-based analysis of public policy, institutions, and power.

Preserve the Purpose, Not Every Old Practice

Institutions under pressure often look back to a period of growth or stability. History can provide useful lessons, but nostalgia selects the parts of the past that support current preferences and ignores the conflicts, exclusions, and adaptations that were also present. An inherited practice is not necessarily faithful simply because it is old.

Leaders should ask what problem an earlier practice addressed, what benefit it produced, what conditions made it work, and whether those conditions still exist. The answer may support preservation, revision, or discontinuation. Online delivery did not necessarily abandon OGS's founding identity. They could represent continuity if they preserved our distinctive learning method and widened access. That conclusion depends on evidence from practice, not visual similarity to the past.

Use Language That Explains Rather Than Hides

Names, degree titles, mission statements, recruitment materials, and presidential communications tell stakeholders what kind of institution they are encountering. Leaders clarify identity when they define important terms and connect them to observable practices. Terms such as excellence, transformation, innovation, leadership, and community conceal more than they explain unless leaders state what they require.

[29] The Board of Regents added 'nonpartisan' to the school's longstanding descriptions as nonprofit, nondiscriminatory, and nonsectarian.

Institutional names can carry associations that outsiders may misunderstand.[30] Leaders should explain whether a name refers to a teaching method, historical influence, location, affiliation, or current legal identity. A name supports credibility only when public language distinguishes those meanings and does not imply a connection or achievement the college does not possess.

Mission and brand language should clarify how a college's stated perspective influences teaching, scholarship, institutional practice, and service. Part of our transformation at OGS included efforts to revise public language to describe that dynamic more precisely while preserving our governing mission.[31] Such revisions represent continuity only when governing documents, curriculum, faculty expectations, public claims, and daily practice support the same commitments.

Growth Can Weaken What Makes the Institution Distinct

Decline weakens identity by reducing the resources needed to carry it out. Growth creates a different risk. More students, programs, faculty, locations, and systems can weaken informal practices that once kept the institution coherent. Knowledge previously carried through personal relationships must be expressed in curriculum, policy, faculty preparation, technology, and shared standards. Otherwise, identity is dependent on a few long-serving people.

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[30] Despite its "Oxford" vocabulary, OGS has consistently, throughout its history, disclosed that while it has "cordial links" with people and programs at the University of Oxford, it has no formal association or affiliation with the university. This disclosure is essential for institutional integrity and consumer protection.

[31] OGS changed the American Center for Religion and Society Studies to the American Center for Research in the Social Sciences and revised its mission to emphasize constructive social change through research taught from a Christian perspective. Founder Hollis Green supported the change and cautioned against using "Christian" merely as an institutional label.

Scaling identity does not require turning every practice into a rigid rule. Leaders should identify which practices need consistency and which decisions require professional judgment. Academic expectations, program rationale, faculty orientation, student induction, technology design, and assessment can carry identity as the institution grows. Rules should support the method without replacing the relationships that make it work.

Partnership Terms Show What Matters Most

Small colleges rely on partners for expertise, facilities, recruitment, technology, funding, and credibility. Those relationships also create influence. A donor may prefer a program, a vendor may limit available choices, a partner may seek control over curriculum, or leaders may interpret an accreditor's expectation more broadly than required. The terms an institution accepts show which priorities govern its decisions.

A sound partnership should have a defined purpose, clear authority, transparent financial terms, protections for students and data, and a workable exit plan. External support should not suspend academic judgment or governance. Leaders should ask both what the partnership makes possible and what obligations or changes it requires.

Show Institutional Identity with Evidence

No single measure establishes institutional identity, but leaders can evaluate curriculum, academic outcomes, student work, faculty practice, board decisions, spending, communications, alumni accounts, and choices made when mission conflicts with revenue or convenience. Decisions that carry a real cost provide especially useful evidence because they show whether the stated commitment actually governs.

Students, faculty, staff, alumni, regents, and partners may experience the institution differently and may notice inconsistencies that formal documents miss. Leaders should compare these

accounts with one another and with evidence from practice. Agreement strengthens an interpretation. Disagreement shows where identity is uneven, contested, or changing.

A Strong Mission Allows Correction and Disagreement

Leaders can misuse mission language to protect themselves, familiar traditions, or the institution's reputation. They may reject a proposal as inconsistent with mission without explaining why, label critics disloyal, or minimize reported harm to preserve a favorable story. These responses prevent the institution from seeing where practice contradicts its stated commitments.

Boards, faculty review, assessment, grievance procedures, external review, and transparent reporting allow people to test institutional claims. These processes should protect legitimate disagreement and distinguish criticism of a practice from rejection of the mission. An institution preserves its identity when it can correct conduct in light of evidence.

Complaint and grievance procedures should let people raise concerns, receive fair review, and do so without retaliation. Patterns across complaints can reveal problems that routine reports miss. An accreditor's complaint process has a narrower role: it addresses alleged noncompliance rather than appeals of individual disputes.

A Turnaround Reveals What the Institution Truly Values

The turnaround tested OGS's identity. Financial pressure could have pushed us toward any available revenue, enrollment pressure toward generic programs, and disruption toward remote delivery that no longer reflected our distinctive learning method. Instead, we connected new programs to social leadership, built technology around our instructional practices, and retained concentrated in-person learning through residencies. These choices are consistent with the identity we claim, but they do not by themselves prove that students experienced it.

A stronger conclusion requires evidence that students experienced our stated method, faculty understood and used it consistently, programs fit the mission, and governing decisions protected those commitments when easier sources of revenue were available. Board records, curricula, learning outcomes, student work, interviews, and spending decisions can provide that evidence. The supported interpretation is limited: OGS changed inherited forms while trying to preserve specific commitments.

Mission Focus Keeps the Institution Distinct

Mission fidelity requires leaders to define the institution's essential commitments, show how programs and practices carry them out, and change forms that no longer serve them. Leaders should use curriculum, teaching, spending, governance, and stakeholder experience to test whether stated commitments govern actual work. Fidelity does not require preserving every inherited practice; it requires preserving the purpose those practices were meant to serve.

A strong mission helps leaders explain why students enroll, donors give, faculty serve, and partners engage. Leaders make that mission visible through defined roles, decisions, resources, and ways of handling disagreement. When those structures are unclear, or people cannot sustain the work, leaders cannot fulfill the commitments they claim.

Chapter Summary

Colleges lose distinction when they imitate forms from larger institutions, rely on vague mission language, or preserve inherited practices after those practices stop serving their purpose. Leaders should define the few commitments that must remain and identify the practices that make those commitments observable. Programs, budgets, partnerships, technology, and public claims should then be tested against evidence from curriculum, teaching, spending, governance, and stakeholder experience.

Legitimate disagreement should be protected, and inconsistencies should be corrected rather than explained away. Mission is credible only when people can carry it out consistently, so Chapter 10 turns to the roles, workload, and decision practices that make coordinated execution possible.

10. Colleges Die When Teams Cannot Work Together; Leaders Must Clarify Roles

Our small team at OGS managed finance, enrollment, academics, compliance, technology, and student support during a crisis. Roles overlapped, work passed through too many hands, and important decisions did not always have a clear owner. The institution also depended on people working beyond sustainable limits. We consolidated committees, clarified decision roles with RAPID, assigned executive responsibility, and removed or simplified work before automating it. Organizational health meant that essential work had an owner, a backup, a decision path, and a workload people could sustain.[32]

[32] RAPID is a decision-role framework developed by Bain & Company. R = Recommend: the person who gathers evidence and develops the proposal; A = Agree: the person whose formal concurrence is required, typically for legal, regulatory, or other mandatory conditions; P = Perform: the people responsible for carrying out the decision; I = Input: the people who provide relevant expertise, information, or perspective; and D = Decide: the single accountable authority who makes the final decision and commits the

Organizational health does not require constant agreement. It requires people to raise problems safely and resolve disagreement through legitimate authority.

Unclear Roles Waste Time and Energy

Small institutions often require one person to work across accreditation, enrollment, teaching, technology, and communication. Multiple roles are manageable when everyone knows which role applies to a decision, where authority begins and ends, and who is accountable. Without that clarity, people duplicate work, consultation is an informal veto, and employees depend on personal access rather than defined processes.

Unclear structures shift institutional costs onto individual employees. Conscientious people fill gaps, answer questions outside their roles, keep duplicate records, and repair failures before leaders see them. Completion of the work does not prove that the structure is sound. Repeated rescue is evidence that a process, role, or staffing level needs review.

Balance Teamwork, Rules, New Ideas, and Results

We used the Competing Values Framework to reflect on the extent to which decisions overemphasized collaboration, control, innovation, or performance. My philosophy was not that one value or quadrant was more important than the others. Each names a legitimate organizational need, and each can be dangerous when pursued without its counterweights. Collaboration can build trust and commitment, but without standards and decisions it can become avoidance. Control can create reliability and accountability, but without flexibility it can become bureaucracy. Innovation can open new possibilities, but without discipline it can scatter scarce resources. Performance can focus attention on

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organization to action. The letters identify roles rather than a required sequence.

results, but without relationships and purpose it can encourage short-termism or overload. The framework helped us ask not only what a proposal improved, but what value it might weaken and what safeguard was therefore required.

We organized goals and measures around those same tensions: innovation and external relationships, internal processes, organizational culture, and finance. Recruitment, persistence, technology, process improvement, net revenue, and net assets could then be reviewed together rather than as unrelated results. More importantly, the framework created a culture of mutual accountability. Leaders responsible for growth had to account for operational capacity and financial limits; leaders responsible for controls had to show that rules still supported students and timely action; leaders focused on people and culture had to connect trust and development to reliable performance; and leaders pressing for results had to consider workload, mission, and long-term capability. No quadrant could claim success by shifting its costs to another. Healthy tension meant that colleagues could challenge one another from different but legitimate values, while remaining jointly responsible for the institution's overall condition.

Clarify Who Gives Advice, Who Decides, and Who Does the Work

We used the RAPID decision-role framework for important decisions. One party recommends, designated parties agree when formal concurrence is required, others provide input, one accountable authority decides, and identified people carry out the work. For a small organization, the single Decider is especially important. Limited staffing and overlapping roles make it easy for several leaders to assume that someone else has authority. Naming one Decider empowers the responsible person or body to act once the required evidence, recommendation, concurrence, and input have been received. It also makes accountability visible: colleagues know who must explain the choice,

monitor its consequences, and revisit it when results or assumptions change. One Decider does not mean one person decides everything or acts without consultation. The Decider varies by issue and must remain consistent with board-reserved authority, faculty governance, law, policy, and delegated executive limits. The framework made three distinctions clear: advice is not approval, participation is not authority, and execution is not ownership of the decision. These distinctions reduced hidden vetoes and unclear executive discretion.

Routine decisions do not need a formal RAPID map. We used the framework for consequential or recurring decisions where unclear roles had already caused delay, duplication, or conflict. As part of the turnaround, we mapped every major decision we could identify across governance, academics, finance, enrollment, student success, compliance, technology, personnel, and operations. For each decision, we assigned one Decider. We identified where a formal recommendation was required, whose input was necessary for sound judgment, whether any party had to agree because of a legal or governing requirement, and who would perform the work after the decision. This exercise exposed decisions with no owner, areas in which too many people believed they held approval power, and matters where affected experts were consulted too late. The map became a practical reference for routing work, escalating disagreements, and holding the appropriate person or body accountable without reopening settled decisions through informal influence. Assigned roles still had to comply with governing documents, faculty authority, law, and decisions reserved to the board.

Simpler Processes Protect People from Overload

Our small leadership team and faculty could not respond to growing administrative work simply by working longer. We therefore treated process burden as an operating risk. We reviewed academic and business workflows for repeated approvals, unclear handoffs, duplicate records, unnecessary exceptions,

and manual follow-up. The goal was to reduce the work that consumed people's time before overload produced error, delay, or resignation.

Lean process design follows a consistent sequence: remove work that no longer contributes to a necessary outcome, simplify what must be retained, and automate only after the process is understood. Steps required for academic review, legal compliance, student protection, financial control, and continuity must remain. The result should be reliable work with less delay, duplication, and unnecessary effort.

In academic work, this approach produced clearer assignments, fewer dissertation milestones, common templates, more consistent syllabi, concentrated course sequences, and changes to delivery methods that created confusion. In operations, it supported integrated admissions, standard forms, status tracking, routine agreements, compliance calendars, and reporting. We removed some processes, simplified others before adding technology, and kept some manual because their scale, judgment, or regulatory requirements did not justify automation.

Not every duplicate step is waste. Some redundancy protects continuity, separation of financial duties, academic review, legal compliance, or student welfare. Efficiency should also not transfer more work to students or employees whose effort is less visible. A lean process removes work that adds no value while preserving necessary review, relationships, and professional judgment.

Too Many Committees Can Hide Responsibility

Committees often accumulate as each new problem produces another group. Over time, duties overlap, the same people attend several meetings, reports pass through multiple bodies, and no one knows where a decision will be made. We consolidated committees so that consultation occurred at the appropriate level and ended in a clear recommendation or decision.

Committee consolidation can exclude affected people, weaken faculty authority, or concentrate power without review. Leaders should therefore identify which perspectives are needed, which decisions require formal approval, what records must be preserved, and how dissent will be documented. The goal is not fewer committees for their own sake. Each committee should perform a distinct function that an existing body cannot perform clearly.

Our simplified structure assigned routine supervision to line managers, individual student status and policy implementation to academic administration, curriculum and academic policy to faculty governance, institution-wide strategy and coordination to executive leadership, and foundational, major financial, and chief-executive decisions to the board. These boundaries kept individual cases from displacing strategic work and prevented executive discussion from bypassing faculty or board authority.

Small Institutions Still Need Clear Executive Responsibility

OGS's small size did not remove the need for executive authority. Academic quality, student success, finance, compliance, admissions, information systems, and strategy each required a leader who could coordinate work across functions. We used executive titles to identify accountable areas, not to copy a larger university. A title was justified only when it matched real responsibility, decision authority, and measurable work. This clarity also mattered because people who serve a small institution often do so with considerable personal sacrifice. They may accept limited compensation, work across several functions, contribute outside ordinary hours, and remain through uncertainty because they believe the mission is worth preserving. The institution should not answer that commitment by giving them impressive titles but only clerical tasks, inherited problems, or responsibility without authority. Clearly stated executive roles recognize that these colleagues are leading consequential parts of the

institution and give them a meaningful domain in which to exercise judgment, improve systems, steward resources, and see how their work advances students and mission.

Executive empowerment means entrusting colleagues with outcomes, not isolated assignments. Each leader needs relevant information, resources, decision authority, and clear escalation routes. Within those limits, executives should improve systems and exercise judgment rather than wait for permission at every step. Meaningful ownership makes service more rewarding and gives the institution a clearer basis for reviewing decisions and results.

Because enrollment affects finance, technology affects teaching, and academic changes affect compliance, executive autonomy still requires shared priorities and cross-functional review. It should create neither isolated fiefdoms nor unchecked discretion.

Pay and Workload Must Be Sustainable

Candidly, OGS's compensation is limited by enrollment and recurring revenue. We combine modest salaries with flexible schedules, remote work, professional development, and permission for outside employment. This approach is responsible only if leaders acknowledge its limits, protect student obligations, disclose conflicts, review workloads, and continue assessing whether pay is fair and sustainable. Commitment to the mission does not replace compensation.

During the first years of the turnaround, presidential compensation did not take priority over stabilization.[33] That choice should not be a general expectation. Unpaid or unusually low executive compensation can hide an unsustainable position,

[33] I served without salary during the first three years of the presidency and began receiving compensation after the finances stabilized. That later salary remained modest relative to operating revenue, and I continued to supplement my own income.

restrict leadership to people with independent income, and weaken succession.

OGS allows supplemental outside employment so employees can supplement institutional income. Flexible and remote schedules make that possible, and professional development can support both outside careers and institutional work. The arrangement also creates risks involving divided attention, confidentiality, competing obligations, and unequal burdens. Employees and supervisors therefore need clear disclosure, realistic workload expectations, protection of student responsibilities, and regular review.

Part-time, remote, volunteer, and externally employed colleagues can strengthen a small institution, but essential work must not depend on chronic overload or unpaid availability.

Flexible work should benefit both the employee and the institution. Employees receive meaningful control over where and when they work; the institution receives clear commitments about availability, results, communication, and continuity. Remote work should follow the needs of the role. Professional development should support both the employee's career and the institution's work without treating the person's career as institutional property.

Non-salary supports can improve retention within a limited compensation model, but pay and staffing capacity must be reviewed as enrollment and responsibilities grow.

OGS benefited from people who worked beyond narrow job descriptions because they believed the institution was worth preserving. Their effort helped us during periods of limited cash and staffing. Leaders should not make that level of sacrifice permanent. They should recognize it, distribute burdens fairly, set limits, and use the temporary effort to build processes and capacity that reduce future dependence on it.

OGS's faith-based identity gave some stakeholders, including me, an additional reason to view the turnaround as stewardship. That belief may have strengthened commitment, but it did not replace financial discipline, competence, governance, or adequate systems. Religious language should never justify chronic

overwork, low compensation, or reluctance to question authority.

Constructive Disagreement Improves Decisions

We confronted how low trust can discourage disagreement, how avoided disagreement can weaken commitment, and how unclear commitment can reduce accountability and results.[34][35] The purpose was to identify team practices that prevented candid, mission-focused work, not to label individuals.

Productive conflict addresses ideas, evidence, assumptions, priorities, and consequences. It does not include humiliation, intimidation, retaliation, discrimination, or misuse of authority. Leaders must make it safe to disagree, use a clear decision process, represent competing views accurately, and close the discussion after the accountable person or body decides. The record should preserve the reasoning and important dissent without reopening the decision indefinitely.

Disagreement improves decisions when it reveals information that agreement might hide. Finance may identify a cost overlooked by academic leaders. Faculty may identify an educational consequence hidden by an efficiency proposal. Student-success staff may identify barriers not visible in enrollment totals. The goal is not agreement on every issue. Participants should understand the decision, how it was reached, and what they are expected to do after it is made.

A useful conflict process has four steps: state the disagreement, identify the person or body with authority to decide, make the decision, and track implementation. Academic leaders may use this process to address problems with a delivery format and then refer a proposed change to the faculty body with formal authority. The same process can guide decisions about recruitment tools, financial-aid strategy, program names, and academic

[34] Lencioni, P. M. (2002). *The five dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable*. Jossey-Bass.

[35] This analysis used Lencioni's five-dysfunctions model.

pathways. Each issue should be reviewed by the offices responsible for its academic, regulatory, student, and financial effects.

How to Tell Whether the Organization Is Working Well

Organizational health means that people know who is responsible, have the authority and information required for their roles, can raise problems safely, and can fulfill essential obligations without chronic confusion or excessive personal sacrifice. Leaders can monitor it through decision time, follow-through, workload, turnover, unresolved grievances, coordination, and recovery from errors.

At OGS, committee consolidation, RAPID decision roles, the Competing Values Framework, clearer executive responsibilities, flexible work, and a defined conflict process improved coordination. They do not establish that workload, compensation, or conflict problems were fully resolved; that judgment requires employee feedback, workload and retention data, and records of difficult decisions.

Healthy Teams Turn Strategy into Results

Frameworks help organize teamwork, but they cannot substitute for fair pay, competent leadership, or adequate staffing.

At OGS, these changes helped board members, leaders, faculty, and staff coordinate essential work rather than depend on repeated personal rescue. That stronger institutional agency gave us a foundation for assigning, testing, and sustaining new ideas.

Chapter Summary

Strategy fails when essential work has no clear owner, consultations are meaningless, employees carry chronic overload, or institutional performance depends on repeated personal

rescue. Leaders should map decision roles for consequential work, assign an owner and backup to every essential function, remove or simplify unnecessary steps before automation, and monitor workload, decision time, follow-through, turnover, unresolved grievances, and recovery from errors. Faculty and board authority still need protection, but execution requires one accountable path. A healthy organization can act today; a durable institution must also preserve resources for tomorrow. Chapter 11 turns to the financial responsibilities current leaders owe future leaders.

Part III. Adapt for the Future

The mission did not change, but the means required for survival had to change. *Adapt for the Future* centers on strategic succession, the practice that converts a successful turnaround from the achievement of particular leaders into capacity the institution can carry forward. Chapters 11 and 12 address its financial and leadership dimensions: preserving usable cash, reserves, capital plans, endowment, and donor intent; and transferring authority, records, operating knowledge, relationships, system access, and leadership responsibility. Strategic succession depends on all seven earlier practices. Accurate diagnosis identifies future dependencies and risks; disciplined finance preserves usable options; clear governance assigns transition authority; mission focus tells successors what must endure; process simplification makes work teachable and repeatable; staged innovation gives future leaders evidence and review points; and organizational health develops owners, backups, and several people able to assume greater responsibility. Adaptation is therefore not change for its own sake, but the governed transfer of an institution's capacity to learn, revise, and remain faithful beyond the crisis team.

11. Colleges Die When the Present Consumes the Future; Leaders Must Protect Resources

Immediate pressure could have led OGS to spend every available asset, postpone maintenance, neglect reserves, and leave new obligations to future leaders. Those choices would have kept the institution operating temporarily while reducing its ability to absorb the next enrollment decline, system failure, facility expense, or leadership change. We balanced recurring operations, eliminated debt, built reserves, increased long-term funds, directed gifts to defined purposes, and reported liquidity, endowment, capital needs, and operating results separately. Protecting limited resources is the financial side of succession: leaving future leaders resources they could actually use.

An endowment consists of funds governed by donor restrictions, spending rules, investment policies, and legal duties. It is not the same as operating cash. Leaders should evaluate it by how much can be spent, for which purposes, under what rules, and how it supports both current and future students.

A few years before I became president, a former chair of the Board of Regents left OGS a relatively sizeable restricted endowment fund. Because it was not available as ordinary

operating revenue, the gift was protected from being consumed by immediate deficits during the crisis. We governed it according to donor intent, applicable spending rules, investment policy, and board oversight. Since then, OGS has increased the fund's value by almost 150 percent. That growth strengthened long-term capital while the operating turnaround still depended on balancing recurring revenue and expenses through other means.

Endowment Funds Are Not Operating Cash

Endowment is not the same as available cash. Operating cash pays current bills. Reserves provide liquid funds for disruptions or planned expenses. The board may usually redirect board-designated funds within legal limits. Donor-restricted endowment must follow the gift agreement and applicable law, and its principal may not be available for ordinary operations. Financial reports should show these categories separately because each can be used for different purposes.

A college can have a growing endowment and still lack cash. A restricted scholarship fund may help students but cannot pay utilities. A research fund may strengthen academic work but remain unavailable for debt service. Market gains may raise the reported value without producing the same increase in spending. Leaders should therefore review endowment alongside available cash, operating results, restrictions, spending policy, and capital needs.

Future Leaders Inherit the Institution's Full Capacity

Successors inherit more than money. They receive facilities, liabilities, policies, systems, faculty practices, donor commitments, public credibility, unresolved conflicts, and institutional records. A college with modest assets and reliable operations may be stronger than one with more wealth but weak governance. Endowment supports continuity only when the institution

also maintains the people, systems, and practices needed to use it well.

Leaders should ask how today's decisions affect the options available to future students, employees, and boards. Spending may be justified when it protects essential academic work, prevents a larger loss, or creates capacity that others will use. Saving may be justified when it protects against volatility or supports work beyond one budget cycle. The board should state what each choice preserves, what it delays, and who bears the risk.

Recurring Deficits Use Up Future Capacity

Board members may responsibly approve the use of accumulated assets during a temporary crisis. Using those assets to cover a recurring deficit without a credible correction plan only delays the problem. Each withdrawal leaves less money for the next disruption or future investment. The underlying issue is still the same: recurring activities cost more than recurring revenue can support.

The institution can also use up future capacity without withdrawing money. Deferred maintenance shortens the useful life of buildings. Weak technology investment reduces reliability and security. Chronic faculty overload reduces professional capacity. Poor documentation allows operating knowledge to disappear. These choices move costs into the future even when the current budget appears balanced.

Honor Donor Restrictions and Avoid Future Costs

Endowed gifts connect donor support with institutional purposes that may last for generations. Restrictions can protect scholarships, faculty work, research, facilities, or other priorities from short-term diversion. They can also create obligations that are difficult or costly to administer. Leaders should therefore

evaluate donor intent before accepting a gift, not only after circumstances change.

The board should adopt a gift-acceptance policy that defines approval authority, due diligence, prohibited conditions, minimum funding where appropriate, administrative costs, naming expectations, and review of legal, reputational, environmental, and operating risks. Gift agreements should define the purpose clearly while allowing reasonable adaptation. Records should preserve the amount, restriction, and reason the institution accepted the gift.

Financial distress can push leaders to accept terms they would otherwise reject. A large gift may relieve immediate pressure while requiring a program, facility, or position that costs more than the gift will support. Leaders should apply the same academic, legal, financial, and governance review they would use in stronger conditions. The question is whether the gift advances the mission without imposing unreasonable future costs.

A Spending Policy Balances Current and Future Needs

An endowment spending policy determines how much long-term capital supports current work. A higher distribution may help current students and programs but reduce future purchasing power. A lower distribution may preserve capital but withhold support when present spending could prevent greater damage. The board must balance these effects.

No single spending rate fits every institution or fund. A defensible policy considers expected returns, inflation, fees, donor restrictions, liquidity, revenue volatility, and the purposes supported. Averaging market values across several periods can reduce sudden changes in annual distributions. Any exception should be explicit, legally reviewed, time-limited, and paired with a plan to return to the policy.

Set Clear Limits for Investment Risk

Endowment investing involves risk. Avoiding market risk entirely can reduce purchasing power, while pursuing high returns can create volatility, illiquidity, complexity, and loss. The board does not need to predict markets. It must define investment objectives, acceptable risk, time horizon, liquidity needs, permitted assets, delegated authority, and review requirements.

Small institutions often rely on outside advisers or managed funds because they lack internal expertise and scale. The board is responsible for understanding the strategy, performance, fees, liquidity, custody, conflicts, and compliance with policy. A complex investment should yield a clear benefit. If the board cannot explain the investment, the institution may not be able to govern it responsibly.

Faith-based or mission-driven institutions may exclude or favor certain investments. Such decisions need explicit criteria, attention to fiduciary duty, and analysis of cost, diversification, and likely impact. If investment policy is intended to express mission, the board should state the standards and apply them consistently.

Donors Invest for the Long Term When They Trust the Institution

Donors are more likely to commit permanent capital when they believe the institution's purpose will continue and its governance can protect the gift after current leaders leave. A compelling story may attract interest, but endowment giving also requires clean audits, reliable reporting, disciplined spending, coherent programs, board oversight, and credible succession planning.

OGS also used recurring gifts to support defined regulatory costs, including accreditation and state authorization.[36] Because total philanthropy remained below 10 percent of the operating budget, these gifts represented targeted support within a tuition-driven model rather than serving as the main source of operating revenue. They were also different from an endowment because they paid current expenses rather than created permanent capital.

An emergency appeal asks donors to address an immediate need. Repeated appeals, however, can signal that gifts are covering instability. An endowment case should identify the educational purpose to be sustained, the permanent capital required, the spending and oversight rules, and the relationship between endowed support and recurring operations.

Financial stabilization can support continuing education and scholarly opportunities for graduates. These efforts may strengthen alumni relationships, but leaders should evaluate their educational and financial results separately from endowment growth.

Long-Term Funds Support Longer-Term Planning

Endowment growth can support longer-term planning, but its value depends on where the increase came from and how the funds may be used. New gifts, investment gains, donor-restricted endowment, board-designated funds, and changes in spending have different effects. For OGS, reported growth improved the outlook, but the composition of the funds determines how much usable capacity it created.

Internal reports can show movement from crisis toward stability when revenue exceeds expenses, net assets and long-term funds increase, tuition grows with enrollment, and cash is adequate. Interim reports help leaders monitor progress, but audited statements should support final public claims about operating results, cash, and endowment.

[36] OGS called this recurring fundraising program Guardians of OGS and used it to support accreditation and state-authorization expenses.

Endowment funds strengthen continuity only when leaders understand the source and restrictions of each fund, govern investment and distributions carefully, and connect long-term capital to the institution's broader financial plan. That connection requires boards to distinguish reported market value from spendable support, preserve purchasing power where appropriate, and evaluate how endowment distributions complement, but are not appropriate for, balanced operations, adequate reserves, and current investment in students, employees, technology, and facilities.

Saving for the Future Must Not Neglect Current Needs

An institution can also save too aggressively. Endowment growth does not justify inequitable pay, deteriorating facilities, insecure technology, unmet student needs, or academic work that depends on unpaid labor. Future protection should not weaken the institution's current ability to serve students and employees.

Leaders should keep the categories clear. Recurring revenue should ordinarily support recurring operations. Reserves should cover volatility and defined contingencies. Capital plans should fund the renewal of buildings and digital systems. Debt should match repayment capacity and purpose. Endowment should support mission over time. When one category repeatedly covers neglect in another, reports should make that dependence visible.

Boards Must Balance the Needs of Current and Future Generations

For each major choice, boards must identify who benefits now, who pays later, which assumptions connect the present cost to future value, and what evidence would warrant a change. These questions bring long-term consequences into the decision.

Board oversight should connect endowment policy with budgets, reserve targets, capital plans, debt strategy, gift acceptance, and succession. Reports should show market value, additions, withdrawals, restrictions, spending, performance against policy, and the purposes supported. The endowment must be connected to the institution's financial condition.

Leave Future Leaders Resources They Can Actually Use

Present spending weakens future capacity when operations depend on drawing down assets, delaying maintenance, or accepting obligations whose later costs are not acknowledged. Endowment supports continuity when permanent capital is invested prudently, spent for its intended purpose, reported clearly, and combined with sound operating practices. Its purpose is to help future leaders and students carry out the mission under conditions current leaders cannot predict.

The financial side of succession planning preserves the resources future leaders will need: cash, reserves, capital plans, endowment, donor restrictions, and a clear account of future obligations. Resources alone are not enough. The institution must also transfer authority, records, operating knowledge, relationships, and backup responsibility.

Chapter Summary

Current leaders weaken the future when recurring operations consume assets, maintenance is deferred, donor restrictions are blurred, or new obligations are accepted without acknowledging their later costs. Policy and reporting should clearly distinguish operating cash, reserves, capital plans, debt, board-designated funds, and donor-restricted endowment. Spending, investment, gift acceptance, and reserve decisions should be tied to multi-year forecasts, and every major choice should state who benefits now, who pays later, and what evidence would require the board to reconsider. Future leaders, however, need more than usable

financial resources. Chapter 12 addresses the authority, records, knowledge, relationships, and leadership capacity that must also survive a transition.

12. Colleges Die Without Continuity; Leaders Must Plan for Succession

The turnaround concentrated important knowledge, relationships, and authority in the president and a small group of leaders. That concentration helped OGS act quickly, but it also created a continuity risk. A sudden departure could leave the board unable to reconstruct major decisions, employees unable to access essential systems, and stakeholders unsure who held authority. We distributed responsibility across key functions, documented processes and decisions, broadened important relationships, and made emergency and planned succession annual board responsibilities. The goal was not merely to name a replacement, but to transfer authority, records, operating knowledge, and trust.

The test is whether a successor can act without relying on the former leader for routine access, interpretation, or permission.

My appointment demonstrates both the value of longstanding institutional relationships and the danger of mistaking them for a succession process. I had graduated from OGS in the early 2000s, volunteered for nearly two decades, knew the mission and educational model, and maintained good relationships with the founder and former presidents. Even so, the board asked me during a crisis to assume a role for which I did not feel fully

prepared and to do so without salary. The outcome does not make the arrangement a sound model: it depended on prior loyalty, personal willingness, and the ability to absorb substantial uncompensated responsibility; conditions that cannot be assumed, can exclude qualified candidates, and conceal the office's true requirements.

A strong board should not wait for crisis and then depend on one familiar person's sacrifice. It should define the leadership need in advance, assess readiness, provide a fair and sustainable compensation structure, establish interim authority where necessary, and conduct a process that gives the institution more than one viable option. I believe our board learned from this experience that a fortunate outcome does not make an improvised succession process adequate.

Turnarounds Can Make the Institution Depend on a Few People

A crisis often requires faster decisions and clearer accountability. With OGS already operating near the edge of its capacity, diffuse processes would have increased risk. The board delegated more authority to the president, employees relied on the people with the most information, and donors, partners, and regulators often depended on one leader for answers. This concentration helped during the emergency.

The same arrangement is dangerous when it continues after the crisis. Decisions keep flowing through one office, relationships remain personal, exceptions are remembered rather than recorded, and colleagues act by anticipating one leader's preferences. Leaders may appear coordinated while the college is still vulnerable to absence, illness, conflict, resignation, or transition.

Turn Personal Knowledge into Records and Systems

Institutional memory includes both records and reasons. Successors need to know why a decision was made, which alternatives were rejected, what assumptions supported it, who was affected, and what evidence would justify reconsideration. Minutes, policies, contracts, budgets, audits, program approvals, risk records, and strategic plans preserve part of that knowledge. Without context, a successor may know what happened but not what the decision was meant to accomplish.

Major decisions should leave a concise record of the problem, evidence, governing authority, alternatives, risks, final decision, responsible parties, and review date. The record need not reproduce every discussion. It should allow a successor to understand the commitment and judge whether it still serves its purpose.[37]

Process redesign supports succession by making work teachable. A documented workflow should let another qualified person perform, evaluate, and revise it, including its exceptions.

Plan for Succession before a Leader Leaves

Leaders often postpone succession planning because they expect to remain or fear that discussing transition will signal instability. Succession planning is not an announcement of departure. It is a continuing board responsibility because leadership can be interrupted without notice and because preparation strengthens everyone's ability to continue the work even when no transition is expected.

A current succession plan identifies essential roles, core responsibilities, interim authority, required skills, key relationships, access to records, and possible internal or external leadership sources. It separates emergency continuity from a planned

[37] At OGS, all meeting minutes are collaborative and archived electronically for future understanding of the context in which decisions were made and who made them.

search and states who starts the process, communicates with stakeholders, and decides which actions should wait. The board should update the plan as strategy, personnel, and risk change.

The Board Is Responsible for Presidential Succession

The board is responsible for presidential succession because it appoints, evaluates, supports, and may remove the President/CEO. Search firms, donors, the incumbent, and other stakeholders may advise, but the board must define the need, approve the process, protect its integrity, and make the final decision.

A search should begin with the work leaders, faculty, and staff need the next president to carry forward, not a generic list of traits or an attempt to reproduce the incumbent. The skills needed to stabilize a college may differ from those needed to manage growth, improve academic quality, build endowment, or prepare for another transition. Board members should identify what must be preserved, what is left unresolved, and what the next phase requires.

Emergency Succession Plans Keep the Institution Operating

An emergency succession plan addresses sudden incapacity or departure. It should identify the interim leader, delegated powers, board-notification process, access to financial and operating systems, and communication responsibilities for students, employees, regulators, donors, and partners. Its purpose is to maintain operations until the board completes a permanent search.

Interim leaders need enough authority to address urgent risks and keep the institution operating. The board should state which major commitments, reorganizations, appointments, or mission

changes require additional approval. These limits protect the institution while leaving the permanent successor room to lead.[38]

Every Essential Function Needs an Owner and a Backup

Presidential succession will fail if other essential functions also depend on one person. Finance, accreditation, enrollment, academic quality, technology, donor relations, facilities, and student support each need a clear owner and a qualified backup. People do not need identical authority or knowledge, but another person must be able to understand and continue the work.

Effective delegation aligns responsibility, authority, information, skill, and review. A task without authority creates frustration. Authority without defined outcomes weakens accountability. Information without opportunities to exercise judgment preserves dependence. Leaders should allow others to make meaningful decisions within clear limits and then review the reasoning and results.

Develop Several People for Greater Leadership Responsibility

Leadership development should prepare several people for greater responsibility rather than designate one likely successor. Cross-functional work, board exposure, mentoring, professional education, temporary assignments, and participation in strategic decisions can strengthen the institution whether or not an internal candidate becomes president. This approach also preserves the board's options and reduces disruption when roles change.

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[38] I am grateful to Dr. Curtis McClane, who served as interim president between my election by the Board of Regents in September 2019 and my formal installation as president in 2020. He brought a spirit of organizational stability during a consequential transition and now continues to serve OGS as Chief Academic Officer.

Access to development should follow relevant responsibility and demonstrated potential, not personal closeness to current leaders. The criteria and opportunities should be clear, and performance should be evaluated with evidence. These safeguards reduce favoritism and prepare a broader group to lead through future change.

Key Relationships Must Belong to the Institution

Turnaround leaders are often the main contacts for donors, regents, partners, and regulators because they explain the crisis, report progress, and answer consequential questions. These personal relationships matter, but they create risk when stakeholders know only one leader.

Leaders should broaden important relationships rather than make them impersonal. Other leaders and appropriate board members should join key conversations. Staff should record contact histories, commitments, restrictions, and follow-up duties. Stakeholders should know which office or governing body holds authority after the current leader leaves. This work should respect donors and partners as participants, not treat them as assets to be reassigned.

Turnarounds often leave several influential accounts of an institution's identity and recovery.[39] Those accounts can preserve useful knowledge, but they can also constrain successors if fidelity is defined as copying a founder's or president's language and methods.

Founder transitions require leaders to preserve institutional memory without confusing symbolic continuity with governing authority. Public acts of recognition can help a community

[39] Hollis L. Green led the task force that preceded formal founding of OGS and helped shape the Oxford Tutorial Method. Other former presidents, such as Rebecca Tucker, Richard Humphrey, and Kimberly Geiger each sacrificed and contributed to the survival of the institution. My own leadership during the turnaround produced another account of the crisis and recovery.

acknowledge that one leader's stewardship is ending, but formal authority must still transfer through the governing process.[40][41]

A successor should inherit the mission, governing obligations, evidence, and unfinished work, not a script. New conditions may require different skills, relationships, structures, and judgments. The board should distinguish commitments that bind the office from methods that belonged to the prior leader.

Departing Leaders Must Make Room for Their Successors

A departing leader should organize records, explain commitments, introduce key relationships, identify unresolved risks, and distinguish personal views from established policy. The leader should provide context without trying to control the successor's choices. The transition is effective when the successor can act without relying on continuing permission or interpretation from the predecessor.

An emeritus title, advisory position, board seat, teaching assignment, or donor role may preserve useful knowledge and relationships. It can also create divided authority if people continue to treat the former president as the decision-maker. Any continuing role should have a defined purpose, reporting

[40] At OGS, the transition was most visible when Hollis L. Green attended graduation shortly before his death and transferred his chancellor's robe to David Anderson. Leaders later interpreted the act as acknowledgment that Green's stewardship was ending, and he died only a few months later at age 92. The memorials that followed marked the transition publicly.

[41] I had the benefit of serving as president for six years while our founder, Chancellor Emeritus Dr. Hollis L. Green, was still alive. We fostered a healthy founder-successor relationship that moved beyond the more difficult early stage of transition following the appointment of the first president after Dr. Green in 2004. During our years of overlap, Dr. Green transferred e essential founding principles to m (clarifying what had to endure even as inherited forms changed); that guidance helped me pursue the mandate to 'Restore the Foundations.'

relationship, duration, and boundary, and should support rather than compete with the successor.

Test Whether the Institution Is Ready for a Leadership Change

Leaders should test succession readiness before a transition. Can authorized people access financial, legal, academic, technology, and regulatory records? Are decision rights documented? Can more than one person explain the strategy, risks, and educational method? Are key relationships shared? Can the board act without the president organizing the process? Can essential systems be recovered when a particular employee is unavailable? These questions reveal remaining dependencies.

Institutions can test readiness through cross-training, temporary delegation, planned leave, tabletop exercises, review of emergency authority, and retrieval of essential records by authorized colleagues. The purpose is to find dependencies while there is time to correct them. An untested plan shows intent, not readiness.

Retell the Turnaround Story so People Can Continue Writing It

Leaders should continuously retell the story of turnaround and renewal to stakeholders, faculty, staff, students, and alumni. The purpose is not to celebrate one leader or preserve a fixed account. It is to remind people how far they have come together, which choices changed the trajectory, what risks remain, and what responsibilities now belong to them. Repetition helps people connect current disciplines, such as cash control, candid reporting, clear governance, program review, and succession planning, to the conditions that made those disciplines necessary.

Storytelling is also a sociological and institutional strategy. The sociological imagination helps people connect the

turnaround's personal experiences with the structures, histories, and conditions that produced them. Institutional imagination helps them interpret those conditions as neither natural nor final and envision forms of shared life they can build together. A shared definition of the situation influences what participants believe is possible, which behaviors they consider normal, and whether they see themselves as observers of recovery or stewards of continuing renewal. When people interpret the turnaround as evidence that disciplined, collective action can change institutional conditions, that interpretation can strengthen both the agency to act and the imagination to keep renewing the institution.

The narrative must remain open to evidence and multiple perspectives. Leaders should distinguish documented results from interpretation, name the contributions of board members, faculty, staff, students, alumni, donors, and partners, and acknowledge unresolved costs or disagreements. They should repeat the story in orientation, faculty development, board education, alumni communication, annual reports, and leadership transitions, while updating it as new evidence appears. A useful renewal story does not turn the past into mythology. It gives people a shared account of what happened, why it mattered, and what they must do next.

A Turnaround Must Include Work Others Can Continue

At OGS, responsibility became more distributed across academics, student success, admissions, tutoring, finance, registration, compliance, information systems, and marketing. These roles improved delivery, assessment, enrollment, aid, reporting, and compliance. As enrollment grew, we also monitored workload and staffing. However, broader responsibility does not establish full succession readiness.

Cross-functional issues should move to a shared forum where accountable leaders request resources, coordinate dependencies,

and report completion. These records let others see what remains unfinished and continue the work.

The turnaround is not complete if its reasoning, systems, or relationships remain understandable only through my memory.

OGS must now test whether colleagues can exercise the responsibilities we have distributed. Until they can continue essential work and carry out emergency or planned succession without current leaders, dependence remains.

Good Stewardship Continues after a Leader Leaves

Succession preserves a leader's contributions by making essential work independent of that leader's continued presence. People are not interchangeable; their knowledge and judgment must become accessible to others.

A mature turnaround leaves both gains and the knowledge behind them in the hands of people able to carry the work forward.

Chapter Summary

A turnaround is still vulnerable while authority, operating knowledge, system access, or important relationships are concentrated in one leader or a small group. Succession planning should therefore be an annual board responsibility, with separate protocols for emergencies and planned transitions. Major decisions and system access should be documented, every essential function should have an owner and backup, key relationships should be broadened, several leaders should be developed, and readiness should be tested through planned leave, temporary delegation, record retrieval, and tabletop exercises. With diagnosis, finance, governance, enrollment, programs, technology, mission, organizational health, and succession connected, the conclusion returns to the central question: what enables a college not merely to survive a crisis, but to renew itself?

Conclusion. Why Colleges Die and How Leaders Can Save Them

OGS's experience is not a rescue formula. It shows how institutional renewal depends on linking immediate repair, renewed purpose, and durable capacity rather than treating finance, governance, programs, people, and succession as separate projects. The three mandates name that progression, while the eight practices explain the recurring disciplines that made it possible.

The turnaround was shared work. My decisions mattered, but the gains described in this book came from coordinated effort across OGS. Regents, faculty, staff, students, donors, and partners turned plans into operating change because they believed the institution was worth saving.

My clinical sociology background helped me contribute a particular form of leadership to that shared work. The same sociological imagination and research discipline OGS teaches became tools for examining OGS itself. They helped people connect personal accounts with financial records, enrollment patterns, governance structures, and historical conditions so that the turnaround could be understood as a social and organizational problem rather than a collection of isolated failures. Institutional

imagination extended that diagnosis toward alternatives: it asked what OGS might become if inherited forms were no longer treated as the only possible carriers of its mission. Institutional agency then joined interpretation to action by aligning authority, resources, relationships, and responsibility around changes people could test and sustain. These capacities did not replace the expertise of board members, faculty, staff, students, or advisers. They helped organize that expertise into a shared diagnosis, a credible future, and coordinated action.

Heal the Wounds

Heal the Wounds restored enough control and trust for OGS to act rather than merely react. Diagnosis exposed the connected causes of decline; financial discipline reopened choices; and governance converted evidence into accountable decisions. Mission, process, organizational health, innovation, and succession mattered here as safeguards, but the central achievement of this mandate was the recovery of institutional agency under crisis conditions.

Healing relationships did not mean avoiding responsibility, minimizing harm, or forcing reconciliation. It meant honoring prior service, listening to people affected by change, acknowledging institutional mistakes and losses, communicating candidly, and creating fair processes through which disagreement and grievances could be addressed. These practices helped restore enough goodwill for people to share difficult evidence, extend trust provisionally, and work together on unfamiliar solutions. Structural repair made relational trust more credible because promises were followed by cleaner finances, clearer authority, reliable reporting, and consistent action; relational repair made structural change more durable because people understood its purpose and could participate without being treated as obstacles.

Healing is not linear. Enrollment can improve cash flow, stronger finances can support recruitment, audits can increase

confidence, governance can improve reporting, better programs can attract students, and repaired relationships can improve the cooperation required to sustain every one of those gains. Leaders should identify the constraint that most limits the institution, address it first, and avoid remedies that create a more serious dependency elsewhere. For a small institution in crisis, successful turnaround therefore means healing both the systems that failed and the relationships through which those systems must continue to work.

Restore the Foundations

Restore the Foundations asked what had to endure and which forms could change. Mission focus clarified OGS's essential commitments; organizational health gave those commitments responsible owners and workable decision paths; and institutional imagination guided program, process, and technology changes toward a coherent educational model. Enrollment tested whether that model was understandable, accessible, and sustainable for students.

During decline, leaders often use strength in one area to cover weakness in another. They borrow to cover recurring deficits, use one-time gifts for ongoing costs, rely on faculty overwork when systems are inadequate, increase marketing before programs are clear, use mission language instead of making strategic choices, or depend on presidential energy when governance is weak. Some temporary measures may be necessary. They are damaging when leaders treat them as permanent and leave the underlying problem unchanged. Leaders should identify these substitutions, decide which can continue, and set deadlines for correcting the rest.

Adapt for the Future

Adapt for the Future converted renewal from the work of a crisis team into capacity others could govern and use. Its

financial dimension preserved usable options; its leadership dimension transferred authority, records, systems, relationships, and judgment. The mandate succeeds when successors inherit not only resources and policies, but the institutional agency and imagination required to diagnose new conditions and respond faithfully.

The three mandates describe a progression in institutional agency and institutional imagination. Healing restored enough authority, trust, information, and financial control for people to act together. Restoring the foundations used that recovered agency to distinguish enduring purpose from inherited form and to imagine a coherent operating model for programs, people, technology, and student experience. Adapting for the future embedded that imagination in resources, systems, records, relationships, and successors so renewal would not depend on the crisis team. The sequence was iterative rather than linear: agency made responsible imagination actionable, while imagination gave agency a direction beyond immediate survival.

Smallness Can Be Strategic

Small colleges have fewer reserves, narrower program portfolios, less bargaining power, and less staffing backup. One enrollment change, leadership departure, system failure, or unexpected expense can have a large effect. These limits also explain why structures borrowed from larger universities may create more administrative work than a small institution can support.

Small scale can also support faster decisions, close relationships, coherent programs, and a clear identity. A small college does not need to imitate the breadth of a large university. It can organize around a distinctive teaching method and a defined student community. These advantages require safeguards. Close relationships can create personal dependence, speed can reduce consultation, coherence can lead to insularity, and distinctive claims can exceed the evidence. Small size is an advantage only

when governance, records, evidence, and backup systems support it.

What This Case Can (and Cannot) Prove

This book presents one recent insider account of a graduate-only nonprofit institution. OGS's donor base, degrees, Title IV participation, distinctive learning method, and focus on adult students limit how directly the case applies elsewhere. Stronger conclusions require the underlying financial, governance, enrollment, student, faculty, aid, technology, and succession records. Looking back may also make the turnaround appear more orderly than it felt at the time.

OGS's operating condition improved substantially across the measures recounted in this book. Several interacting causes appear to have contributed, and the case neither guarantees durable gains nor predicts the results another institution would achieve. Its narrower lesson is that recovery became possible as people rebuilt several connected capacities.

As immediate constraints eased, our attention changed. We moved from financial and regulatory stabilization to operating discipline and enrollment, then to learning quality, identity, scale, and succession. This sequence does not establish causation, but it shows that improved capacity allowed us to address problems that earlier conditions had kept out of reach.

Public claims are credible when people's routine work supports them. Compliance calendars, academic review, enrollment coordination, financial monitoring, workflow improvement, and proper referral of decisions to faculty or governing bodies show that leaders have assigned responsibility and that people follow through.

Turnaround Creates New Risks

A turnaround does not remove the causes of decline. It changes how they appear. Restored cash flow can encourage

overexpansion. Enrollment can grow faster than faculty and student support. New programs can fragment the portfolio. Technology can create systems the institution cannot maintain. Positive publicity can reduce scrutiny. A successful president can be too central to decisions, records, and relationships. Endowment growth can hide unresolved operating or capital needs. Leaders should repeat the diagnosis after conditions improve.

The most durable result of a turnaround is the institution's ability to identify new problems and change course before they become crises. Leaders and boards must keep channels open for adverse evidence, revise explanations when facts change, stop work that no longer serves its purpose, and distinguish commitment to mission from attachment to earlier decisions.

Renewal Requires Work from the Whole Institution

Renewal requires work from several groups. Boards require evidence, govern risk, evaluate leaders, and protect continuity. Presidents help people understand conditions, choose a direction, coordinate action, share authority, and make their reasoning open to review. Faculty protect academic purpose. Staff build reliable systems and student support. Students show whether institutional promises are being kept. Donors and partners help when their support strengthens rather than redirects the mission. At OGS, recovery became possible because these groups accepted responsibility for the institution's future.

No group sees or controls the entire institution. Governance should therefore connect information, authority, responsibility, and review. Shared governance does not mean that everyone decides every matter. People with relevant knowledge or who will be affected should have appropriate ways to contribute evidence. In contrast, the person or body with formal authority makes the decision and is accountable for it.

What Keeps Colleges Alive

Colleges die when purpose, resources, authority, and daily work become disconnected long enough that people can no longer correct the institution's course. The specific symptoms differ (financial constraint, weak evidence, delayed decisions, declining enrollment, incoherent programs, fragile systems, imitation, overload, or dependence on a few leaders), but the cumulative danger is the same: each failure narrows the institution's capacity to choose and act. No single condition is always fatal. Left connected and uncorrected, however, they can make recovery impossible.

Colleges are more likely to remain viable when leaders treat the eight practices as one connected discipline rather than as separate remedies. Diagnosis shapes financial and strategic choices; governance turns evidence into accountable action; mission and imagination guide adaptation; simpler processes and staged innovation make change sustainable; organizational health enables coordinated work; and succession carries resources, knowledge, authority, and relationships beyond current leaders. Together, these practices heal immediate damage, restore the foundations that make the institution worth preserving, and adapt its capacity for the future. They do not guarantee survival. Some institutions may still need to transform, merge, or close. However, those decisions should follow careful analysis and accountable leadership rather than unmanaged decline.

We have made substantial progress at OGS, but the work is unfinished. The immediate crisis has eased; the harder test is whether board members, leaders, faculty, and staff make disciplined finance, clear governance, mission-focused programs, reliable systems, healthy teams, and succession planning routine. If we do, OGS will have moved beyond a turnaround toward a shared institutional agency: the capacity to interpret conditions, make accountable decisions, and act together. It will also possess institutional imagination: the disciplined capacity to envision and build faithful forms of education under conditions we cannot yet predict. Colleges remain alive not by preserving every

inherited arrangement, but by joining the agency to act with the imagination to renew.