

Book Review / Compte rendu

Keller, George (2014). *Transforming a college: The story of a little-known college's climb to national distinction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pages: 146. C\$ 32.86 (paper).

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Conceived first as a journal article in *Planning for Higher Education* (25(3), 1997), George Keller (1928-2007) published *Transforming a college* (2004, Johns Hopkins) at the urging of then (and still) President of Elon University, Leo Lambert. Re-published in 2014 to mark Elon's 125th anniversary, *Transforming a college* is with little change an account of how a "a small, unattractive, parochial bottom-feeder" (p. XVII) liberal arts college in Elon, N.C. transformed itself into a much larger institution of national stature in the decades before 2000 (changing its name from Elon College to Elon University in 2001). Given the number of reviews already published of the virtually identical 2004 edition, what I offer here is a brief comment on changes to the book and the landscape of American higher education as seen through the lens of American higher education.

As Keller had hoped, *Transforming a college* became a popular monograph. No doubt its popularity was based on the search, perhaps most intense in America's heavily privatised higher education ecosystem, for a recipe for success. As both Keller and Lambert recognise, however, a copy-and-paste approach from case study is less likely to bear fruit than a "high-above-the-cloud" (p. XIV) read for inspired institutional planning. In both editions alike, the reader finds case study treatment of: stable leadership; strategic planning; personnel (including faculty) selection, training and recognition, particularly for teaching quality; institutional advancement/development and marketing. All of this and more, it is argued (originally by Keller and parenthetically in 2014 by Lambert), has spurred the University's success.

To any student of higher education this list is neither unfamiliar nor exhaustive. What is different about the 2014 edition is, first, the new 28 page afterword by Leo Lambert. In it we read what continues to define and shape success or failure at Elon University (and American higher education generally). All of it, he says, is couched in context-relevant strategic planning (the theme that distinguished Keller's career as a scholar of higher education though he, of course, was not involved in this republication). Thus we read

about: the stable “cast of characters” in the original book that continue to play a role at Elon including a long-retired but engaged ex-president (indeed Lambert himself is only the 8th president in the institution’s history); an emphasis on service to the institution; enrolment growth (by more than 50%) and diversification, including out-of-state registrants (reaching 80% of the University) from such places as Massachusetts, California, Texas and Illinois; a supportive Board, alumni and parents; effective management and use of its growing endowment. We also read about ambitious campus construction that continues to expand Elon (including residential halls), the growth and development of professional schools (e.g. business, law, various health professions) and commitments to pedagogical change such as the introduction of experiential learning and teacher-mentor modelling (based on a student-faculty ratio of 12.3:1). What Lambert says is most distinguishing about Elon’s experience since 2004 is the school’s accreditation with *Phi Beta Kappa* in 2010. This key moment in the institution’s history, he says, is both recognition of the decades of change that Elon had been chasing (2010 being the school’s third try at such accreditation) and affirmation of the University’s status in its new “competitive set” peer group of universities.

Also set within the context of Elon’s strategic planning, Lambert’s afterword touches on the corporate practices that both pervade the original book and have continued to shape Elon beyond 2004. This brings us to the second difference—one of emphasis more than type—between the two editions: the ever more intense pressure on US colleges (broadly defined) to prove their worth. This case study provides us with all the familiar cues now in public discourse and academic debate on the future of (American) higher education. Programmes and colleges are constantly faced with return on investment calculations, apparently disruptive MOOC offerings and dense labour markets for graduates. Lambert writes that readers (and Keller himself) would be interested to know how some of the marketing and financial risk-taking continue to impel Elon over and above its core activities of teaching and learning.

If the reader feels this latter theme is not “core” to the University mission, it should be nonetheless unsurprising. Demands for fiscal prudence and accountability are generally apparent, whether private or public, American or western generally. What is striking about *Transforming a college* is the degree to which corporate and competitive strategy and management are so central to the success storyline, if not displacing core activities then always accompanying academics. The University must thrive academically to survive financially. I feel the reader will find it easy to consider these processes as mutually interdependent. If so, then this case gives one pause to consider how these interactions affect our own campuses.

Taking a step back from the 2014 edition in particular, one cannot help but wonder what happens to the populations long served by Elon. Though the emergent application/registration metrics are impressive, the “above-the-cloud” view leads one to wonder about the communities whose youth are left behind by this impressive ascendance. Perhaps this is the inevitable trade-off for national stature. Competitive admissions will surely mean that the students once served by Elon will only add its rejection letter to those from the competitive set. I ask the student and administrator—and especially those with a system view—of higher education to bear this in mind in this worthy read. 🍁