The Stephens College Strategic Plan

The Stephens College Board of Trustees approved a new mission articulation in February 2017 and a new Strategic Plan in June 2017.
Introduction

It was 1830 when Lucy Ann Wales made her way — alone — from her home in Weymouth, Massachusetts, to what was then the tiny frontier town of Columbia, Missouri. Lucy Ann came originally to teach the children of some of Columbia’s most privileged residents, but in 1833 she was hired to be the first headmistress of the Columbia Female Academy — the original name of what would become Stephens College.

Over the 184 years since Lucy Ann Wales first stood before a classroom of eager young women, Stephens College has evolved into an institution unlike any other in higher education. Innovative, independent, and committed to the synthesis of theoretical and experiential learning, Stephens remains inspired by its unwavering dedication to women’s undergraduate education — even as it has embraced new opportunities, redefined its distinctive advantages, and expanded its outreach to learners of all ages.

Since the adoption of its most recent Strategic Plan in 2010, Stephens has embraced a new emphasis on excellence in the creative arts and health sciences, a strategy that has brought intentionality and focus to its curriculum. A reorganization of the College to create a School of Health Sciences, launch of a Master of Physician Assistant Studies program, and investment in a new Center for Health Sciences have expanded the College’s opportunities in some of the most in-demand disciplines in the education marketplace today. Simultaneously, the College has invested in its arts programs, including new housing at its summer theatre; acquisition of TRYPS, a regional children’s theatre program; the building of exciting creative synergies across campus; and the launch of a new blended (in-seat/online) Master of Fine Arts in Television and Screenwriting, located at the Jim Henson Studios in Los Angeles.

Stephens has in recent years recognized that among its greatest strengths is the capacity to respond effectively and nimbly to emerging opportunities. But our embrace of new ideas is deeply rooted in the institution’s longstanding core commitments: to student transformation; to the synthesis of theoretical and experiential learning; to exceptional teaching informed by scholarly and artistic achievement; and to graduates educated in the liberal arts, informed by diverse perspectives, and committed to lives of leadership, integrity and service. That extraordinary blend of tradition and innovation rests at the heart of the College’s distinctive culture: We will continue to renew and evolve, but always in service to our greater purpose and values-driven mission.

That evolution has been guided and inspired by the insights and independent thinking of the hundreds of faculty, staff, administrators, students, trustees and alumni who have contributed to our pathways forward. Through more than 16 months of meetings, conversations, drafts and presentations, the Stephens community has participated in a process of self-review and revelation, celebrating its achievements and acknowledging the good work yet to be done.

Stephens’ new articulation of its purpose, aspirations and principles reiterates the same foundational mission and values that have guided its evolution for decades, even as it captures a more contemporary version of the College’s historical character. Steadfastly committed to remaining an undergraduate residential women’s college, Stephens has developed into a teaching-and-learning institution for the 21st century, expanding its reach and promise to lifelong learners of all genders both on and off campus.

Considered collectively, the College’s Mission, Vision and Values statements communicate an exciting sense of energy, urgency and commitment to outcomes. Its three-word Mission statement, memorable and emphatic, presents imperatives that speak to all of our stakeholders: students, employees and alumni. Our Vision statement is as realistic about our strengths as it is aspirational about our results. And our Values statement provides an apt reminder that, even as Stephens College embraces its dynamic, strategic and inclusive future, it remains deeply committed to the foundational values that have informed and inspired its history.

Mission

Vision
Inspired by its tradition as an undergraduate women's college, Stephens College engages lifelong learners in an educational experience characterized by intellectual rigor, creative expression, and professional practice, supported by accomplished faculty, talented staff, and engaged alumnae/alumni. Graduates of Stephens College are educated in the liberal arts, informed by diverse perspectives, and committed to lives of leadership, integrity and service.

Values
Stephens College is committed to its Ten Ideals as core values that inspire and enrich our lives:

• Respect for our own dignity and the dignity of others, embodied in a sense of social justice
• Courage and persistence
• Independence, autonomy and self-sufficiency
• Support for others through the willingness to take and give criticism, acceptance and love
• Sensitivity to the uniqueness and fragility of the natural world of which we are part
• Responsibility for the consequences of our choices
• Belief in our changing selves and in our right to change
• Creativity in the spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of life
• Intelligence that is informed and cultivated, critical yet tolerant
• Leadership which empowers others

Areas of Excellence
As the College executes on these core commitments, it will focus its investment in six key Areas of Excellence:

• Delivering on Our Promise: Academic Excellence and Innovation
• Growing Smart and Strong: Enrollment, Persistence and Completion
• Supporting Each Student's Success
• Preparing Graduates for the Lives That Await Them
• Campus Matters: Sustaining a Vibrant Living-and-Learning Environment
• Investing in Our Own: Cultivating and Supporting Great Faculty and Staff

Delivering on Our Promise: Academic Excellence and Innovation
Stephens College operates in service to the intellectual transformation that occurs as our students engage with new knowledge and experience, within their classrooms and beyond. In an environment characterized by academic rigor and individualized support, students discover that work ethic, resilience and self-discipline are critical contributors to success. It is this synthesis of intellectual growth, self-awareness and expanded world view that characterizes educational excellence.
Our planning process provided an opportunity for our community to consider the questions and assumptions that underpin that commitment: How do we define and measure academic excellence and rigor? What are the resources and investments necessary to enhance teaching and learning? What interventions are most likely to engender work ethic, resilience and self-discipline in students? How can we better support our faculty at all stages of their careers to continue to evolve as teachers and scholars/artists, and to remain energetically engaged with their students and their disciplines? How can we better advise students as they navigate the challenges inherent in their adjustment to the demands of college learning? And how do we ensure that our academic programs — in their content, delivery, format and scheduling — are responding to the challenges and opportunities presented by the changing nature of our students, the marketplace and the availability of new technologies?

Out of those conversations and considerations emerged “critical conclusions,” which in turn will direct our budget priorities and annual objectives:

Critical Conclusions:
• An expert faculty is the College’s greatest asset and best investment.
• A strategic array of best-in-class academic programs in high-demand disciplines is critical to the College’s future.
• Effective academic advising is a necessary component of academic excellence.
• Data-driven assessment of student-learning outcomes is necessary to increasing effectiveness.

Growing Smart and Strong: Enrollment, Persistence and Retention
Stephens College is clear about its mission, its strengths and its strategic commitment to excellence: For students seeking individualized attention, a dynamic synthesis of academic and applied learning, and a caring and inclusive intellectual community that nurtures independence, self-discipline and ambition, Stephens is the most transformational institution in the country.

Similarly, Stephens is committed to doing only what it can do with commitment and excellence. Its focus on the creative arts and health sciences speaks to a determination to offer academic programs in disciplines where it can be best-in-class. That precision about our student profile and academic program mix is a formula for growth and sustainability: No small organization can be all things to all people; success is about knowing what you can do better than your competitors and growing from there.

As Stephens continues to invest in the improvement of its curricular and co-curricular offerings, its emphases will focus intentionally on meeting the needs of a rapidly changing college-bound population. Today’s incoming students are far more likely to be first-generation, transfer, working or part-time than they have been in the past; Stephens’ strategies for growth must include increased flexibility in its delivery systems, scheduling, audiences and partners.
Additionally, retention is a growing challenge at every institution in an era when 37 percent of undergraduate students change colleges at least once. The reasons for any given student’s departure are as varied as the students who offer them, but finances, personal or family challenges, and a change in career goals are among the most common. As Stephens seeks to grow its stable, engaged and loyal community of students and alumni, it will benefit from a network of support to enhance student success and to encourage completion.

Critical Conclusions:
• Enrollment growth correlates with institutional clarity about the College’s target markets; exceptional excellence in selective, high-demand programs; and strategic investment in both.
• Enrollment and retention are everybody’s responsibility.
• As the demographics and enrollment patterns of our prospective students change, so, too, must the College’s delivery systems, partnerships, financial aid strategies and outreach, including outreach to the growing transfer market.
• Degree completion is a critical and primary metric of institutional success.

Supporting Each Student’s Success
At Stephens College, we celebrate the reality that learning occurs at every moment and in every dimension of our lives. In the universal sense expressed in our mission, we consider each of us to be a teacher. Our goal is to surround our students in every aspect of their campus experience with professionals dedicated to their intellectual, emotional, physical and social development, and to ensure that we are meeting each student’s needs.

Leveraged well, Stephens’ intimate campus community is one of its most valuable assets: At our best, we engage with each student as an individual, shaped by a particular life experience, motivated by a unique set of ambitions, and challenged by the consequences of both. Our capacity to provide such a system of support and responsiveness is one of our most important competitive advantages, but also one of our greatest challenges. To deliver on this promise demands flexibility, cultural buy-in at every level of the institution, and persistent problem-solving. As Stephens strives to become the most student-centered campus in the country, it will need to balance the inevitable tension between the rights and requirements of the collective and the needs of the individual student.

Critical Conclusions:
• Stephens commits to providing each student with the support and opportunity that s/he needs to succeed.
• The College will adopt new approaches and delivery systems designed to increase the flexibility, accessibility, currency and interactivity necessary to meet the needs of all students.
• Stephens is well situated to create model communities of support and success for particular student cohorts (i.e., veterans, first-generation, pet owners, etc.).
• Transparency, clarity, accuracy and consumer education are essential qualities of an effective financial aid program.
• Inclusion of and responsiveness to the multiplicity and intersectionality of student identity require ongoing training in and development of all employees’ cultural competencies and understandings.

Preparing Graduates for the Lives That Await Them
The synthesis of theoretical and applied learning is the foundation of Stephens College’s commitment to educational excellence. Since its creation in 1833, Stephens has provided students with the opportunity not only to think but to do: From its aviation program in the 1940s to its longstanding traditions of equestrian studies, performing arts and fashion design, Stephens has always recognized that graduates are best prepared when they have developed mastery of theory and practice. In short, Stephens has long prided itself on preparing women for the lives that have awaited them: initially as wives and mothers, and then, in more contemporary decades, as professionals, leaders and innovators in a rapidly changing world.

Today, Stephens measures its success based on its outcomes. Recognizing that self-actualization and content mastery are critical benefits of students’ educational experience, the College also counts among our key
metrics the job placement rates of its graduates. In 2014, Stephens committed to the development and presentation of a new Center for Career and Professional Development, and the adoption of a new and rigorous program in professional preparation as a non-academic graduation requirement for all students. The CCPD is committed to providing all students and alumni with resources, training and networking opportunities to enhance their post-graduate success.

Critical Conclusions:
• Best-in-class career development requires currency, individualized attention, professional connection and networks, and timely, accessible and accurate information about emerging opportunities and employer needs.
• Success breeds success: Media that speak to Stephens’ alumni success and impact increases brand awareness and create new opportunities.
• Internships, on-campus incubators, fellowships and well-organized work-study provide professional experiences from which every student can benefit.

Campus Matters: Sustaining a Vibrant Living-and-Learning Environment
Physically located in the center of Columbia, Missouri, Stephens College is a bucolic, private and self-contained campus situated within the heart of a bustling and growing college town. Its 86 acres are crossed by College Avenue and Broadway, two of the city’s main thoroughfares and home to its downtown shops and restaurants, as well as many of the major academic and social buildings at the University of Missouri. The college’s location can be counted among its most important assets — both in terms of the value and profile of its properties, and in its close proximity to all of the arts, music, restaurants, sports and special events of a community commonly called “College Town, USA.”

On campus, Stephens continues to invest in its facilities, landscaping and infrastructure. But like many institutions of its size and history, the campus requires constant renovation and refurbishing. While the College has made major investments in the past eight years — including replacing the bridges that span College and Broadway; renovating Hickman Hall; refurbishing Senior Hall; renovating the President’s residence; replacing sidewalks; renovating major portions of Stamper Commons to create a new computer lab, student union, and student activities center; refurbishing classrooms in Walter Hall; refurbishing Prunty Hall; refurbishing Pillsbury Science Center; renovating the Library Penthouse; and embarking on a beautification program of gardens and greenery across campus — there remains much work to be done.

Critical Conclusions:
• Innovative and flexible spaces and facilities that support the student experience are essential to Stephens’ continued progress.
• Maintenance and renewal of campus infrastructure is a pressing budget priority.
• An accessible campus is not a luxury.
• Inexpensive parking on campus now competes for investment and space use with other institutional priorities.

Investing in Our Own: Cultivating and Supporting Great Faculty and Staff
At Stephens, each of us contributes to the College’s mission in everything we do. Whether it’s a facilities employee who stops to chat with a student in the residence hall, or a faculty member who volunteers to help judge a student competition, each Stephens employee has a role to play in our collective commitment to our students. It is that professional investment in and personal loyalty to the College that distinguishes Stephens from other employers in our region.

Over the past seven years, the College has worked hard to recognize — in both words and action — its appreciation for its employees. Improvements include salary benchmarking with 10 peer institutions and resulting equity salary adjustments for faculty and staff; the institution of summer hours; tuition exchange and tuition remission; an extended holiday break for all employees; a $10 minimum wage; new recognition programs for both faculty and staff; and an intentional schedule of newsletters and campus communications.
to ensure employees are informed about their community. We are committed to doing everything we can, whenever we can, to attract, retain and reward the very best employees — and we believe we have made great progress in that regard.

Critical Conclusions:
• Recruiting, retaining, developing and rewarding great employees is an institutional priority.
• There is no such thing as over-communication.
• Transparent, responsive and accurate human resources processes are a hallmark of an effective institution.

Conclusion
As Stephens College looks to the future, it stands proud of its achievements, and it anticipates with confidence and clarity the challenges yet to come. As the higher education marketplace continues to experience massive disruption and intense political and cultural pressures, Stephens will remain an institution committed to its mission; exclusive and strategic in its offerings; responsive to opportunity; flexible in its systems, structures and processes; eager to pursue new partnerships; and comfortable with change. As we engaged in this process of self-review and priority setting, it was clearer than ever that Stephens remains resilient and optimistic, faithful to its traditions, and eager to embrace whatever the future may bring. As it has for more than 184 years, Stephens continues to prepare its graduates for the lives that await them — lives of distinction, integrity and service.