

*This visionary document, written as a retrospective article in the New York Times in the year 2020, has been endorsed by the Sterling College faculty, staff, administration and Board of Trustees. Its purpose is to paint a picture of the future for Sterling College.*

## A Vision for Sterling College

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### **Education Special Report**

Sterling College, a school once considered on the ropes, has become a success story in the world of small, private, residential liberal arts education. In recent decades, public universities and community colleges have experienced tremendous growth and maintain their grip on the majority of students that are enrolled in higher education. For years, there have been predictions of the demise of the private liberal arts college. Demographic research from 2008 was cited in predicting an accelerated weakening of these schools, particularly in the Midwest and Northeast, due to declining numbers of high school graduates. And while some attrition has taken place, schools like Sterling College have defied the predicted trends by leaning into the increased competition for students. Indeed one could argue Sterling's growth defied its own history.

Founded in 1887, it was not until 2009 that Sterling's enrollment surpassed 700 for the first time. And at the time, Sterling was celebrating its climb from an enrollment of just over 500 five years earlier, as the central Kansas school edged away from the brink of closing. The three-year presidency of Dr. Bruce Douglas (2006-2008) saved the school and gave it a chance to succeed. The College recommitted itself to its vision statement "to be recognized as the finest Christ-centered, servant leadership development focused, liberal arts experience in the Great Plains." It was upon this vision that the school began to pursue an energetic campaign to achieve it.

It has made progress on every front of its holistic approach to education. Sterling's traditional enrollment has more than doubled in the past decade, meaning its traditional population has grown almost 200% in the past fifteen years. With a traditional enrollment today of nearly 1500, Sterling has taken its place among the liberal arts colleges that are in demand. While its leadership claims to have never chased rankings from such publications as U.S. News & World Report, Princeton Review, and Forbes, Sterling is now consistently recognized in these publications that are eschewed by many educators but read widely by college shoppers.

Perhaps the best indicator of Sterling's quality is the demand for a Sterling education. A decade ago, the demand for a Sterling education was modest. Sterling turned away few students, which created challenges in the classroom, kept retention numbers below healthy norms, and made it difficult to attract and keep better students. During the past decade, Sterling has achieved the combination of increasing its enrollment while

simultaneously becoming more selective. This was achieved in part by strengthening Sterling's academic profile. The College identified key academic programs for growth and strengthened Sterling's pipeline to graduate school. Sterling added several majors and now offers master's degrees. In 2010, fewer than 50% of Sterling's full-time faculty had earned terminal degrees. Today, that number is over 80%. The College has also raised its undergraduate ACT average by several points.

In 2007, the College launched e.Sterling, its online division for non-traditional students. At the beginning of 2010, e.Sterling had 79 students. Today over ??? take classes each year. e.Sterling's growth has helped Sterling expand its influence in primary and secondary schools, as well as community colleges and the church by making Sterling's distinctive education available to a large population that would otherwise never benefit from it.

While Sterling has a reputation for academic quality, the College measures quality more broadly than most liberal arts colleges. As an intentionally Christ-centered school, Sterling has set itself apart from both secular and church-related colleges, seeing itself in the classic tradition of American higher education. That tradition places Christian morality and character at the core of preparing college students for adulthood. This tradition maintains that education is first and foremost the development of the whole person, and that while knowledge and job preparation are important, they are not the most important part of education. Knowledge, and therefore education, has its roots in a biblical worldview, meaning life is lived under a Creator who loves the individuals of his creation.

Sterling College is a place where Christ, the Bible, and faith are at the heart of how the school functions. Servant leadership is overtly taught and woven into the curriculum, with the hope that students "catch" a vision for a life of learning and service no matter their professional call. Faculty and staff, who embody Sterling's Christ-centeredness, take a personal and deep interest in the lives of students, caring for their development and future. Students from spiritually diverse backgrounds are both encouraged and challenged to grapple with what it means to be a fully devoted follower of Christ. The College envisions itself as providing a certain kind of education in order to help students become certain kinds of people. The College aspires that its graduates leave its campus having: grappled with the larger questions of faith; grown in the "fruit of the Spirit" described in Paul's letter to the Galatians, and; attained a measure of wisdom.

Provided a quality liberal arts education, Sterling maintains that students leave prepared for broad rather than narrow vocational opportunities. Employers in all vocational settings continue to value honesty and integrity in combination with the ability to communicate, think critically, and work well in a team setting.

Sterling recognized that while this classic form of education had all but disappeared from the American landscape, there remained strong market demand. Heeding the basic Adam Smith principle of supply and demand, Sterling recognized there were few intentionally Christ-centered colleges in its region and that they could supply what few others offered.

It set out to make itself known with a focus on Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas and California. Sterling did this in part with a strategy to reach high school students and their parents, as well as donors, in over 250 strategically important churches. It also identified key high schools, and tapped into the growing movement of homeschoolers. And as Sterling reached out to these and other targets, they discovered it opened many additional doors. Their hunch that their market was receptive to their kind of education was validated at virtually every step.

Athletics has always been important at Sterling. Over many years, Sterling built a reputation of athletic excellence, making it widely respected as having one of the premier athletic traditions in the Midwest. In 2010, Sterling's enrollment was highly leveraged on its twelve athletic teams. And while Sterling's enrollment growth came mostly through non-athletes, Sterling's athletic program did not get lost in the growth. In fact, the athletic program is more distinctive than ever. Its winning traditions have continued and the College has increased the number of programs known for their competitive excellence. In addition, athletes now play a more prominent role of leadership spiritually and in the classroom.

Sterling's financial story is nothing short of remarkable. Just a decade ago, Sterling struggled to make ends meet. Sterling's endowment in 2010 was valued at just over \$12M. Today it stands over \$50M with expectancies of at least \$50M more. And while Sterling does not possess the mega-endowment of better-known schools, it has created both a solid annual operating margin and has benefitted from the generosity of many who believe in the mission and quality of the school. At first the operating margins were small, but Sterling found ways to strategically leverage these margins toward building a strong economic engine. Small margins eventually became larger, and the College was able to add to faculty and staff to provide the infrastructure for the growing student population.

The Board of Trustees played an especially important role in the transformation of the school. Ten years ago, the board saw itself in the midst of self-transformation, and decided to adopt best practice methods for the school to achieve at a high level. Led by Tony Thompson, alumnus of the College and chair of the board, the trustees decided that they would seek to create demand for board membership, just as they sought demand for a Sterling education. Mr. Thompson has never forgotten his small-town Kansas roots, and has successfully channeled his boundless energy and brilliant networking and recruiting skills in creating a world-class board for the College.

In addition to the trustees, Sterling focused a commitment on other leadership networks, including its Alumni Council and National Advisory Council (NAC), as well as other advisory groups the College created and nurtured over the years. These groups played a central role in providing wise counsel, and tapped into a network of constituents that care deeply about Sterling's mission. The Alumni Council helped to identify a strategic core of alumni who were instrumental in reconnecting thousands of alumni back to the College. Last year, members from these advisory councils gave over a million dollars to the College.

The board commissioned the creation of a campus master plan, incorporating 31 acres the College acquired in 2003. And between the generosity of trustees, alumni, and the network of friends who believe in the mission of the College and are excited by its rise, Sterling has added several new buildings. These provide additional residential space and provide the classroom and community space required for the burgeoning campus population.

Success of this kind came because the faculty and staff were fully engaged. To be sure, the College has made progress to provide resources for faculty and staff to do their jobs with excellence. But resources are only part of the equation. Employee satisfaction has improved over the years, in part because the College cares about employee morale and took steps to address areas of dissatisfaction. They also called on employees to reach for their full potential. The combination of these efforts deepened the already existing employee commitment to the great mission of the College. They knew that if Sterling was ever to be considered among the finest institutions in the United States it would require resolve. They never lost sight of the vision. Their focus and hard work paid off. With a “whatever-it-takes” attitude, they persevered through long hours and some tough times with a smile and words of grace. They thought of themselves as stakeholders of a great dream to fulfill a great vision. They committed themselves to the long-range vision of the College, and infected others with the excitement of reaching for an electrifying reality. Their commitment to: Christ-centered education; being top professionals; attention to detail; hospitality; graciousness; and commitment to excellence; became the ethos on campus.

Once thought of as simply having great potential, Sterling College has made enormous strides toward fulfilling its potential as a leader in Christian higher education. Most impressively, as the College has become well-resourced and gained a reputation as being among the finest liberal arts colleges in the ten-state area known as the Great Plains, it has never lost sight of its purpose, namely to *develop creative and thoughtful leaders who understand a maturing Christian faith*. Ten years later, they do it better than ever.