



# LEARNING TO CHANGE

Guilford College President Jane K. Fernandes knew her school's traditional model had to evolve. Building a coalition for transformation has required thorough and honest engagement.

By Novid Parsi

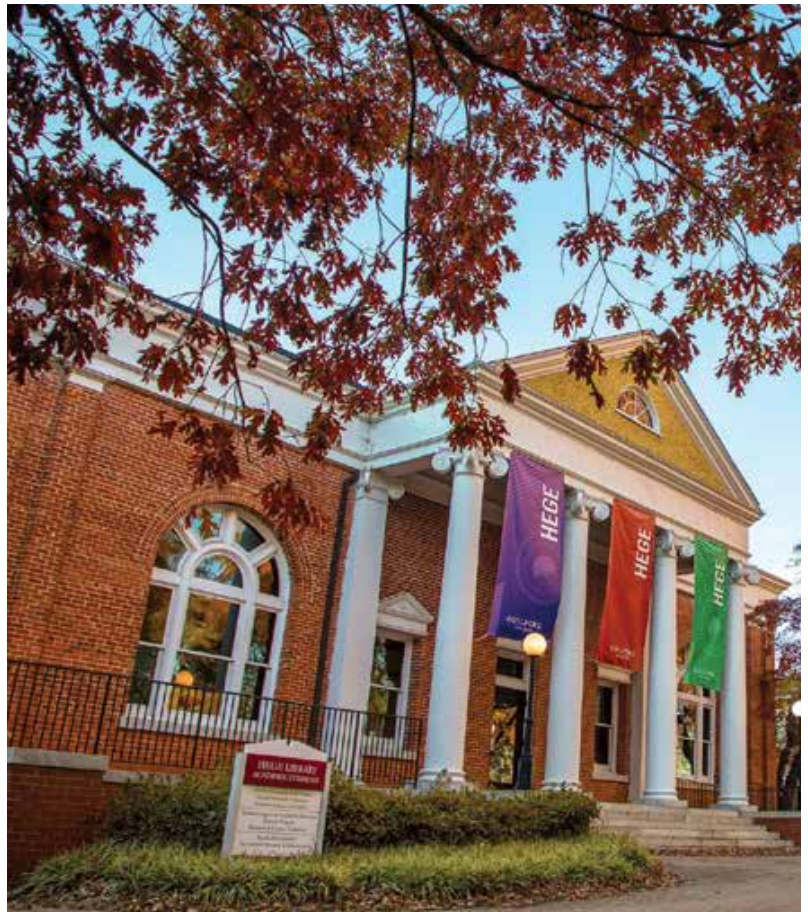
**J**ane K. Fernandes knew something had to change. When she became president of Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina in 2014, the small liberal arts college had been struggling to attract new students. For the previous 15 years, enrollment had been slowly yet steadily declining. Because the school is tuition-dependent, as enrollment fell, so did revenue. During her first two years as president, Dr. Fernandes eliminated about 65 faculty and staff positions to balance the budget—and made boosting enrollment her top priority.

“It brought me into a state of high alert about the need to change,” says Dr. Fernandes, who is both Guilford’s first female president and the first deaf woman to head a U.S. college or university.

Change, however, was precisely what many at the college had long resisted. Like many other liberal arts institutions, Guilford had operated on the assumption of the inherent worth of the education it provided. But for decades, the general public has been questioning the value of a liberal arts degree—especially given its hefty price and the debt that students often incur to pay it. Tuition alone for one semester at Guilford costs about \$19,000.

“Society has been asking a lot of questions about whether the liberal arts teach anything of use, whether liberal arts graduates get jobs in their fields, whether they earn salaries to warrant the investment they make in their education,” Dr. Fernandes says. “But like many other private liberal arts colleges, Guilford was not prepared to receive questions challenging its very existence. Fundamentally, the school had an existential crisis.”

To be sure, Guilford has plenty to offer: excellent faculty, staff and students, first-rate facilities, a beautiful campus and a rich Quaker heritage. (The school was founded by the Society of Friends in 1837 and its core values and culture remain grounded in the Quaker tradition.) “This is a great college and it deserves to thrive,” she says. But she knew that continued budget cuts due to falling enrollment were not a sustainable path. Dr. Fernandes understood that if Guilford was going to attract more students, the school had to transform. It needed to provide an education that not only teaches students to become critical thinkers, as liberal arts colleges traditionally have done, but also prepares them for a successful career. “Adding to the transformation challenge is the college’s deep Quaker roots,” says Jon Kleinman, a partner with Insigniam. “Finding a way to honor that history while innovating for the future was a key concern that Dr. Fernandes needed to address.”



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## UNLOCKING PASSIONS

To begin the transformation process, Dr. Fernandes tasked Guilford with understanding



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF GUILFORD COLLEGE

exactly what current and potential students wanted from the college education they and their families were investing in. The research revealed that students wanted collaborative, project-based learning about issues important to them. They also asked for integrated career and academic advising, a focus on ethical leadership and a greater sense of community spirit.

“That’s different than the traditional liberal arts model, in which faculty know all about their discipline and decide what to teach students,” Dr. Fernandes says.

Based on the research findings, she and her leadership team instituted fundamental improvements in the Guilford student experience. The school revamped the traditional U.S. college semester, during which students typically take four courses during a 15-week period. Beginning with Guilford’s 2019-2020 academic year, a three-week course each semester that revolves around team-based projects is followed by three 12-week classroom courses. At the same time, professional staff help students integrate their academic and career goals and develop professional networks that will serve them well after they graduate. For example, a student with a major in environmental studies and a passion for climate change might work on team-based projects involving

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composting or water conservation. “In the past, Guilford did not stress specific careers because we believed in the purity of liberal arts, that they were sufficient unto themselves,” Dr. Fernandes says.

Now, collaborative projects tapping into students’ core passions and concerns are an integral part of every course at the college.

“That’s the response to the question of why anyone should go to Guilford—because they will have the skills and knowledge that will allow them to directly impact important problems in our community,” Dr. Fernandes says.

### MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE

Identifying the need for all this institutional change was one matter. Implementing it was another. Many faculty and staff did not readily embrace a changing Guilford because they did not view the status quo as broken. Dr. Fernandes had to get her organization to see how the liberal arts education model was falling behind—and get them to join her vision.

Spearheading an organizational transformation can be particularly difficult among a group of highly trained analytical thinkers, Dr. Fernandes says. “It’s challenging to transform a college because it’s a community of very smart, well-educated critical thinkers.”

So last year, Dr. Fernandes decided to identify roadblocks to change and the best ways to resolve them. “We needed to move people from being doubters to being supporters,” she says.

The first step was a deep cultural assessment. Earlier this year the entire college community, including 300 full-time employees and roughly 1,800 students, were surveyed to shed light on their views of the college. In addition, more in-depth one-on-one interviews with about 30 faculty, staff and students were conducted. Ultimately, the assessment revealed 13 facets of Guilford’s culture.



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## SPEED TO RESULTS

In just 10 months, Guilford College expedited an innovative transformation that has already yielded several breakthrough results, including:

- An 8 percent boost in enrollment
- A new academic calendar built around a unique project-based curriculum
- A new initiative that provides faculty and staff several hours of personal growth time per semester to foster a cohesive culture
- An internal website with meeting agendas from every college-wide committee to make the institution's work truly transparent

Some of them were positive and affirming. The Guilford community shared a universal love of the school. There was also overwhelming agreement that the college prioritized its students.

Other facets exposed challenges—and opportunities for growth. The community expressed a desire to reaffirm and more deeply embody the school's Quaker heritage. However, a big obstacle involved silos. The assessment found the college was not so much a community as a “community of communities.” “Most people at Guilford thought of themselves as individuals identified with their group: faculty, staff or students. They loved their group, but they didn't talk about the college as a whole,” Dr. Fernandes says. “As long as people think of themselves as individuals in groups, they never understand that they can be changemakers in the college.” For Guilford to provide the collaborative learning that Dr. Fernandes envisions, its community first has to work collaboratively.

“The assessment revealed a significant amount of finger-pointing and blame,” Mr. Kleinman says. “Faculty and staff accused each other of being out of touch and not listening. Students complained about administrators being unresponsive. It became apparent that a lack of ownership for the existing culture needed to be addressed.”

Another cultural facet revealed a lack of a guiding vision and purpose for Guilford's future. People spoke more positively about Guilford's past than its potential. “They talked glowingly about the college's history and their nostalgia for the way it used to be,” Dr. Fernandes says. If Guilford was going to evolve, the community needed to know why. “They were frustrated because I was asking them to change without clearly telling them why we were changing,” she says. A clear vision shared by all would allow the entire

college to see itself not as a collection of individuals but as a unified community with a larger purpose.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Equipped with the cultural assessment's findings, a leadership coalition of about 40 people comprised of trustees, administrators, faculty, staff and students has begun to define the way forward. This year, the coalition has been discussing and drafting the college's new future to reflect the assessment's overall themes: collaboration, care for one another and relationships.

The coalition has worked swiftly to begin turning those ideas into action. It identified three quick-win projects to kick-start the transformation—and to show the community it could be achieved. One project focused on Dr. Fernandes' own leadership role. The coalition asked her to engage in public talks and appearances to get the message out to the broader public about how Guilford is responding to societal questions about the value of higher education.

“While there has long been a deep pride in Guilford from faculty, staff and alumni, there has been a reluctance to be visible and vocal about what a special place Guilford is,” Mr. Kleinman says. “The Quaker value of simplicity was seen as being incompatible with bragging.”

Another project allows all faculty and staff three or four hours during the semester to promote creativity and innovation on a personal and professional level. It could be playing the guitar, writing a poem or volunteering in the community—“something to get them centered, grounded or at peace,” Dr. Fernandes says. The idea is for the institution to communicate to its employees a respect and appreciation for their labor and time, with the goal of fostering a cohesive culture.

The third project aims to provide clarity



on the college's decision-making process as it transforms. Guilford is creating an internal website that will feature links to the meeting agendas and minutes of every college-wide committee—making their decisions transparent to all. The goal is to make it “easy for anyone on campus to check what’s been decided and what’s next,” Dr. Fernandes says.

Through all of this transformation work, she has learned the value of ensuring that all members of her organization have the opportunity to communicate their views and experiences. That is especially critical in educational settings, she says. “Schools tend to be closed communities where vicious cycles of rumors and bad feelings keep repeating over and over for years.” For instance, a faculty member might blame the president for the failure to hire a sought-after candidate. Even if that is not true, the notion can circulate for a long time. “That the past is spoken about as if it is still present is part of the climate at every school where I have worked. There are thousands of stories that create a climate of confusion,” she says.

In the past, Dr. Fernandes would not engage with such stories.

Now she does. Through Guilford's transformation, Dr. Fernandes says she has learned the importance of allowing people to air their thoughts and then really listening to them—even and especially if she does not agree. “I wish I had known in the past that every person lives their experience and their truth—and that while I don't have to change

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This communication process is not just about making people feel better. It is about enabling change. “If I listen to you, that makes it possible for you to listen to me, which helps us to resolve our issues and move on,” Dr. Fernandes says. Finding closure allows people to focus less on their individual experiences and more on collective goals; it keeps them engaged in the present.

“Dr. Fernandes is an incredibly self-aware leader,” Mr. Kleinman says. “I think people really admire her authenticity and willingness to say she doesn't have all the answers.”

It is still early days in Guilford's transformation journey, but Dr. Fernandes has begun to see positive signs of change. Enrollment for the 2019-2020 academic year is up 8 percent compared to the previous year. All three quick-win projects are progressing and energizing stakeholders. And while the college community was initially wary of many of the components of the “Guilford Edge,” people now accept it and embrace it, she says. As one student put it: “I don't know what it is, but there is a sense of spirit and excitement on campus that I've not felt before.”

A new future is now unfolding, for students, faculty and staff alike. “Today, we're clearer that there is a return on what students invest, and it comes in the form of a clear career path from Guilford to the next phase of life,” Dr. Fernandes says. That clarity helps ensure that the college has a clear path to the next phase of its own life. **IQ**