

## Katy M. Murphy

November 21, 2022

### Open Letter to the Whittier College Faculty, Trustees and Community:

It is with great sadness that I write this letter to you all. Based on my commitment to my alma mater and my 40+ years of experience in the enrollment field, I believe the current path undertaken by Whittier's leadership will inevitably lead to closing the College. In strange ways, the situation at Whittier mirrors Elon Musk's continued destruction of Twitter as a viable platform. There are important decisions to be made that can change this course, but the faculty, Trustees and alumni will need to step up in many ways.

### Enrollment and Inclusion

Certainly the financial stability of Whittier has been at stake for the past six years, but those challenges are not substantially different than those faced by other mid-range liberal arts and sciences colleges. In fact, Whittier's location and traditions give it more advantages than those faced by others in the Mid-West, New England and the Mid-Atlantic both in terms of population and state funding.

Enrollment staffing along with staffing in related areas has been, in my opinion, a serious threat to the overall well-being of the college. Resources allocated to enrollment activities have been cut over time and clearly competitive salaries designed to attract the best enrollment professionals possible are not allocated, as spaces on the staff remain open. *Whittier's job board currently lists five vacant positions in Admissions and according to the website, few of the existing staff are allocated to recruiting first year students.* Over two years ago I was delighted when Falone Serna was hired at Whittier as I've known him for many years to be an excellent enrollment officer. He is both a competent professional as well as a person committed to inclusion and support of first-generation, low-income students. Last year I was very sad to see Falone leave and know that cutting his budgets and the overall morale and environment did not give him the opportunity to make a difference. Since then, who is leading enrollment? As a tuition dependent institution, that question needs to be asked and answered with assurance. Freezing tuition rates for three years (the only independent college in the region to do so), is another decision that should be analyzed to determine if the goals related to that decision were met.

At the same time, the Enrollment effort needs to be able to articulate distinctions to prospective students, their parents and counselors (and to potential donors and alumni at the same time!) When the President was appointed and came to the Bay Area on her listening tour, I was happy to hear her ideas on partnering with corporations and local businesses. I sent her a follow up email with ideas including establishing a co-op program, similar to Northeastern University's, that would intentionally link Whittier students with two to three semesters of co-op paying jobs within the region and throughout the United States and perhaps beyond. And most co-ops lead to substantial job offers. *It is noteworthy that Northeastern has gone from an institution with an admit rate of close to 40% only 15 years ago to last year's admit rate of 7%.* This co-op program reflected the President's ideas and become a major distinction within California where only a handful of co-ops exist. The President did not acknowledge or respond to my email.

In admissions in the 1980's we recognized that outcomes were very important to students and their parents. Again in the 2020's, career outcomes and job placement are foremost on the minds of families who consider and can afford to send their children to private colleges.

As college admissions continues to rely on relationships and networks (and not as much on social media and technology as vendors will claim), the real opportunity here is the network. In my memo to the President, I offered to host a meeting for private and public college counselors in the Bay Area to introduce her and other Whittier staff to them. No meeting has been requested, which is a shame because while I cannot contribute thousands of dollars to the College, I can provide an introduction and network of those who influence students and families in the college admission process. And I am not the only one, as Whittier has a long and storied tradition of alumni who are in the college admissions and college counseling field.

At Bellarmine, we educate 1700 young men who come from the richest families in the Silicon Valley as well as poorest, and close to 50% of students are students of color. The Jesuits know how to raise money, and over \$6 million a year is dedicated to scholarships for students to attend Bellarmine. I cite these statistics to put several things in perspective:

- During the February following the President's listening tour, I sent a follow up email letting her know that we were bringing 15 first-generation, low-income juniors on a college tour that included Whittier and asked if she would like to meet them. Again, no response.
- This college tour is sponsored by a Bellarmine alumnus who owns hotels throughout the United States. He pays for the tour for our students, all of whom are well-educated and ambitious for their futures and come from families that don't have the resources to take them on college tours. Each year we've brought them to Whittier. The tour week includes Occidental, Redlands, LMU and Chapman, and Whittier has rarely shown well but often the warmth of the admission officer and tour guides has shown through. This past February we had the worst tour ever, and the students, knowing I am an alumnus, were transparent in telling me that they would not consider Whittier. We will not be including Whittier on the tour schedule for the coming year.
- On the same day, the Athens Advisors college tour, led by alumnus Doug Locker WC '79, brought 28 full-pay and bright students, some from Bellarmine, and they had the same bad tour experience. Those students ranked Whittier last among the eleven colleges they visited. Whittier will not be included on the schedule for the coming year.

At Bellarmine, we have a senior class of over 400, who will apply to over 330 colleges and ultimately attend over 125 different colleges. What are they looking for? Outcomes to be sure. Affordability is important. Prestige is a factor. And community is even more important to them this year as their experience in the Pandemic have left them wanting to spend more time with more people. In talking with my colleagues across the country, these desires are shared by most students they are working with. Whittier's location in the state that hosts 1 in 8 high school graduates in the country, the Cal Grant, and meaningful access to recreation and internships which is in many ways very desirable given modern marketing and enrollment efforts. Athletics is one of several important and time-tested ways to build community.

I ask you all, what is the true distinction of Whittier relative to its competitors in the private sector and the public sector? Outcomes? Internship Experiences? While I value and credit my Whittier professors for the challenging and supportive education I received, those factors are touted by many. Chapman, LMU, Redlands and Occidental have more beautiful campuses, better visitor welcome areas, and much better admission staff across the board, to be honest. Is that the fault of the Admissions Staff?

No. It is I believe the direct responsibility of the administration to give the Admission staff what they need to be able to enroll the students Whittier wants according to what I understand to be its traditional mission: from every walk of life, some who can pay and some who can't, many who will bring their diverse cultures to the community, those who care about and support others, and those who will bring life to the campus. *And in the 1980s and 1990s Whittier competed directly with Redlands, Occidental and LMU and Chapman was in our shadow . . . no longer.*

In addition to infrastructure, students are looking for spirit. They were cooped up during the Pandemic and have otherwise been mostly overprogrammed by their parents or peers. They need to be busy and engaged whether in the theatre, the robotics lab or on the playing field or court.

This is why the decision to close varsity football, lacrosse and golf makes absolutely no sense to me, as the consequences will be:

- An erosion in retention of the players themselves as other colleges would LOVE to have these transfers
- The elimination of 30 – 40 potential first year students for the Class of 2027; along with 10 – 15 transfers
- The elimination of financial support above and beyond "the bill" from families who can contribute to individual sports' expenses
- An even more definitive difference between the male and female balance in the student body -- *the number of male athletes competing in football and lacrosse represents 25% of the entire male enrollment at Whittier*

- An erosion and elimination of students who want to cheer for teams, be at a place with winning teams, be at a place with spirit . . . and I can attest that 90% of my seniors, from every socio-economic and cultural background, are seeking this type of spirit
- An elimination of opportunities for first-gen, low-income students from to play football or lacrosse . . . which in the past have been inclusive environments
- All of this in the context of consistently lower enrollments than the institution's capacity!

### **Decision Making**

The values of an education in the Quaker Tradition were instilled in all of us during our Whittier education. Those values, including social justice and community decision making, were very important in effecting change as challenges presented themselves over the past sixty years. While somewhat laborious, that community decision making process was transparent and assured all involved that their voices had been heard as they committed to final decisions. We also had the facts in front of us when decisions were made. The College faced many challenges this way and went on to thrive.

From what I've read and what I've heard, the latest round of decisions on shutting down the football, lacrosse and golf programs were not made by the community but by a few in the administration who have almost exclusive access to the Trustees. If the concussion situation in men's sports is an issue, is that not for the Director of Athletics, Dean of Students and faculty committee to address in terms of coaching, athletic training, etc.? Or are these decisions just clouding a budgetary shortfall? Nonetheless, there are serious enrollment consequences involved in cutting these sports.

When the current President was hired by the Trustees, I question the challenges and job presented to her as I cannot believe that a fundamental change in the institution was a part of those. I also wonder if she, and others surrounding her, were given to understand that the College community was and should be a part of any consequential decisions.

### **Funding and Support of Enrollment**

It is the responsibility of the administration, faculty, development, athletics and alumni to support enrollment, plain and simple:

- Faculty and administration to develop distinctive programs that will attract students who are interested in outcomes and meaningful engagement
- Athletics to hire and support coaches who are at the same time good coaches, given wellness protocols, but are also excellent recruiters who bring student athletes who participate on competitive teams
- Administration to raise funds to support attractive facilities, realistic financing opportunities for families and distinctive programs that will attract students and families
- Alumni to contribute not only financially to the institution and internship placements, but to provide meaningful access to others who have internship placement opportunities and can provide financial support to grow the endowment and therefore the draw down each quarter for scholarship funding.
- And the Trustees . . . who should ask good and detailed questions, seek and expect input from the larger community and support the distinction and future of Whittier.

I have personally witnessed the downfalls of both Mills College and Notre Dame de Namur University, and from afar the demise of Marymount. Why did these institutions fail? I believe they didn't have the will or the leadership to succeed.

In conclusion, I believe Whittier is at a point where there are opportunities to succeed, and the decision to eliminate the varsity sports perhaps will be the definitive factor in a failed future. While on the staff, and as an alumnus, I held Whittier to the standard of recruiting and enrolling student-athletes in the best connotation of that term . . . football and lacrosse players and golfers, among other athletes, who went on to become researchers, Rhodes Scholars, doctors, teachers and others who make this world and their communities better places.

I hope this memo has provided context on the challenges I see but also some of the ideas, among many, that should be considered by those who truly care about the institution. I care deeply because I believe Whittier gave me the confidence and education necessary to become the person, professional and hopefully the role model I am today. I am here to help, as are thousands of others.

The time is now to take action to reverse the decisions that are threatening both the short-and long-term enrollment in the Whittier College education and experience, and to recommit to our stated mission, our tradition, and our future.

Thank you for your consideration.

*Katy Murphy*

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Past Chair, AICCU Admissions Advisory Council

Past President, Western Association for College Admission Counseling

Past President, National Association for College Admission Counseling

Current Director of College Counseling, Bellarmine College Preparatory