Scaling to survive:
Montreat College's revival

An anonymous multimillion-dollar gift. New leadership, programs, and systems. How a secluded North Carolina institution came back to life.

INSTITUTION SNAPSHOT

Montreat College | Montreat, North Carolina

Institution type:
Private, nonprofit, 4-year

Total enrolled students:
Approximately 1,000

Total full-time faculty:
40+

Number of campuses:
2

The obstacle

- Outdated curricula and systems for tracking, analyzing, organizing, and disseminating information
- Manual operations that limited management of students, faculty, and staff spread across two campuses, two instructional sites, and multiple states

The solution

- Watermark Faculty Success
- Watermark Course Evaluations & Surveys
- Watermark Planning & Self-Study

The outcome

- Reduced time faculty spent entering data by 80%
- Took end-of-class evaluation and survey turnaround from 3-4 months to one week
- Streamlined faculty review, reappointment, promotion, and tenure processes

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Paul Gratton, D.B.A.
Associate Dean and Chair of Business,
College of Adult and Graduate Studies
Montreat College

In Montreat, North Carolina — a sequestered town whose name comes from combining the words "mountain" and "retreat" — life moves slower. Burrowed at the base of Greybeard Mountain and looking out from all sides to the Blue Ridge Mountains, Montreat is unburdened by commercial development, or even a single traffic light. Many of its residents prefer to walk along the town's picturesque paths and trails.

In 2012, the warmth of this small, tight-knit community was reflected in the culture of Montreat College. But the century-old institution, which began as a two-year girls' high school, was arriving at a painful realization: perhaps its magic came at a cost. The college's quaintness, central to its tranquility, rested on a certain slowness to change.

Yet, even if Montreat had been more concerned with modernizing, its efforts may not have been enough to save it from the fallout of the Great Recession, which rendered many small private schools helpless to keep up with rising costs and plummeting enrollment. Programs and positions had to be cut. In 2013, the college's then-president resigned. By 2014, with weak financial roots and just a few hundred students remaining on campus, Montreat College was withering.

The multimillion miracle

Later that year, Montreat College hired a new president, Paul J. Maurer, Ph.D., and cybersecurity at the undergraduate level became a major instead of just a minor. With President Maurer's new direction, the school would come to invest heavily in cybersecurity, linking up with federal agencies to refine its understanding of offensive strategies.

In 2014, with failed merger talks behind them, Montreat College faced closure — until a dramatic twist. A husband and wife who had never even visited the campus pledged $6 million in donations. Later this number grew to $10 million.

Next, domino blessings. The anonymous couple's donation set off more giving by other benefactors, and Montreat College found itself on more fertile ground. For now, it was saved. However, the school knew it would need more than just money to sustain itself. Montreat was long overdue for a mindset shift.

"Sometimes the thinking is small until the organization realizes, *Oh, we can't run like this and scale. We need to scale to survive,*" says Paul Gratton, D.B.A., Associate Dean and Chair of Business for the school's College of Adult and Graduate Studies.

Dr. Gratton, who came to Montreat College in 2017, is quick to point out that it's easy to be critical of those who came before you when you have the benefits of hindsight. "They were probably doing the best that they could with what they were given," he acknowledges. Later, he says, they knew better than to be nostalgic about times past. "We have the advantage of that perspective: *Folks, we change or we die.*"

There was no turning back to "the good old days," because there were no good old days. If Montreat College was going to survive — and not just survive but thrive — it would need a revitalization not only of its curriculum but its systems for tracking, analyzing, organizing, and disseminating information.

Walking through a tornado

By the fall of 2017, Montreat College had become the 4th four-year college in North Carolina ever to be recognized as a National Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense Education by the National Security Agency (NSA) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS). As the school worked to adapt a curriculum that prepared its students to confront rapidly evolving global cybersecurity threats, its own technology's shortcomings were coming into focus.

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Some of these changes were set into motion in 2018, when the school began to move more of its programs online in an attempt to address shrinking enrollment numbers among adult, graduate, and online students, who often needed more flexibility in how they completed coursework. This meant that the college was especially prepared when the COVID-19 crisis and its remote-learning requirements hit. But this also meant that their organization was no longer centralized around the Montreat campus — and that they now needed new tools to manage students, faculty, and staff spread across two campuses, two instructional sites, and multiple states.

Limitations of their manual operations became particularly apparent as the school prepared for reaffirmation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) in the hopes of securing accreditation for the next decade. Dr. Gratton describes the process as "archeology mixed with a scavenger hunt."

"It was a three-year process of people, like, opening closets and scanning through shared drives saying, 'I know we must have it somewhere, but where can we find this data?'" says Dr. Gratton. "You have a real mishmash of paper files, some tucked away in boxes in closets. There's a shared drive that has 15 years of data that went through multiple administrations and admin assistants. And many of the people who had this institutional memory left when the school almost closed. So you've got a lot of information to gather — but the key things you need to report for your accreditor aren't organized in a meaningful way. We were eventually able to find the data, write the report,

and provide the evidence, but it was a monumental effort…and we knew there must be a better way."

New world, new tools

In April of 2020, the college hired David Poole, Ed.D., as the new vice president for the College of Adult and Graduate Studies — a decision that Dr. Gratton says was instrumental in Montreat College's Adult and Graduate Studies systems overhaul. Coming from California Baptist University, Dr. Poole had experience working with Watermark Faculty Success (formerly Digital Measures) to optimize data for faculty reporting, credentialing, and review.

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Dr. Gratton recalls that, during his first handful of years at Montreat College, he received little guidance through official performance reviews. "The only feedback I really got was, 'You're doing great, keep doing what you're doing,'" he says. Beyond the difficulty of having a lack of clear metrics for his own success, the weakness of the faculty review process made effective management nearly impossible.

"I can't let somebody go unless I have a clear paper trail of documentation, right?" says Dr. Gratton. Conversely, offering raises for good performance requires the same kind of documentation, he points

out. "Asking people to manage without consistent data and clarity is like driving a car with your eyes closed and your ears plugged."

Through Faculty Success, Montreat College has finally been able to begin building such a repository, moving away from file-cabinet-bound faculty review and credentialing towards processes that are automatic, repeatable, and available from anywhere.

"If I need to know who's credentialed to teach which course, we can pull down the credentialing report and see what everyone's qualified to teach. That's moved us out of the paper, PDF, and shared drive world as well. That's a big step, to access the data I need, when I need it, from anywhere."

Likewise, their experience with Watermark Course Evaluations & Surveys has been "world-changing," says Dr. Gratton, cutting the process time by months. "I had a great admin named Mary Jo. Mary Jo was part-time, trying to cover a full-time load of work, and was bogged down, having to manually compile and email these end-of-course surveys to people directly." Whereas before, end-of-class evaluation and survey feedback saw a lag time of three to four months — much too late to make meaningful changes before the next courses began — now the school sees results within about a week, with no manual work required.

They've also been able to make their evaluations and surveys more targeted. What used to be a standard few sheets of paper that asked generic questions is now organized into categories that are structured, nuanced, and capable of yielding actionable data.

Looking forward, Montreat College has also implemented Watermark Planning & Self-Study — with its curriculum mapping, outcomes assessment, and expansive library of supported accreditation self-study templates — to create a more seamless accreditation prep in the future and encourage ongoing institutional improvement.

Teamwork and the chunking-pilot method

Crucial to Montreat College's successful implementation of new solutions has been their chunking-pilot method — a segmented approach that helps them avoid biting off more than they can chew. "It's easier to stagger through a new process with a small group than a big group. Adult and Graduate Studies essentially did a six-month-to-one-year pilot of most of these tools prior to the traditional campus, and we were able to set some processes and bug-fix," explains Dr. Gratton. "It's a monumental task if you say, 'The whole college is going to do this over the next year.' It's really helpful if there's a smaller unit that can start this — then, chunk it and share what we learned with others."

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First in order was to make sure that their full-time faculty members had inputted core pieces of their information into Faculty Success. (The tool allows users to capture faculty information just once and use it again and again, cutting data entry time by 80%.) Next, as that group was in the midst of completing its second cycle of faculty reviews through the new system, the traditional campus began its own implementation. New users could come to the early implementers for guidance, adapting those approaches for their own purposes.

The Montreat team has also benefited from collaboration with outside teams. "Watermark was really great in terms of stepping us through," says Dr. Gratton. "The implementation support has been fantastic."

An institutional resurrection

In 2013, the revival of Montreat College seemed like an impossibility. A decade later, their successes have multiplied. Today they have approximately 1,000 students and are pursuing several new professional accreditations. In the last three years alone, they've launched 15 new degree programs. Cybersecurity has become one of the largest majors at the school, nearly doubling the undergraduate census over about a six-year period.

With the help of Watermark, Montreat College has achieved:

Timely, direct feedback in course evaluations and surveys.
Now they can create question sets with specific expectations, get better data, and benefit from a more intuitive workflow — all with the feedback turned around in just one week.

More consistency and focus in faculty reviews.
Today they can expect precise data on a regular cadence that allows for more streamlined faculty review, reappointment, promotion, and tenure processes.

Heightened culture of continuous improvement.
Sometimes, it takes a near-death experience to alter the course of your life. For Montreat College, things got so bad that people were more open to adapting. Part of this meant a willingness to adopt — and become proficient in — new, improved tools.

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I no longer feel like I'm facing the strain of that since we've implemented the Watermark tools," says Dr. Gratton. "It gives me access — very rapid access — to the data I need to manage and lead."

"The tool helps us make sure that the process happens." However, he points out, "You can't just push a button and Watermark saves your life. Having the tools is important — but also organizing to use the tools properly to support your institution's processes and culture is very important."

What is perhaps most essential is continuing to embrace the reality that growth requires flexibility. "I don't expect perfection in this," says Dr. Gratton. When he advised faculty on how to get used to putting their information into the new system, he didn't push them to meticulously input their entire professional history. Instead, he told them something that turns out to be great advice generally: "Let's start with today and work forward."

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