

# Adapting to the Needs of Students

An Interview with John C. Bravman, President, Bucknell University



**EDITORS' NOTE** *John Bravman is Bucknell's 17th president. He came to Bucknell from Stanford University, where he oversaw the undergraduate program as Freeman-Thornton Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and served as Dean of Stanford's Freshman-Sophomore Residential College, which he founded in 1999. He holds bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in materials science and engineering from Stanford.*



John C. Bravman

**INSTITUTION BRIEF** *Based in central Pennsylvania and founded in 1846, Bucknell University ([www.bucknell.edu](http://www.bucknell.edu)) is the country's largest private liberal arts university. Its College of Arts and Sciences, College of Engineering, and School of Management feature 110 majors and minors in subjects ranging from accounting to East Asian studies to neuroscience and theater. The curriculum includes professional programs in education, engineering, management, and music as well as pre-professional advising in law and medicine. Bucknell enrolls 3,500 undergraduates and 150 graduate students and is among the top 20 U.S. liberal arts colleges in terms of the number of alumni who go on to earn doctorates. In 2011, Kiplinger's rated it 22 in "America's Best Values in Liberal Arts Colleges".*

## How has Bucknell remained consistent in quality and how will the institution evolve over time?

With a 165-year history, any institution has periods that are characterized differentially. It's a very different place today than when it was founded. Without being trendy, the university has, over time, adapted to the needs of its students first and to society as a whole.

It was founded as a college in the wilderness, and while our campus and curriculum have changed, our basic character has not changed that much. We're a liberal arts college at heart. Now we also have a powerful College of Engineering and a significant School of Management, which allows Bucknell to occupy a unique niche within the sphere of undergraduate liberal arts education. This has allowed us to offer a breadth of activities and academic endeavors to our students and to adapt over time to changing societal needs.

## How important is the diversity in the student body and how have you reached out internationally to build that student body?

Diversity is a core goal of our strategic plan and it's a challenge based on our location. This commitment goes back to our earliest days. Early on, the university developed ties with Burma. We were a leader in having an international presence as a small college in the Northeast and we have built on that. We also admitted women long before the Ivys did. Four to five percent of our student body now is international and we have good representation across the 50 states.

With the changing demographics of the U.S. and a high school population that will shrink for the next 10 or 15 years, most dramatically in the Northeast, we started making efforts years ago to become more geographically diverse.

To offer greater socioeconomic opportunity, we have established strong partnerships with The Posse Foundation and several community colleges.

We also work with programs in high schools across the country such as A Better Chance, YES Prep, Schuler Scholars, Mastery Charter Schools, and other organizations to bring talented students of color and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to the university.

## In the global world we live in, is Bucknell focused on what takes place beyond campus?

The term globalization became prominent in its current context 20 years ago, but even then, no one knew how pervasive the concept would become. Our students have grown up with the reality of globalization just as they have grown up in the Internet age; they don't know a world constrained. So universities such as Bucknell have had to focus their efforts on defining what globalization means. Almost half of our students spend a summer or more overseas by the time they graduate – that is a crucial part of college education today and cannot be replicated on campus.

The students are here for job preparation, but they're also here to get prepared for a life that will see challenges and opportunities that are unimaginable right now – that readiness is a core outcome of our liberal arts education. Its direct results can be difficult to measure and prove, but education is an act of faith in the future and in our students. The education we provide serves the manifold purposes of society best when we provide an education that will serve our students for the 80-plus years they are likely to live after they graduate.

## What do you tell students who are graduating today and is it tough to be optimistic?

For students at places such as Bucknell and other top schools, there is a filter in them

getting here and they preternaturally have a drive and optimism about their future. Nine months after our students graduate, nearly 90 percent are gainfully employed, in graduate school, or both – they're doing what they want to be doing. So college graduates, more than ever, are doing differentially well compared to non-graduates.

Also, for an education where the comprehensive fee across four years totals more than \$200,000, parents expect that their child is going to gain employment and we agree. We recognize that immediate goal is easier in some disciplines than in others. But the broad and rigorous liberal arts education we provide for all of our students will serve them extremely well, whatever their career path.

I'm a big fan of the intersection of the humanities and technology – the connection Steve Jobs used to champion. My preparation as an engineer through the doctoral level was a great preparation to be an academic, but it was my self-training in literature and the arts and other fields that has ultimately allowed me to be successful in my career. We tell students to find something they're passionate about and help them understand that they and their families and communities will be best served that way.

## What more can be done to offer affordable options for higher education?

I don't know a college or university where financial aid is not a major cost driver. Many private schools cost as much as what Bucknell or the Ivys cost and yet those schools don't have the resources to offer the kind of financial aid that I and millions of other people received. We're fortunate at Bucknell that we have been able to recently practice need-blind admissions and to meet the full financial aid requirements of all of our domestic students.

An impressive fraction of our budget is devoted to financial aid. We work hard to not only maintain that but to extend it to all students who are academically worthy of being here. But we can't be efficient the way a school that has 500 students in a classroom at a time can be – we offer small classes with a 10-to-1 student-to-faculty ratio. Retaining quality faculty is a costly proposition, as well as maintaining that need-blind admission through financial aid. But we have a four-year graduation rate that is 87 percent – one of the highest in the country – and what parents and our students are investing in is the Bucknell combination of success and the deep preparation for a rewarding and fulfilling life. ●

*Bertrand Library at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania*