



EXECUTIVE Q&A

Karen Petersen Takes Office as President of Hendrix College

by Arkansas Business Staff
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Petersen and her husband, Joey Keasler, a northeast Arkansas native, are parents of two children, including a student-athlete at a residential liberal arts college. (Jason Burt)

Karen K. Petersen was elected the **13th president of Hendrix College** in January. She took office on June 1, following the retirement of President Emeritus W. Ellis Arnold. She was previously a professor of political science and dean of the Henry Kendall College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Tulsa. Before that, she worked at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro.

Petersen earned her master's degree and Ph.D. in political science from Vanderbilt University.

You and your husband are both native Arkansans. How does that inform your role as president of Hendrix College?

As Arkansans who have lived outside of Arkansas, we see clearly how much Arkansas has changed for the better in our lifetime. Given our individual experiences as first-generation students, we appreciate the life-changing potential of higher education in general and the liberal arts in particular. Thus, we recognize that continued, thoughtful progress for our home state will require a robust higher education ecosystem, within which Hendrix College plays a unique role in preparing young people for leadership, creativity and engaged citizenship within the state.

What can be done to curb the cost of a college education?

Much of the perceived inflation in the cost of higher education is driven by changes in public funding. That is, in the aggregate the shifting of the burden for financing higher education from taxpayers to families has increased the cost paid by families. Even if actual expenses stayed flat, families would experience an inflation in cost burden. That shift drives the higher education cost narrative, which usually portrays higher education as a monolithic industry rather than as the diverse, nuanced enterprise it is. Additionally, colleges have expanded their services to include more intense mental health, academic and career counseling. It is helpful to remember that residential campuses are essentially small cities with responsibility for providing housing, food, counseling services, recreation, infrastructure maintenance, technology services and security in addition to education. Colleges can encourage better informed discussions about cost by focusing on value and return on investment.



What is the top obstacle Hendrix is facing in attracting students to the school?

Hendrix is often referred to as a "hidden gem." Even within the state, we need to do better at telling our story. Hendrix College has humble roots and a Methodist background, both of which contribute to our propensity to go about our life-changing work without making a fuss. Our alumni go on to lead incredibly successful lives, and we need to do a better job sharing those successes widely so that potential students (and their parents) can make an informed choice about their investment in higher education.

College administrators often argue that with scholarships and financial aid, few students pay the full price of an increasingly expensive college education. But wouldn't it be better if the true costs of college were more transparent?

It would be easier but not necessarily better, and I say that as a parent of a current college student who just went through the application process two years ago. Even as an expert, I found navigating the system challenging. However, one of the major strengths of our system, and what makes the U.S. the best in the world at providing higher education, is the tremendous variety of institutions. Even if costs were simple to understand and compare, value differences would still be a challenge. For example, we sent our son to a residential liberal arts college because the three of us believe that is the best experience for him. We could not easily compare the costs of that decision with the generous financial awards he received from large public institutions or the "free" community college option available in our home state at the time. We had to compare the value holistically. Nonetheless, institutions can do more to provide clarity, and I commit to doing so at Hendrix because I do not want families opting not to apply because they believe we are not affordable. I want families to have an opportunity to make that holistic value comparison and include Hendrix as an option because I believe that it is the best option for students who want the type of experience we offer. Hendrix has consistently demonstrated its commitment to accessibility and affordability with generous merit- and need-based aid. One of our most visible programs is the Tuition Advantage, which ensures students will pay no more in tuition at Hendrix than the published rate of their home state's public flagship institution. And three years ago, Hendrix reduced tuition by 32%, which was a bold investment in accessibility and affordability and made one of the best values among national liberal arts colleges even better.

How might private liberal arts colleges like Hendrix need to adjust amid the enrollment declines expected for higher education in the U.S.?

We will need to continue to make a compelling case for the value of a liberal arts education and the residential experience, and we will have to specify clearly how the benefits of that education translate to economic opportunity and a meaningful life. I do not believe Hendrix College needs to become something other than a residential liberal arts college. Some institutions, particularly those in regions saturated with competition or in less desirable locations, have made the decision to expand into areas outside of the liberal arts. That is a reasonable choice, but it is not the right choice for us. Hendrix is the premier liberal arts college in the region, and we are in a dynamic city adjacent to the state capital. Our location and reputation allow us to maintain an intense commitment to a high-quality liberal arts experience that prepares our students for lifelong success. It is likely that each reader can identify successful professionals in their orbit who started at Hendrix. Arkansas needs Hendrix College to continue doing what it has done for nearly 150 years — supplying the state with a steady stream of engaged, creative and successful leaders.

Please make your case for the benefits of a liberal arts education, despite the current climate that tends to put greater emphasis on career preparation.

A liberal arts education is career preparation and life preparation. Our motto, Unto the Whole World, reflects our commitment to engaging students holistically. We give time and effort to vocational discernment so that students can discover what it is they were made to do and how they can best contribute to society. In fact, our Life Launch summer enrichment program helps rising high school junior and senior students begin the vocational discernment process while they are still in high school because we recognize young people face pressure to figure out a life path before they arrive at college. A liberal arts education prepares students to be lifelong learners in two distinct ways: They are capable of learning new things because they have practice connecting disparate parts into a whole, and they hone their desire to learn because we feed that strong human urge to make connections and understand our world. Lifelong learners do not become displaced workers. As our society and economy rapidly transform, those with the power skills of a liberal arts education will be best prepared to adapt to, and more importantly, guide those transformations. According to the Georgetown Center on Education & the Workforce, the return on investment for liberal arts colleges is nearly \$200,000 higher than the median for all colleges and close to the ROI for engineering and business schools over 40 years. Economically, those who attend private liberal arts colleges do very well over the lifespan of their career.

What's one thing about Hendrix College that many Arkansans probably don't know and should?

I believe many Arkansans know that Hendrix has a stellar reputation and is particularly well known for its success in preparing students for postgraduate experiences like medical school, law school, etc. However, Hendrix is also a great place for students who need time and guidance to figure out what they were made to do. It's a place where young people can engage in guided exploration in a close-knit community with strong mentors and talented peers. In addition to our strong academic offerings, Hendrix students compete in 21 NCAA Division III sports, plus esports, and participate in a variety of cocurricular activities through our nationally recognized Odyssey Program.


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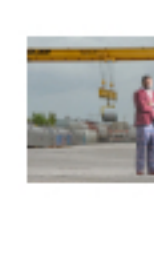
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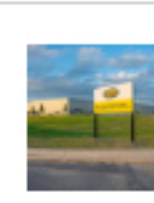
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