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Hastings College takes 'unabashedly different' path

Tuition at private school this year gets students iPads, Apple Pencils, all books and a foreign trip

By RICK RUGGLES
 WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

HASTINGS — Hastings College has lived through plenty of changes in its 137 years, but few have been as profound as the transformation students will see this school year.

In an effort to prepare students for an evolving world and to secure the college's future in the higher education marketplace, administrators have made big changes in their school's schedule, technology and travel opportunities.

Hastings College now requires each sophomore to take a college-funded trip to a foreign land such as France, Peru, Spain, Honduras, Great Britain or Canada. Hastings has converted from a traditional schedule to the block system in which a student takes only one or two classes in terms much shorter than semesters.

And each student will receive an iPad Pro and an Apple Pencil, paid for by the college (valued about \$1,000), so that everyone has solid computer technology and is working with the same equipment. Professors are expected to use the technology in their classes.

Hastings also has thrown in free books, including those online, and

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Hastings: Faculty, 'absolutely' nervous, adjusts to new tech, other changes

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a free Gallup CliftonStrengths examination to help first-year students recognize their strengths.

Hastings College President Travis Feezell said much of this is being funded by donor support. There have been efficiency efforts



Travis Feezell

and redirection of some money to help cover the costs, too. For instance, the college saved money a couple of years ago by outsourcing groundskeeping and cleaning, Feezell said.

And Feezell expects enrollment to rise, generating more revenue. Hastings College has about 330 first-year students coming in. The college said that's the third-highest number of first-year students in school history.

Tuition this school year rose to \$30,040 a year, up 5% from the previous year. That, too, produces more money. In each of the preceding five years, tuition increased only 3% or 3.5%.

At a college lunch last week for about 20 prospective students and their family members, Feezell said his college will give them a unique experience. "We're different," he told them, "unabashedly different."

Kinsler Lundt, a high school junior from Omaha, said she was impressed with the many changes the college is making. "I really like the trip idea and the iPad," Lundt said. "I think I like the new class schedule."

Feezell said in an interview that when he was named president 2½ years ago, the board of trustees directed him to enact change. Enrollment was a concern — last year it fell to 950 from 1,072 — and competition for students was fierce, considering that public colleges nationwide typically weren't getting the boost in state funds to which they were accustomed.

Although the value of a college education always has been debat-

ed, some politicians and members of the general public increasingly decry higher education's cost and question whether it prepares individuals to be productive citizens.

Trustees Vice Chairman Roger Doerr said the college knew it had to become more aggressive to increase enrollment and carve out a niche for itself. The University of Nebraska system, especially, is pursuing students who typically might have gone to Hastings or other private schools, said Doerr, a retired professor and administrator at Hastings College.

Doerr said the board wanted an administrator with a distinct vision for the college. Feezell, 50, who had been provost at the University of the Ozarks in Arkansas, came from a family of academicians. His father taught at Creighton University and his mother taught at Hastings.



Maggie Rogers

Maggie Rogers, a junior from Alabama, said students heard rumblings of change because Feezell is "the idea guy."

The scope of the changes surprised the student body, said Rogers, vice president of student government. But many recognized the need for transformation. Feezell is the college's fourth president since 2010. Rogers said an upperclassman once told her that Hastings College was in a funk similar to the Great Depression.

"I think Feezell is like our FDR," Rogers said, referring to the

American president from 1933 to 1945. "This," she said of the Hastings shake-up, "is his New Deal."

Susan Meeske, executive vice president for enrollment and student management, has been at the



Susan Meeske

college about eight years. "It feels like we finally have a vision for what we're doing," Meeske said. "Travis is a great, visionary leader."

Annette Vargas, associate dean of arts and humanities, said faculty members must use the iPads for syllabuses, attendance and grades, but some are using the devices for far more, such as sending students charts, worksheets, graphics and reading assignments.

The iPads enable a student to record a lecture for future use, among many other things. Amy Black, a professor of economics, said students will use the iPads

to make podcasts, take photos, interview people and create travel journals.

"We have been provided a lot of training," Black said of the professors. "To be honest, if I don't know how to do something with it, a student does."

Vargas said the iPad "puts everybody on the same playing field," so that some students don't have to use the computers offered by the college in computer labs. Also, students and teachers will work from the same computer processing system.

It just makes sense, she said, to give students excellent technology. "They haven't been in a world that doesn't have smartphones or Internet," she said.

Barbara Sunderman, vice president of academic affairs, said faculty members have worked with iPads for about 1½ years. They have also had training and will have access to information technicians and other professors who are at ease with the technology.

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Barbara Sunderman

“I think it’s opening the world of possibilities to the faculty,” Sunderman said. “Are they nervous? Absolutely.”

Sunderman said there have been no mass defections by faculty members. But she said it will be interesting to see what happens at the end of this school year.

“A lot of it settles out here shortly,” she said. The first two-week block starts on Aug. 14. That will be followed by two seven-week blocks. Instead of taking four or five classes in a semester, students focus in the block system on one or two classes at a time.

Black said the block system means classes each day are longer, so she and her students can dig deeper into a topic before adjourning. When you stop in the middle of a lesson, she said, “you’re losing momentum.”

Early this year, a group of Hastings students and faculty members went to France for a pilot trip and



Dani Lizarraga

test run to prepare for the new sophomore foreign travel. Among other places, they went to the Louvre in Paris.

“I had, like, a spiritual moment,” said Dani Lizarraga, a junior from Denver. “Just seeing

all the hard work and dedication they put into it (the art) and now they’re all gone, but their art is still there.”

Mackenzie Waltemath, a Hastings College junior from Omaha, said they walked and walked. They saw the Eiffel Tower, the Palace of Versailles, and the company that makes cookies for Starbucks.



Mackenzie Waltemath

“I would do it over in a heartbeat,” Waltemath said.

Corinne Baker, a senior in high school from McCook, said she attended a summer art program at Hastings College two months ago and loved the place, including its many trees, lush lawn and red-brick buildings.

Baker said she has Hastings College ranked No. 1 on her list of colleges. Hastings’ intrepid attitude toward change is part of the reason.

“I think that’s really cool,” she said. “I like that they’re trying new things.”

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RICK RUGGLES/THE WORLD-HERALD

Hastings College will welcome about 330 first-year students this month, the third-highest number in school history.