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## THE INTERVIEW: Franklin Pierce's Kim Mooney plots growth beyond New Hampshire

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As president of Franklin Pierce University, Kim Mooney isn't afraid to split from the herd when plotting her school's future. Case in point: Her sites are set on adding campus outposts throughout her home state of New Hampshire, not to mention other parts of the country, even as peers pull back on spending and contract operations to weather the Covid-19 pandemic.



FRANKLIN PIERCE UNIVERSITY  
Franklin Pierce University in Rindge,  
New Hampshire

The school, which enrolls 2,147 total students, already has three locations outside of its main campus in Rindge, New Hampshire, including a graduate program in Goodyear, Arizona. Mooney said she plans to add more graduate-level operations, among other efforts, to diversify revenue and reduce Franklin Pierce's reliance on the nation's declining population of undergrads.

Mooney recently spoke with *The Business Journals'* Hilary Burns about her university's growth strategy, navigating the Covid-19 pandemic and how her small New England school ended up with a campus in Arizona. The following is an edited transcript of their conversation.

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### **How was fall semester during the pandemic?**

Our intensive planning over the summer was effective. We coexisted with the pandemic, but we didn't let it dominate the university's ongoing commitment to student success.

The college presidents in New Hampshire spent quite a bit of time on the phone together. It was a very collaborative effort to update one another on how we were thinking about things and what our plans were. The key question was, what conditions need to exist on our campus and at our graduate centers for us to safely return to them? Our priority was always to return to in-person instruction and return our faculty and staff to in-person work environments. But those aren't the only scenarios we plan for. The success of the return had to do with the fact that we had such a structured and consistent planning process over the summer months with a lot of input from around the university.

We spent a lot of time communicating over the summer months. We developed a website for families and students so that they could see updates in real time about what we were planning. We held forums for the faculty and staff. I connected with the student government. I wrote more memos than I've ever written in my entire academic (career). We didn't want people to come back and feel like they didn't know something was going to happen. Kudos to the students — they adhered to the new restrictive policies and protocols for safety and health. And they let us know every day that they really wanted to be here.

This fall we did not have formal athletic competition in our conference. The athletic department formed a committee to figure out how to help student athletes and non-athletes participate in all sorts of recreational activities, because they knew that the student athletes would really want to compete in some way. They held weekly activities. This going to sound silly, but a couple things

were really funny, like the rock, paper, scissors competition. People were really competitive about it. We tried to take advantage of our beautiful campus in New Hampshire and the outdoors. We set up tents, used our athletic field and other beautiful spaces on campus, and that's where we gathered.

### **How was enrollment impacted in the fall?**

We did see a reduction in our undergraduate enrollment. Students were choosing to defer their acceptance for a year, take a gap year. But I will say our retention rate was the highest in the history of the university.

### **How has Covid-19 impacted Franklin Pierce financially?**

The good news is because of the Care's Act funding and because of some of the federal funds that came to the state of New Hampshire that are being allocated to private higher education ... all those unbudgeted expenses were covered. So, the direct impact on the institutional budget wasn't as tremendous as we initially anticipated because of that.

The thing about Franklin Pierce University is that it has a really diverse academic portfolio. We also have graduate centers in the state of New Hampshire and one in Arizona, where enrollment is incredibly strong. We also have a number of online programs. So, our business model isn't exclusively the small private residential college; it has more diversity to it.

So, even if the traditional undergraduate student is making different decisions right now about going to college or holding off for a year, enrollments around the rest of the university are stable. The budget this year is fluid. I would say we are still working on the budget, but we are in good shape.

### **And what about your endowment? How much have you leaned on that to get through the Covid crisis?**

Not at all. We didn't do anything extraordinary in terms of drawing down from the endowment to support the university.

**It sounds like bringing students back in the fall helped the university remain financially stable.**

Absolutely. And again, that's why those were very difficult decisions whether to reopen or not.

Those were difficult decisions with serious implications, not just about budget, but about health and safety. They were some of the most difficult decisions I'm sure presidents have ever made.

### **What does the future hold for Franklin Pierce?**

We built our new strategic plan, which had already been approved by the board of trustees about two days before the whole world went remote. We kept working on the strategic plan. We know there are significant opportunities ahead for change and for improvement based on experiences gained and lessons learned from the pandemic. I don't think I can overstate the importance of working to the future and planning academic offerings and the delivery format of those programs to meet the emerging needs of students in a post-pandemic world.

As I think about the conversations we're having at the senior staff level and around the university ... I'm asking everyone to think about what are we anticipating on the horizon because the world has just gone through a pandemic. What professional skills will students need to enter a post-pandemic economy or what intellectual skills will students need to enter post-pandemic careers that we haven't even imagined yet?

We are planning expansions in some of our health profession graduate programs. We're planning to expand three-year degree offerings at the undergraduate level. We've developed a new professional programs and partnerships initiative. It's something we have been working on prior to the pandemic.

It's a workforce development alliance, so (we work) with local and regional employees in the state of New Hampshire and we create an alliance that allows us to educate or customize educational opportunities for those employees. We've already started those conversations with local and regional businesses about the educational goals and needs of their employees.

### **How can schools like Franklin Pierce help relieve the debt load for students and their families?**

Franklin Pierce already offers financial support to every undergraduate student. And we do see the need to imagine what that is going to need to look like in the future. We are hoping to establish more endowed scholarships so that we can better support incoming students and give them access to higher education.

Also, let me just go back to this concept of a three-year degree. One of the reasons families find three-year accelerated degrees appealing is because it's a full year of undergraduate tuition. We're also trying to think of ways to offer that education so it allows it to be more financially accessible. There's a number of things I think we can do to give a kind of a menu of options. We're giving students opportunities to toggle back and forth between on-ground and online. There are just a lot of ways that colleges and universities can become as flexible as possible for students. And I think Franklin Pierce is well down that path.

### **How are you thinking about overcoming the demographic declines in New England?**

Going back to the diverse academic portfolio and the fact that we have graduate centers both in New Hampshire and in Arizona. We are looking to expand those portfolios. We are looking to expand those opportunities beyond the state of New Hampshire.

### **And why Arizona?**

About 15 years ago, a forward-thinking mayor in Arizona put an ad in the Chronicle of Higher Education looking for proposals from private, higher-ed institutions to bring private higher education to the West Valley of Phoenix. Franklin Pierce was one of maybe 10 or 11 institutions that submitted a proposal. They invited us out to talk to them about what we could imagine doing out there. We were one of two selected to establish a center or a campus in Goodyear, Arizona. We've been out there now for over 10 years and we have a very successful graduate program in physical therapy out there. We will be expanding, as I said. We will do our due diligence and extensive research to make sure that whatever we decide is grounded in data.

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**Hilary Burns**

Associate Editor

*Boston Business Journal*

