

Palmer Ball

The recipient of the 2015 Ken White Distinguished Business Officer mulls the current enrollment picture, the view from her office and the independent school value proposition. “I’d like to think that having the freedom to innovate means we can be nimble enough to do everything better than the competition.” INTERVIEW BY LEAH THAYER



Palmer Ball received the 2015 Ken White Distinguished Business Officer Award at the NBOA Annual Meeting in Boston. The award is given to “exceptionally active and inspiring individuals who have dedicated their careers to the support of others in the field.” Since 1995, she has been business manager at the preK-12 Spartanburg Day School (SDS), in Spartanburg, South Carolina, where she has also served as a golf coach, marine biology guest-teacher and parent. Learn more about her work with NBOA and other business officer organizations at <http://go.nboa.org/DBOaward>.

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Q Congratulations on the Ken White Award. As busy as you are, what compels you to find time to also be so committed to helping the business officer profession generally?

A I am convinced that I have gotten so much more out of NBOA and the profession than I have given to it. What I have learned has made me a better business officer and has made my school better. This profession is absolutely about the rising tide—it’s all about giving back—and I am happy to do that because NBOA and other organizations have helped me so much.

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Q Winding back, you are a true Southerner: a Georgia debutante who’s been settled in South Carolina for many years. How do your Southern roots influence your outlook on work and life?

A Well, my mother might say I had a good upbringing that taught me to be kind and helpful! But I don’t think my being Southern

affects my attitude as much as being an independent school business officer does. We are somewhat unique in how we help each other out. I was in public accounting and in higher education before I came to SDS, and neither of those fields had this kind of camaraderie and collaboration. Independent school business officers are helpful whether we’re from the South, East, West or North. It’s not a regional thing by any stretch!

Plus, we’re not just making widgets in an independent school. In the corporate world, and even some nonprofits, there’s this profit-driven pressure aimed only at producing more efficiently. It’s just very different in the education environment, where we are constantly reminded why we do what we do. For instance, I absolutely love the view from my desk because I look out on a courtyard where every day, weather permitting, there’s a group of students riding around on their unicycles (a new craze started by a faculty member), playing cornhole and just having fun between classes. Where else can you do that?

It’s also nice that I’m a parent at SDS. My two daughters have both been there since they were four. I

remember one time saying to my husband something along the lines of, “Guess who gave me a kiss at work today?” He noted that he could never say that in his job—he would get fired! But at that time one of my then very young daughters was passing me in the hallway and just came and gave me a kiss. And I get hugs from the students, especially the younger ones I get to teach about sea turtles (one of my passions is marine biology). It’s wonderful.

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Q Can you give your peers any tips for leveraging that “business officer spirit” to help faculty and other administrators appreciate the budget-related responsibilities that fall to the business office?

A In the college business office, I witnessed this sense that it was their way or the highway. I’ve really tried to have a different attitude—to show that I’m there to help faculty do their jobs, and not to create roadblocks that keep them from doing their jobs. Of course there are some things that I need them to do certain ways, but generally I try to show them that they

know best how to teach, for instance, and my job is to help them get what they need to do that effectively. More than once, a faculty member has left my office saying, “Wow, I assumed you would shoot my idea down. Thanks for your support and suggestions on how to make it work.”

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Q Your bachelor’s degree was in biology, but you went on to get an MBA in accounting, and of course now you’re deeply involved in every aspect of financial operations. What kind of a relationship did you have with math as a student?

A That’s a great question because I actually had to repeat pre-algebra. The second time around it just clicked, and I was off and running with straight As from there on out. Ironically, my eighth grade daughter was in the same situation this year. The second time pre-algebra clicked for her as well, and she’s now at the top of her class. She went from being one of the weakest to being one of the strongest. I think building that kind of confidence can help anyone do great going forward.

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Q What challenges have arisen that you might never have foreseen as a business manager 20 years ago?

A I could never have envisioned the issues



KEN WHITE AWARD WINNER PALMER BALL (SECOND FROM RIGHT) WITH FAMILY MEMBERS WALLACE PRESTWOOD (SISTER, FAR LEFT), ANNE DOBSON BALL (DAUGHTER), TAYLOR BALL (DAUGHTER), TONI CORPENING (MOTHER) AND MICHAEL BALL (HUSBAND).

we’re having with enrollment. In my first five or six years at SDS, from the mid- to late-1990s, enrollment was always higher than it was the prior year, and we always had surpluses. Suddenly the bottom fell out for us, and it has become a bigger issue than I would have ever dreamed. A lot of this is driven by cost, even though we think our price (about \$15,000) is not high by the standards of some independent schools in other markets. Even then, of course, our tuition doesn’t come close to the full cost of educating our students.

Another change I’m seeing is brought about by parents allowing students to make big decisions about school. Parents tell us they’re letting their child go somewhere else because they’re tired of complaints about homework,

for instance. We all know 14-year-olds don’t have the big picture in mind and don’t realize how our academics will help them get into the college they want to attend. It’s frustrating for us as administrators to see parents adopt this position not because it’s in the best interest of their child but because they just want to let their kids decide. And it’s hard when kids who have been here since they were four years old decide to finish out their career at the high school down the street, just so they’ll have an easy final three or four years.

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Q What’s your reaction to Sweet Briar College’s recent decision to close, as both an alumna of a women’s

college and a business officer in a sector where \$94 million endowments are considerably larger than average?

A I really hate to see a prominent woman’s college closing. I believe strongly that single-gender institutions have an important role in society, be it K–12 or higher education. I think this also shows the fragility of our financial model, with our strong dependence on tuition dollars and donations. When an institution of Sweet Briar’s reputation and resources decides to close, it shows how vulnerable we all are. It points to the need for strong financial management, a dedicated and generous board, a strong leadership team and a robust student recruitment effort. Also, as the former vice president of a

women's college, I understand the challenges of recruiting for a women's college. I can't speak to the Sweet Briar situation, but I can draw a correlation in the challenge we face at SDS in recruiting students. Specifically, I understand the importance of the value proposition and of demonstrating to prospective families and students the difference they will experience by attending our school.

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Q On a brighter note, you alluded to the new Unicycle Club at SDS. What are some other cool programs that you think your peers should know about?

A One thing we've done at the high school for a long time is cancel classes for a week each spring so students can do something special. With Special Studies Week, we offer a wonderful variety of programs: volunteering with Habitat for Humanity, creative writing, French cooking, an art trip to Italy, studying the state's Civil War battlefields, trout fishing in the Georgia mountains, backpacking on the Appalachian Trail with the woman who holds the record for walking the trail in the shortest amount of time, and more. It used to be that taking a group of students to New York or D.C. would make them miss classes for a week. Now we have this unique model where everybody just stops with their classwork

and chooses an interesting, non-traditional learning opportunity for a week.

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Q Can you think of one particular aspect of your job that you wouldn't mind seeing go away?

A Oh boy. I've been dragging my feet in working with lawyers on employee handbooks, but I know that HR and legal issues will never go away. What I'd like to believe actually might go away is the enrollment issues we're facing. I'm absolutely convinced the challenge involves the "value proposition," something that's been discussed at NBOA quite a lot [see <http://go.nboa.org/1aLAWqe>]. I remember Ace Ellis's great point that if you're charging \$15,000, then you've got to be \$15,000 better than the public school or the other competition. I've been saying that for a long time: We've got to be \$15,000 better (or get \$15,000 better), and we've got to talk about that differentiation. I suppose this is where our Southern gentility comes in: We try too hard to find gracious ways to basically say we offer a better education. It might be time to take the gloves off and get a little bit more aggressive.

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Q Is it the enrollment issue that prompted you to develop the five-year

budget model that's been so popular among NBOA members for many years?

A Absolutely. We lost 80 students in the space of two years. That impacted our budget pretty significantly and served as a catalyst for the budget model, as the board wanted to see enrollment and break-even projections. More recently, though, I've jumped over to the NBOA 10-year budget model [<http://go.nboa.org/LRDSfinancialModel>], which has some neat charts and graphs and makes it easier to show the board how one change or another will affect revenue and other variables, or what tuition in first grade will be in 10 years if tuition increases each year by X percent.

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Q Looking ahead, what worries you about the future viability of the independent school business model?

A As my former head of school used to say, this is the only business that sells its product for less than what it costs to produce. Imagine if the auto dealer or restaurant down the street did that. In a class I have guest-taught on nonprofit finance, I draw a sketch that shows how most businesses incur one cost to make a product, sell it for a higher cost, and make the difference as profit. It's the exact opposite for independent schools. By

definition, we lose money on everything we do and every student we serve, making us dependent on things like annual giving and endowment income. That business model just doesn't work on paper. But we all do it because it's a worthwhile product. We've just got to fix the business side, the pricing side, whether it's by driving costs down through larger class sizes or something else. I don't think it's fair to believe we're ever going to solve this problem by charging more tuition. We've got to take a serious look at the expense side of things.

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Q What makes you optimistic about the future viability of independent schools?

A I think we have the ability to really distance ourselves from public schools and our other competition. I think that's where we can really shine. I'm a huge follower of Grant Lichtman and agree that there's so much potential for innovation and teaching in new ways. I'd like to think that having the freedom to innovate means we can be nimble enough to do everything better than the competition. As John Spence said at the Annual Meeting in Boston, we need "nimbleocity" and should strive to become "nimbolicious"! ■