

# Hardin-Simmons University Should Remember the Widow's Mite

The coronavirus pandemic has placed financial strain on colleges and universities nationwide, and enrollment is expected to drop by as much as 20% in the fall.

Small, religious institutions face a particularly difficult future, as they depend heavily on tuition for revenue. The generosity of donors will be needed more than ever before to help universities withstand the storm.

Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas, may be a bellwether for other religious universities.

Before the pandemic, the university [announced the closure](#) of 22 academic programs, including Logsdon Seminary.

Many alumni feel that HSU is in danger of losing the values it has stood for since 1891, when it was founded with the mission “to bring young men and women to Christ; to teach them of Christ; to train them for Christ.”

In this time of great difficulty, perhaps nothing is more reflective of a university's values than how it treats the donors who supported the university's work in better times, whether their gifts are big or small.

Before the university closes down for the semester, let us recall the parable of the widow's mite found in Luke 21:1-3. “And he looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury, and he saw also a certain poor widow putting in two mites. So, he said, ‘Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all.’”

Carol Bratton worked for 17 years as the administrative assistant to the dean of the Logsdon School of Theology at Hardin-Simmons University.

Through my work with the group “[Save Hardin-Simmons](#),” I met Mrs. Bratton and came to understand her struggle with the university after she reached out to me through direct email and personal phone conversation.

Our team has personally seen Mrs. Bratton's correspondence and has copies of letters between her and the university, and she has given me permission to share some of her experience.

Mrs. Bratton's ask of the university is small.

Her late husband also served the university as associate vice president of information technology. After his passing, she wanted to honor his memory by giving back to their long-time employer.

After making a gift of \$5,000 in 2008, she saved for another five years to meet the \$10,000 minimum required to establish an endowment at HSU.

Mr. and Mrs. Bratton cherished Logsdon Seminary, and she chose to create The Bratton Family Scholarship to recognize outstanding doctor of ministry students.

I count myself as one of the lucky few helped by the Bratton family's gift, having received the Bratton Family Ministry Award in 2017.

In February, Mrs. Bratton learned via email that HSU would close Logsdon Seminary, thus eliminating the scholarship in her family's name.

The Logsdon School of Theology was established through a legacy gift from Mr. and Mrs. Charles and Koreen Logsdon in 1984 to "train young ministers."

As part of the university's new strategic plan, the Logsdon School of Theology will continue to conduct undergraduate courses, but now under the auspices of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Without seeing the original gift agreement, it is impossible to ascertain whether the new arrangement satisfies the Logsdons' intent.

But it is hard to imagine that closing the seminary would please donors who wished to prepare Baptist ministers.

The Brattons shared the Logsdon's passion for training young ministers. Carol Bratton's 2013 agreement stipulates that if the doctor of ministry program should cease to exist, then the dean of Logsdon has the discretion to award the funds to benefit seminary students.

The final paragraph of Mrs. Bratton's gift agreement states, "earnings, principal

or gains from this scholarship shall not be used for any purpose other than those prescribed above.”

As of the end of 2021, there will be no dean and no Logsdon Seminary. There is no way that HSU can now uphold the intent of her gift.

Upset by the news, Mrs. Bratton drove two hours to campus to hand deliver a letter requesting that the university return her gift so she could find another way to honor her late husband’s memory.

As Mrs. Bratton told me on the phone, and as she has told multiple parties, she was met by HSU’s Vice President for Advancement Mike Hammack with laughter and told it would never happen.

When she retold this part of the story, I could hear the hurt in her voice, even over the phone.

In early April, Mrs. Bratton wrote another letter to HSU reiterating her request. The university responded two weeks later, asking her to fill out a form.

When she asked for a copy of the form, they told her to send another letter. Two weeks ago, Mrs. Bratton sent a third letter asking the university to return her gift.

Mrs. Bratton made a sacrificial gift to HSU. She deserves better than laughter and dismissal.

Because her gift is a smaller endowment, the university could easily return it, rather than disregarding her late husband’s memory. After all, her gift is worth only 5% of HSU President Eric Bruntmyer’s salary.

Shuttering a program like Logsdon Seminary - with its ardent alumni base and essential mission - comes with a cost that dollars and cents cannot quantify. During this pandemic, we cannot forget who we are or what we stand for.

Stories like Carol Bratton’s have a corrosive effect on an institution, particularly one founded in the Christian faith. Baptists everywhere should take note and consider how to enrich our communities in this difficult time.

Trust is a hard thing to secure but is easily lost. For the Bratton family, it may be too late for Hardin-Simmons to regain their trust.

And as Mrs. Bratton wrote in her first letter to President Eric Bruntmyer, “In the Texas culture, trust is everything.”