Putting Simmons ‘on the map’ for women

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When Helen Drinan became president of Simmons College in 2008, the school was running a deficit and in desperate need of a leader who was not only committed to educating women but also one who could turn the finances around.

In five years, Drinan, who previously had been a member of the college’s board of directors, has managed to do both. In 2008, the year Drinan came in as president, the Boston college reported a $10.4 million operating deficit. By 2012, Simmons reported a $6 million surplus. Meanwhile, Drinan made it her mission to raise the college’s academic rigor and standards.

“She has a real determination to put Simmons on the map as a leader among women’s institutions,” said Regina Pisa, chairwoman of Goodwin Proctor, and a member of the Simmons board of trustees.

Among her first steps when she arrived, Drinan cut more than 70 jobs and made across-the-board expense reductions for things like materials and supplies.

She subsequently launched new academic programs aimed at bringing in more revenue for the college, such as an online nursing program that started this month and another online graduate program focused on library sciences that started earlier in the college’s fiscal year.

She also launched an $85 million fundraising campaign, and is halfway toward reaching that goal.

Drinan came to Simmons after a career in the private sector, most notably as a human resources executive at Caritas Christi Health Care and BankBoston. Drinan learned how difficult it is for women to get ahead.

“When women remain behind the eight ball when they’re (trying) to build careers,” Drinan said, a reality that has inspired her in her current role in women’s education. “Women remain disadvantaged from day one. Put them side by side (with men) and start them at the same place and the number of opportunities will be fewer for women.”

Drinan recalled the years she was an executive at BankBoston, when she had a growing family and was unwilling to spend extended periods of time traveling for work.

That choice may have limited her career options at the bank, she said. “There are realities about the choices we make,” she said.

Drinan grew up in Weymouth, and attended public schools there. She went on to graduate from Mount Holyoke College.

Drinan married her high school sweetheart David at the end of her junior year in college and was pregnant by the time she graduated.

The couple, who now have three children, went into the Peace Corps, working in the Philippines. Upon returning to the U.S., Drinan attended Simmons and received two graduate degrees from the school, the first in library science and the other an MBA.

What Drinan said she loves most about leading a women’s college is the opportunity she now has to help shape budding careers and to help build confidence.