

Focus

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A Survival Guide for Small Colleges



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Cover photo of Sweet Briar College by Julia Schmalz for *The Chronicle*



KRISTIN WATERS

For small institutions like Ferrum College, in a mountain valley about an hour's drive south of Roanoke, Va., fast-food options and cellphone service can be recruiting tools. Jennifer L. Braaten (standing) helped bring both to Ferrum since becoming its president, in 2002.

Small, Rural Colleges Grapple With Their Geography

By LAWRENCE BIEMILLER

THE route Google Maps recommends if you're headed to Ferrum College from the west involves what may be the loneliest and most roller-coaster-like stretch of roadway ever to earn a state route number from Virginia. It's a narrow ribbon of

pavement with no center line, a twisting trail you drive imagining that if you go over the edge, weeks could pass before anyone found the wreckage. Only at the other end do you spot a yellow sign that reads, "GPS Routing Not Advised."

But Jennifer L. Braaten, Ferrum's president, just

laughs if you mention that the college seems remote: “My husband’s a Lutheran pastor. He says, ‘Only God knows where it is.’”

Ferrum is tucked away here in the Blue Ridge foothills for a reason: When the Methodist Women’s Missionary Society established a four-year high school outside the town of Ferrum in 1913, thousands of children in the surrounding mountains were going uneducated. The high school became a two-year college and then, in the early 1970s, a four-year institution.

But when Ms. Braaten became president, in 2002, the student population stood at about 800 — down from 1,100 a decade earlier. “We had multiyear enrollment challenges,” she says. Looming large among them was the college’s location: There was no cell service, for starters, and the hamlet of Ferrum just down the road had almost nothing to offer students. The nearest city, Roanoke, is about 50 minutes away.

Even by the standards of liberal-arts colleges,

“Kids now seem to prefer metropolitan colleges. That’s a factor every college in a remote location has to deal with.”

Ferrum is isolated — in a league with Sterling College, in Craftsbury Common, Vt. (an hour and a half east of Burlington), and Upper Iowa University, in Fayette (an hour from Cedar Falls). But plenty of small institutions in slightly less remote settings face similar challenges. Unlike universities large enough to generate their own critical mass of food, shopping, and entertainment offerings, many liberal-arts colleges find themselves counting the miles to the nearest fast-food outlets and assuring potential applicants that they can get to a city like Chicago, New York, or Washington in only a few hours. The old real-estate saw “location, location, location” can just as easily be applied to colleges.

Indeed, when Sweet Briar College announced last year that it would close — a decision its alumnae succeeded in reversing — one reason administrators cited was the 30-minute travel time to the closest Starbucks, in Lynchburg, Va. Sweet Briar has one of the loveliest campuses in Virginia, with handsome buildings, rolling meadows, and two

lakes, but there’s very little in the way of commerce nearby.

“As recently as a generation ago, the utopian small college in a small college town was the way to go for a lot of kids,” says Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges. “Kids now seem to prefer metropolitan colleges. That’s a factor every college in a remote location has to deal with.”

In earlier times, small colleges frequently moved from one town to another in search of healthier enrollments. Pomona College, for example, lasted barely a year in Pomona, Calif., before moving east to Claremont, in 1889. And in 1924, Beaver College moved from Beaver, Pa., a small town west of Pittsburgh, to the suburbs of Philadelphia (it later became Arcadia University). But nowadays hardly any institution could afford to buy a new campus and build classrooms, laboratories, dormitories, a dining hall, and athletics facilities all at once.

Instead, administrators at colleges far from the beaten path make what improvements to their campuses and offerings they can to attract students and faculty members — and tweak their marketing to promote their locations as assets.

‘30 MINUTES TO MCDONALD’S’

That’s what Ferrum started doing when Ms. Braaten arrived. After she got a cell tower erected, she went to work on food options, bringing a Subway to the campus and a Papa John’s to the college-operated Mercantile, a short walk from the chapel. A new cafe in the bookstore now serves Starbucks coffee. “We needed some name brands,” she says, to help students from less rural areas feel comfortable.

Name brands alone didn’t get Ferrum to its current enrollment of more than 1,400, but they matter more to students than one might expect. Mary Ann Naso, vice president for enrollment at Wilson College, in Chambersburg, Pa., says she can’t remember ever running into students downtown, where the Franklin County courthouse overlooks a lovely, historic square with a fountain and a couple of local restaurants. Meanwhile, a busy commercial strip not far from the campus is a big draw. “The whole Norland Avenue stretch is a place our students love to go,” she says, naming Chick-fil-A, Chipotle, and Starbucks as popular destinations, along with the combination gas station/fast-food retailer Sheetz.

There’s no such strip anywhere near Pippa Passes, Ky., where the buildings of Alice Lloyd College crowd a narrow valley on either side of Caney Creek. “It’s 30 minutes to McDonald’s,” says Gator Hazelett, who will be a senior next fall. He confers with Paige Werner, a fellow biology major who just graduated, and after some debate they conclude that the nearest Starbucks is two hours away.

At Alice Lloyd, as at a handful of other American colleges, every student has a campus job, and in return tuition is free for most, including students from about 100 Appalachian counties in five states that the college considers its service area. That makes attracting applicants easy, despite the remote location: The college had 6,300 applications for 200 spots in last year's freshman class, says Joe A. Stepp, the president.

Most out-of-the-way colleges can't solve their admissions problems by making tuition free, but even for a work college like Alice Lloyd, location can still be a problem. Claude (Lafie) Crum, the vice president for academic affairs, points out another challenge: hiring good faculty members to live so far from almost everything except their colleagues and students (Hazard, Ky., population 5,000, is the nearest city, about 45 minutes away). All but three of Alice Lloyd's 30 full-time profes-

A good president, says Ferrum's chief, is "a peddler of hope. There's gotta be hope for the future, rather than a sense of, We're dying."

sors, along with a number of staff members, live on the campus, and many eat together regularly at a long table in the middle of the crowded dining hall. Some people enjoy knowing practically anyone they run into, but that kind of lifestyle isn't for everyone.

"Because it is such an issue, I really try to emphasize the small enrollment and out-of-the-way location in my early phone conversations with potential faculty," says Mr. Crum. Even so, he says, some people come to visit and are put off by the remoteness. Age may be one factor: "Many of the older faculty candidates like the remote location and the camaraderie on our campus. The interviewees that seem to dislike the location tend to be younger."

Some disciplines have been harder to hire in than others, for reasons he can't explain. "I think we had 15 or so candidates for the education posi-

tion this spring and close to 50 for the speech and theater position," Mr. Crum says. "Both positions were advertised on the same website on the same day, and the postings were nearly identical. I'm not sure if there are just a lot of people with speech and theater credentials who are out of work compared to other disciplines." A few years ago, he adds, the college found only five or so candidates interested in a physics job.

And while the college has no ties to any church, President Stepp sees the issue in almost evangelical terms: "You have to have a missionary zeal to want to work here."

MENTORS AND KAYAKS

The same can be said of many small colleges, and it's certainly true at Ferrum. Besides improving students' fast-food and caffeine options, Ms. Braaten, who is retiring this summer, has worked hard to upgrade facilities, with both donations and money borrowed through a U.S. Department of Agriculture program intended to spur economic development in rural areas. She likes to quote a visitor who said Ferrum had gone "from frumpy to fabulous in five years."

It has also evolved into what the president calls an "applied-liberal-arts college," keeping the liberal arts at its core but also offering programs in criminal justice, business, and health. In addition to promoting those programs, Ferrum tries "to get the message out that we're affordable," Ms. Braaten says. The discount rate — the difference between the sticker price and what the average student pays after grants — is between 48 and 50 percent, right around the national average.

As the college has bolstered enrollment, it has also attracted a surprisingly diverse student population, with more than 40 percent minority students. That's due in part to word of mouth among a network of alumni and friends of the college in and around Washington, Ms. Braaten says, but the college has also created peer-mentoring programs for black men and women called Brother4 Brother and Sister4 Sister.

Ferrum's revised marketing emphasizes the beauty of the region and the proximity of Smith Mountain Lake. And the college has expanded its athletics offerings to appeal to more students, adding men's and women's lacrosse and women's wrestling. The admissions office also makes sure potential applicants who come to visit get introduced immediately to a coach, current student, or faculty member. That kind of welcome can be critical. "All these small colleges are built on an experience of intimacy," says Jake B. Schrum, president of Emory & Henry College, another small Virginia institution that's not near very much.

Emory & Henry competes for students partly with innovations in its academic program, but

also by making its location an asset. The college calls southwestern Virginia “an outdoor wonderland” and offers students an Outdoor Center packed with kayaks and camping gear. Just up the hill from the Outdoor Center is a climbing tower, and the campus backs up to its own nine-hole golf course, overlaid in part by a popular 18-hole disc-golf course.

Wells College, in Aurora, N.Y., isn’t near a city — it’s half an hour from Ithaca — but it too promotes its location. The campus is a stone’s throw from “beautiful Cayuga Lake” and surrounded by what the college’s website calls “vast outdoor recreational opportunities.” Even so, it’s found itself relying more and more on tuition discounting to attract students.

Jonathan C. Gibraltar, the president since July 2015, says the discount rate rose to 72 percent for last year’s freshman class and 68 percent for all students. “Families and students are aggressive about appealing financial-aid packages,” he says.

Now the college is working with data gurus from

the admissions consulting firm Ruffalo Noel Levitz and expects to bring the discount rate down by five points for this fall’s entering class. The hope is also to increase enrollment, from 600 to 725, in the next five years.

A recent purchase of several Wells commercial properties by an alumna intent on making Aurora a tourist destination will let the college make “strategic investments,” Mr. Gibraltar says, among them a new gym floor, turf field, and sustainability center. And the college plans to recruit the kinds of students who have proved more likely to come, and to stay. Data show that those from within 100 miles of Wells are twice as likely to enroll and succeed.

There’s no question that small rural colleges have to work harder than their city and suburban counterparts to recruit enough students — enough of the right students — to remain viable. “You’ve gotta do five, six, seven things at the same time,” says Ms. Braaten. But a good president is “a peddler of hope,” she says. “There’s gotta be hope for the future, rather than a sense of, We’re dying.”

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Survival at Stake

After the Great Recession, small colleges had to try new approaches

By LAWRENCE BIEMILLER

THE PLEIADES — seven sisters lofted into the night sky by Zeus — shine crisply through the eyepiece of a handsome new telescope that Austin College bought to top off its two-year-old science building.

David Whelan, an assistant professor of physics, describes the star cluster's astronomical significance after Amy Anderson, who is double-majoring in physics and theater, has given visitors some background on the sisters — daughters of Atlas and a sea nymph who were pursued by the lusty Orion till Zeus put them eternally out of his reach. It's a perfect liberal-arts-college moment — professor and student, science and the humanities — playing out under a dome open to the cosmos.

What it's not is a moment that comes cheap. The telescope cost about \$1-million all told — a lot of money for this 1,300-student college an hour north of Dallas. Mr. Whelan, who was hired last fall, says the instrument is equally valuable for research and teaching. Working alongside a professor, "it's within a student's reach to observe a small subset of stars, perform the data reduction, and present results at the end of a semester," he says.

Coincidentally, the instrument also serves another purpose. From its perch on the roof of the \$40-million science building, the telescope overlooks a campus quadrangle that every admissions tour crosses. So even during the day, the telescope and its dome make an important statement about the kind of college Austin is.

The science building and two student-housing projects are the biggest of several bets Austin College made during the recent recession, the most serious since the 1930s. The bets were important because the college's administrators say that to achieve long-term financial stability, it needs to expand its enrollment, attracting more students even as competition from other colleges and universities increases. It's a challenge many of the smallest liberal-arts colleges face.

The recession may be over, but with middle-class incomes remaining stagnant and politicians talking endlessly about the needs of the work force, liberal-arts colleges like this one find themselves operating in a marketplace much different from that of 10 years ago. Their small size, their comparatively high cost, and sometimes even their traditional pitches about the lifelong value of a liberal-arts education work against them now, making their situation even more precarious than that of many larger institutions. Small colleges are discovering — some faster than others — that they have to be acutely sensitive to the evolving whims of students and the concerns of parents, as well as nimble enough to meet the marketplace on its terms.

"Since 2008 the economic landscape has changed and become more difficult for small colleges," says Carol Ann Mooney, president of St. Mary's College, in Indiana, a women's college with an enrollment of 1,500. "In general the economy is feeling very volatile. In higher ed I see a much less predictable future."

Some small colleges, such as St. Mary's, are expanding nontraditional offerings like graduate programs and online courses. Others, such as Austin and Randolph-Macon College, are bolstering old strengths — particularly the personal attention students get from professors — and marketing them with new vigor. A few colleges — among them Agnes Scott College — are making radical changes in their curricula and identities. And almost all are searching for ways to make bring in extra revenue from housing, summer programs, and the like.

It's still too early to say which approaches will work, in part because each college's circumstances are different. Nonetheless, small-college leaders are united in saying their institutions, as a group, face bigger challenges than ever before. "I was lucky enough to start my presidency in 2004," says

Students visit the Adams Observatory at Austin College as part of a physics class. The \$1-million telescope tops off a new \$40-million science building at the 1,300-student college.



ILANA PANICH-LINSMAN FOR THE CHRONICLE

Ms. Mooney, of St. Mary's. While her college has been more fortunate than some, she says, "those early years seem like a picnic now."

Austin College had survived rough patches before the recent recession. Founded in 1849 in Huntsville, Tex., the college moved here to Sherman in 1876. Then, in 1913, a fire destroyed the rambling main building; the residents of Sherman contributed to a Greek Revival classroom building in yellow brick that is today one of the campus's oldest structures.

The recession didn't hit Austin harder than other colleges, but the timing was especially awkward: The stock market crumbled after the Board of Trustees had hired a new president, Marjorie Hass, but before her first day in office, July 1, 2009. She came to Austin from Muhlenberg College, in Pennsylvania, where she had been provost, and on arriving she found that the value of the endowment was dropping — the recession eventually cost it about \$27-million — salaries had been frozen, and benefits had been cut.

"There were a number of things we had to look at very quickly," she said. "Like any liberal-arts college, there were vulnerabilities. You have a model

that is very tuition dependent and dependent on contributions and endowment, and the downturn affected all three."

She consulted the board. As she describes it, the question boiled down to, "Would we pull back and hunker down and balance the budget through cuts, or would we make some investments that we believed would enhance revenue over time?"

"There wasn't much fat in the budget," she says, "so we'd be cutting into the lean — and then what we would be offering would be of less value."

"We ultimately did decide on a somewhat aggressive strategy" — in part, she thinks, because the board included "some guys in oil and gas" who had more of an appetite for risk than businesspeople back in Pennsylvania did. "They're used to a regular cycle of ups and downs in their investments," Ms. Hass says.

The most visible element of the revenue plan involved building a new residence hall for underclassmen and a series of handsome duplex cottages for seniors — a total of nearly 200 beds, completed in about 12 months. Enterprising donors came up with a plan to help the college avoid the tight credit market by creating a company just to finance

and build the new housing and turn it over to the college. Now the additional beds bring in “about half a million a year” in revenue that would otherwise have gone to off-campus landlords, according to Ms. Hass.

Not everything went smoothly, however. “There were positions we didn’t renew,” she says, and 60 students staged a sit-in when the college decided it couldn’t afford to fill a position in classics. Another challenge was “making clear to the faculty why we could spend money on buildings” — including the \$40-million science center — while the salary pool wasn’t growing.” She ended up offering “Budget 101” sessions to faculty and staff members because “they had to feel they could stand behind the integrity of the changes.” Conversations about money have been “painful at times,” she says, but “the faculty is now really well versed in the college’s finances.”

Although the college’s situation has improved significantly since, Ms. Hass is still worried about deferred maintenance — she says has a list of \$15-million or \$20-million of projects that could use attention — as well as about creating “a sustainable plan for faculty and staff salaries.”

RANDOLPH-MACON COLLEGE, in Ashland, Va., also hopes to grow — even though its current enrollment of 1,400 is its largest ever. Robert R. Lindgren, the president, says during a chilly golf-cart tour of the campus that the institution’s strategic plan calls for adding another 100 students, though that would put the college “at the edge of some tipping points.”

“Scale is so important,” he says. “The proportion of students who want a school as small as this is shrinking. Students want a little more commotion.” A bigger enrollment means more members for teams and clubs and spreads more widely the cost of “what our provost likes to call ‘the one-offs’ — the football coach, the president,” and the like. Perhaps most significantly, he says, more students means more choices in the dining hall. “Food is the toughest thing about our scale,” he says. “My long-term view is that places like ours need to be in the 2,000s. If you do that right, you won’t lose the connections.” But he’s quick to say he doesn’t have a precise study backing up his opinion.

What Randolph-Macon does have, though, is what it calls “The Edge,” a cleverly named advising and career-planning program carrying out the strategic plan’s recommendation that the college focus on student outcomes. The program was inspired by a Wake Forest University career-development effort that Mr. Lindgren read about in this newspaper in 2010, prompting a visit to Wake Forest’s vice president for career development, Andy

Chan. Afterward, Randolph-Macon ramped up faculty advising and added new career-oriented elements, including a “boot camp” weekend in which sophomores retreat to a nearby hotel to polish their personal narratives, get advice from alumni, and attend a dinner designed help them with etiquette.

“We took advantage of a lot of things we were doing anyway, but we talk about them in a ‘brand’ way,” says Mr. Lindgren, adding that the goal is to “convey to students and their parents that we care about what happens when they leave here.” Apparently it’s working: “I’ve had parents stop me and say, ‘That’s a game changer,’” he says.

INDEED, many small institutions see little hope of prospering if they continue to offer just what they always have. “Being known as a fine women’s liberal-arts college in the South didn’t cut it,” says Elizabeth Kiss, president of Agnes Scott College, in Atlanta (her last name is pronounced “quiche”). She says the college needs to add at least 200 students to its current enrollment of 900.

Doing that, though, requires persuading high-school women who aren’t considering women’s colleges — Ms. Kiss calls them “the over-my-dead-body group” — to see something that makes Agnes Scott worth applying to. After working with consultants who tested several ideas in a series of “simulated modeling decision” interviews with high-school students, the college settled on repositioning itself around global learning and leadership, and also around connecting students with careers.

The college calls its new approach “Summit,” adding the tag line “Leading Everywhere,” and it’s set to start this coming fall with the goal of “preparing every student to be an effective change agent in a global society.” As soon as they arrive on the campus, Ms. Kiss says, students will spend three days in a leadership program before starting one of 10 new first-year courses, each of which includes a weeklong trip during the spring semester. Every student will also assemble her own board of advisers, with a faculty member, a staff member, a career mentor (often an alumna), and a peer. The student’s progress will be captured in a digital portfolio, which the president describes as a way of “getting students to do that where-am-I-heading work.”

“It’s really exciting, and it’s a gamble,” says Ms. Kiss. “And it’s energized our campus.” That’s a good thing, because the shift requires the trustees to approve significant expenditures, the faculty to make big changes in the curriculum, and the admissions office to market a program that’s still being designed. “It’s looking really promising,” she says. “We’re well ahead on enrolled students.”

Not every small college feels compelled to roll out a game changer, of course — some are comfortable. Whittier College, in California, has grown from 1,250 students in 2005 to nearly 1,700. “We’re trying to march it back a little,” says Sharon D. Herzberger, the president. She gives some of the credit for the growth to the same recession that caused problems for other colleges, because appropriations cutbacks forced California’s big state universities to trim their offerings, meaning it took some students extra time get into courses they needed to graduate.

“That helped us. Parents would say that four years of Whittier was not that much more than five and a half years of the UC down the road,” she says. Even so, “we’re trying to be creative in helping people in our area keep costs down.” Among other approaches is encouraging students to earn credits elsewhere before enrolling at Whittier.

Even colleges that don’t have big financial worries keep a close eye on their markets as well as on national trends. “Scripps is in good shape, but I do see the tension with access,” says Lori Bettison-Varga, president of Scripps College, a California women’s college that is part of the Claremont Colleges consortium. “The challenge for us is the broad socioeconomic range — we’re fighting the barbell,” she says, meaning that while poor and rich students are fairly easy to enroll, “our institutions are very much out of reach to the middle class.”

AUSTIN has a \$136-million endowment — bigger than those of many colleges its size, but not so big that it doesn’t depend heavily on tuition revenue. The latest strategic plan calls for adding 150 students, for a total enrollment of 1,450, says Ms. Hass, but “we may want to grow larger than that.” The campus could accommodate 1,500 without major changes, she says, though it would have to use classrooms and other spaces more efficiently.

But where will those additional students come from? Austin mostly recruits here in Texas, where the public universities have both world-class reputations and big-time football programs that are magnets for students. And in a region with few liberal-arts institutions, many students and their families have only a limited idea of what a liberal-arts education is, and even less understanding of why it should cost more than attending a uni-

versity with 300-student courses. What’s more, consultants are now telling colleges from states with less-healthy demographics to try recruiting in Texas — which is “very bad advice,” Ms. Hass jokes.

“We focus a great deal on outcomes for our students,” she tells a crowd of potential applicants and their parents in a campus auditorium during one of the college’s admissions events. She says Austin students almost all finish their degrees in four years — rather than linger on campus on their parents’ dime — thanks to Austin’s small classes and professors who know students’ names. “At big universities,” she says, gesturing with her reading glasses as she paces the stage, “faculty members have other responsibilities, and undergraduate teaching is kind of an afterthought.”

As it strives to remain competitive, Austin has beefed up its marketing efforts — most recently adding a student-staffed call center, which the admissions and development offices share. And, like many other colleges, Austin considered a “price reset” — cutting its \$48,000 sticker price to some slightly-less-daunting number and then reducing aid accordingly — but administrators didn’t see that it would improve the bottom line.

“We do have some students from families of significant means,” Ms. Hass says, and there didn’t seem to be any point to charging them less when even at the current rate they’re not paying the full cost of their education (gifts and endowment income make up the balance). Plus, she says, many families take pride in the size of the aid package offered to their son or daughter.

Still, she says, “there will be dads with tears in their eyes who say, ‘I know this is the right place for my daughter,’ and there are times we have to say, ‘You’re right, there’s no way our aid will stretch that far.’”

Her real concern, though, is long term: She sees the American middle class becoming ever weaker, and she worries that the implications could be drastic for small colleges devoted to giving students from ordinary families a lifelong set of intellectual skills and to broadening their horizons.

“Schools like ours have essentially been middle-class operations,” Ms. Hass says, and if those families disappear, many small liberal-arts colleges could disappear with them. “It’s the middle class,” she says, “that has these aspirations.”

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MICHAEL MORGENSTERN FOR THE CHRONICLE

Down With Downsizing the Liberal Arts

Liberal-arts colleges should play a role in a national renaissance

By ROBERT WEISBUCH

TONIGHT in this village of 2,300 people, the theater troupe is debuting a work by a local writer while, in a nearby building, a visiting physicist is explaining competing ideas about gaps in our understanding of gravity. An Oscar-winning foreign film is playing at the student union, the Irish ambassador to the U.N. is speaking on his country's recent history, choral singers are rehearsing, and a soccer match is under way.

And that's not even half of what is going on in this amazing village on a single early-spring evening. You might expect such a list for a medium-sized city, but for a village of 2,300? Such a

place must be unique.

But of course it is not. I have taken this list from an actual calendar of events at a strong but not renowned small liberal-arts college. And the very next morning, the villagers on this extraordinary but normative campus will be engaged in a myriad of science labs, writing groups, and classroom discussions.

All of which shows why we must not simply save our liberal-arts institutions but extend them beyond their campus oases to inform national life and create a 21st-century renaissance. We need to enlarge them, not pare them, because, while a college campus is not a perfect place—some of those

late-night parties in the village, for instance, sponsor binge drinking and other troubling behavior—it is still about the best community that humanity can create.

We need to grow these villages in two senses: their enrollment and their social influence. Today, private liberal-arts colleges and small universities enroll shockingly few students, well under 5 percent of B.A. recipients. Why would we ever wish them to enroll less? In several columns over the next few months, I want to suggest how we can achieve this growth, and while I will focus on liberal-arts institutions, I mean often to include the liberal-arts wings of large research universities as well.

A plea and a plan for growth sound an odd note, I recognize, at a time when public discussions of higher education are dominated by jeremiads, by accusations from outside and a sense of crisis within. Many liberal-arts institutions are now advocating downsizing so as not to hang themselves, like the farmer in *Macbeth*, on the expectation of plenty. But the very cause of complaints is a disappointed idealism: They testify to the conviction that college should be utopian, the chief instrument of civilization, the embodiment of the deep human qualities of curiosity and interest, and the guarantor of the social justice that lets people improve their lot by merit.

Can college be that again, and can it be more than it has ever been? Can academe be not just an illustration of what a great society should be but an active instigator of that reality in the greater world?

Not unless we can disrupt the current conversation. I began with an account of a routine night at a liberal-arts college because I fear that, while we educators seek to sell our colleges and universities to potential applicants and their parents, we sometimes fail to remind ourselves of their value and of our amazing luck to have such a variety of institutions in every national region.

But downsizing and cutting expenses are the panacea du jour for private colleges and small universities. Like any hallucinogen, the diet drug has an allure. In an academic era when CFOs have usurped the proper roles of many college and university presidents and Moody's determines the campus mood, when demographic projections appear scary and tuition seems out of control, it's natural for financially challenged institutions to wish to cut expenses and, thus, people and resources. Lose some staff, fail to replace retired professors, leave a spare dorm or class building unused, become more selective in admitting students (though that is wishful thinking, as these cuts will make a college less attractive to applicants).

The philosophy of shrinkage is natural but deeply unwise, for wisdom seldom arises out of a sense of panic, just as improved learning cannot occur

when the primary energies of a learning community are diverted to amateurish cost-cutting. The surgery will likely be fatal, as the greatest college costs, human and material, are fixed. Fewer students may improve an abstract figure like endowment dollars per student, but shrinking also means fewer tuition dollars balancing fixed costs. And meanwhile morale suffers. The resultant loss of quality will lead to further decline and possibly even demise.

Smaller won't be better. Smaller will be worse, and then smaller won't be at all.

The real hope for private institutions with endowments well under the gazillions exists in the creativity of the community: increasing revenues and raising quality via new and renewed practices of the best traditions.

The other alternative, the status quo, is just as risky as downsizing and may even be riskier, because the status quo disguises itself as safe. But outside of the 1 percent of richest colleges and universities, the status quo has already proved disastrous. Or haven't you noticed the crisis in enrollments and faculty positions?

Still, growth is distrusted on many small campuses because, it is said, even mild growth of numbers or programs will disrupt and disfigure the particular character of a college. But that will only happen if that institution's identity is faint to begin with. I attended Wesleyan University, in Connecticut, as one of 1,200 male students. Four decades later, my daughter attended a Wesleyan of 2,800 students (both male and female). Yet it was strikingly clear to both of us that the Wesleyan we each attended was the same Wesleyan, permanently and delightfully levitated.

Now a column like this one usually proceeds at this point with a self-aggrandizing narrative of personal and institutional success that illustrates the general advice. Not this time, ruefully. When I was a university president, I knew the institution I was leading needed to grow but I gravely underestimated the tasks for making growth happen. I am hardly alone in having made that error; and the very number of institutions that have stumbled on the path of hope has added to the furor for focusing on cutbacks. That's because expenses are the one thing you can control, while revenue is always speculative.

Even so, getting smaller is small-minded, the wrong lesson to have learned. Cutting expenses will lead most often to a reduction of revenue, which will lead only to the next cut in expenses and loss of revenues and so on. The death throes, as the faculty watches its privileges as well as its number dwindle, will be still more painful than the actual death, which will come as something of a relief. My mistake was in not ensuring we had the programs to make growth natural and pleasurable, but I had the growth part right.

In fact, the real lessons are more complex and have chiefly to do with the revenue-creativity side. Instead of the spurious claim of spending less for more, we can make our campus village as intellectually and socially exciting as possible, and in the process we will indeed reduce some costs but we will reinvest the savings. The difference I propose is the distance between sour necessity and the joy of discovery.

To skip to the end, I promise that in my next few columns, if you consider the subjects that can lead to growth, excellence, and equality of opportunity, I will propose for you a means to grow that does not give away any part of that precious campus village to outside developers or cause the institution to take out a loan that will shatter its bank account.

But first, we need to discover a program for growth that doesn't make matters worse by planning for an increase that never happens. Details to follow, but here is a preview of measures I am going to propose that would take months, not years, to put in place.

We're going to flip the faculty. It doesn't help to tell 17-year-olds about all the great opportunities that await them four years up the pike. Instead, we're going to focus on particular student interests from the start rather than to say to them "we're nice, you're nice, join us." And we are going to choose a class by judging the distance a student has traveled rather than relying on standardized

tests that are, as President Obama has said, anything but standard.

We're going to be aware that the new B.A. is an M.A. and, more broadly, that the divide between liberal and professional education is a gaping wound that we can heal. We're going to move from dumb competition to smart collaboration; and on the beginning end of the college experience, that will include revolutionary collaborations with high schools. We're going to maximize creativity and timeliness by a shared-governance process that is not, as it so often is now, snared governance. And once the institution can pass a rigorous growth test, we're going to discover a means to improve our material campus that doesn't bankrupt our values or our endowments.

So who is this "we"? A hackneyed rhetorical hypocrisy at worst, but at best a reality. Because while the nature of an essayist is to assert, I know that I am going to get some things wrong and all things less right than a village of Chronicle readers can improve upon. I am hoping the comments will be the best part.

This ought to be fun. It's about time for some.

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Tough Times Push More Small Colleges to Join Forces

Neighboring colleges put
competition aside to save costs
and offer a richer range of courses

By SCOTT CARLSON

MAYBE it was providence that put two well-respected liberal-arts colleges together in a town of 20,000 people in rural Minnesota. Maybe it was luck.

Either way, it's an opportunity too good to pass up, say Steven G. Poskanzer and David R. Anderson, the presidents of Carleton College and St. Olaf College, respectively. Soon after Mr. Poskanzer arrived at Carleton in 2010, the presidents began talking about how these two colleges could work together more closely in areas like the library, the colleges' technology infrastructure, human resources and payroll, and, ultimately, their academic programs.

"We immediately started addressing the question of how you enhance the quality of what you do, while controlling the costs of what you do, in a world of constrained resources," Mr. Poskanzer says.

That question is one for the times. Carleton and St. Olaf's effort, supported with a new \$50,000 planning grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, fits with a growing chorus of people who say that fierce competition among colleges may not be best for the sector as a whole. Last month, for example, a paper published by the Center for American Progress suggested that institutions

could form leagues to help them meet common admissions goals.

Others say there could be more cooperation, with a greater emphasis on academics. Eugene Tobin, the program officer for the liberal-arts-colleges program at the Mellon foundation, says that collaborations among liberal-arts institutions, and even research universities, are "the future of higher education."

"Liberal-arts colleges in particular understand competition, and they compete for students, faculty, prestige, and visibility, but their organizational cultures tend to focus inward, and I think that needs to change," he says.

CLOSE, BUT NOT CLOSE ENOUGH

Historically, says Mr. Poskanzer, there have been barriers between Carleton and St. Olaf, aside from the Cannon River that runs between their campuses in little Northfield, Minn. St. Olaf has been more conservative, still connected to the Lutheran church, educating lots of top Minnesota students; Carleton is secular and has been more politically liberal, drawing students from across the country.

Even beyond their cultures, the two colleges face hurdles to collaborating. Academically, they



COURTNEY PERRY FOR THE CHRONICLE

Steven Poskanzer (left) and David Anderson both lead colleges in Northfield, Minn., a town of about 20,000. Their institutions, Carleton College and St. Olaf College, have embarked on an effort to share resources

are on different calendars—Carleton is on trimesters, while St. Olaf is on a 4-1-4 term calendar. And there are areas where the colleges still plan to compete: When this collaboration effort was just getting started, both colleges happened to be searching for directors of their career centers. But they decided not to merge those offices.

“There are going to be places where Carls and Oles are literally competing for the same job,” or the same slots in graduate schools, Mr. Poskanzer says. Merging the offices “felt a little too rife with conflict of interest.”

But in the future, each time one of the colleges has an opening, administrators say they may ask if it is something that the two institutions can do better together. The goal is to share strengths. “Neither of our institutions has entered this with the primary and specific goal of reducing the size of the work force,” Mr. Anderson says.

The academic side, however, will be one of the most difficult areas to mesh, both presidents acknowledge. Mr. Anderson is reluctant to name specific departments that might be candidates for collaboration, because faculty members in those departments would “regard themselves as peo-

ple with targets on their backs.” One area he does mention is education: Aspiring teachers have to take a long list of courses to become certified to teach in Minnesota public schools.

“Maybe our two institutions can do a better job together of offering a richer range of courses that can help students get certified,” he says. Once the colleges sort out their plans in areas like these, they will go back to the Mellon foundation with a pitch for a larger grant.

A HISTORY OF SHARING

Higher education has some famous collaborations—perhaps the best-known among them are the Claremont Colleges, where seven institutions, each with a different emphasis, occupy roughly a square mile in Claremont, Calif. The colleges share library services, some academic programs and student-activity programs, and various administrative functions, like mail services, maintenance, and human resources.

There are other well-known partnerships, like the Five Colleges of Massachusetts, comprising Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and Smith

Colleges, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, or the consortium that embraces Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore Colleges. And colleges of all kinds form consortia for purchasing essentials like paper products, technology, or health care. The Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities has helped its members save about \$50-million on supplies and services in the past five years.

But in academics and course offerings, colleges have traditionally been reluctant to work together for fear of diluting their particular academic identities. Amid financial pressures and popular skepticism about the value of liberal-arts education, however, some colleges have little choice.

“It takes a lot of thoughtfulness, patience, and time, because collaboration is incredibly hard work,” Mr. Tobin says. “It is structurally complicated, and it can be politically fractious. But when it works, faculty members have new colleagues who create a larger academic community, and students have access to a richer variety of courses.”

The Mellon foundation is talking to various colleges that are considering partnerships for academic programs—among them, some of Pennsylvania’s liberal-arts colleges. Presidents at Gettysburg, Juniata, Muhlenberg, Ursinus, and Washington & Jefferson Colleges are just starting a conversation about what their institutions might gain if they combine forces on specialized and underenrolled programs. (Savings collaborations in back-office functions, library services, and other programs are part of that conversation as well.)

A Washington & Jefferson student in, say, advanced Chinese could go to a special room in the library and get connected through a screen to students and an instructor at the other colleges. The individual colleges would save money, and the students would get a richer experience, says Tori Haring-Smith, president of Washington & Jefferson. She compares the idea to Sunoikisis, a collaborative classics program started by the Associated Colleges of the South in the mid-1990s for many of the same reasons.

“Even as we share, this will force us to sharpen our individual identities, to define what our individual campuses as residential colleges have to offer,” she says.

SEPARATE BUT EQUALS

That balance between collaboration and individual identity is one that the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, in north-central Minnesota, have grappled with for a long time.

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Academically, the two institutions are totally merged, and many administrative functions are combined—the two colleges have one provost, one vice president of enrollment and financial aid, one library director, a single Phi Beta Kappa chapter, and so on.

MaryAnn Baenninger, president of the College of Saint Benedict, says the two colleges save perhaps 50 percent of what they would have spent if they were maintaining totally separate administrations. More important, she says, they have been able to benefit from a larger and more diverse faculty roster than they would as two institutions.

But the colleges, only six miles apart, have maintained distinct cultures since they began hammering out collaboration agreements 50 years ago.

That may be made easier by the fact that they are gender-specific institutions—Saint John’s enrolls only men, while Saint Ben’s serves women. But it’s more than that, and maintaining that culture has to be attended to all the time, Ms. Baenninger says.

“Culture ultimately resides in the things that you don’t think it resides in,” she says. It’s in different kinds of meals that are served on each campus, or even things as small as whether the college uses paper towels or air dryers in the bathrooms, she says.

In a quest to be more efficient, Saint John’s and Saint Ben’s are now starting to “peck away at a lot of these nonacademic areas where a lot of the culture resides.” Ms. Baenninger says preserving the colleges’ cultures at the same time is one of the most interesting and difficult conundrums of her career.

Lately, she has advised half a dozen presidents who are considering collaborations. But it takes a courageous president and board of trustees to even entertain the possibility.

“When you contemplate a partnership conversation, you automatically contemplate a merger conversation, and that is the threat,” Ms. Baenninger says. “What merger generally means is that one institution loses its identity. There is a fear that the conversation is a slippery slope.”

But the alternative, in some cases, is also dire. More than one president contacted for this article mentioned the fate of Dana College, in Nebraska. Dana had been pushed by a major donor to work with—even to merge with—another small, struggling Lutheran college nearby. The colleges resisted, and Dana closed in 2010.

In these tough times, collaboration may preserve not just individual institutions but the diversity of higher education as a whole. Mr. Poskanzer recited an old Benjamin Franklin quip to make the point: “Either we all hang together, or we all hang separately.”

Staying Small and Getting Large

Liberal-arts colleges need
to embrace partnerships
with other entities in a big way

By ROBERT WEISBUCH

COLLEGES talk a lot about the ideal of a diverse community, but they tend to be narrow-minded about creating that community with other institutions. Like meets only with like, and even then the competitive juices flow.

I've been writing about the challenges facing liberal-arts colleges and urging them to be audacious, not risk-averse, from my new semi-remote of semi-retirement. In my first two columns, I've argued against downsizing at liberal-arts colleges, and offered a curricular proposal aimed at attracting new students. Liberal-arts colleges, I've contended, provide a set of academic practices and social outcomes so positive and so vital that we should be obsessed not with cutting but with sensibly growing their size and influence.

But there's another kind of smallness that we need to take arms against: the entrenched practice of colleges standing small, separate, and solitary. Eugene Tobin has a contrastingly large perspective as a senior program officer at the Andrew Mellon Foundation. In his key essay, "The Future of Liberal Arts Colleges Begins with Collaboration" (published in the 2013 edited volume, *Remaking College: Innovation and the Liberal-Arts College*), he quotes another big-perspective educator, Stanford University's Ray Bacchetti, on the effects of colleges' pride in their (supposedly) distinctive cultures: They imagine, Tobin writes, "all institutional problems are local and all the resources needed to solve them are, by definition, close at hand." He

further summarizes, "Little energy or thought is given to the experience of others ...; rarely do colleges and universities build on the work of their peers, and seldom do they engage in comparative study, except when they are benchmarking their progress against one another."

We educators have gotten set in some bad ways. What we require is an era of unprecedented collaboration, not only among small colleges themselves but also between those colleges and research universities, K-12 schools, community organizations, hospitals, businesses—in short, every possible connection. We need to both stay small and become large.

Of course there is an important value to the model of college campus as self-contained village, a place that encourages reflection and discovery. It is the analog to the notion of the thinker whose solitude and separateness is essential to insight. The ringing of the bells from the clock tower of a campus is a blessed sound of thought-filled silence. It's damned near holy. It really is. I miss it.

But does *every* such campus require its own gymnasium and research-science building and instruction in every abstruse but necessary discipline and language? Aside from the enormous and perhaps unsustainable costs as our campuses become gated communities, is it spiritually and educationally healthy for our students and their faculty members to insulate themselves quite so fully?

Probably the most heartening development in our understanding of the liberal arts at present is

the recognition that they are not entirely limited to reflection or self-understanding but have real power to move back and forth between the pastoral campus and the city of urgencies—that our learning can contribute to the world and not just critique it.

That is a most fragile and incomplete awakening to a more experiential education. We still find defense after defense of the humanities based on an idea of opposition between deep learning and worldliness, as if one can either contemplate the self or interact with one's surroundings but not both. Similarly we are coming to realize that it is vastly insufficient for us to make the claim, true as it is, that a liberal education prepares its graduate for everything. It should not be beneath us, it is in fact our responsibility, to provide some guidance on how an intellectual interest can issue in a career, for, as Dewey instructs, "to find out what one is fitted to do, and to secure an opportunity to do it, is the key to happiness."

We have allowed the half-truth of an opposition between learning and the world of practical affairs to be mirrored in our ideal of the stand-alone campus. Now we must complement that with the other half of the truth—the ways in which experience and learning depend upon each other—to reconceive our campuses as participants in a larger community.

HEREWITH, four possible kinds of new networks that will allow small colleges to stay small and become large simultaneously.

1. Among liberal-arts colleges. Small institutions need to move from small-minded competition to collaboration. An obvious model: The Five College Consortium of Amherst, Hampshire, UMass, Mount Holyoke, and Smith allows for cross-registration of students, shared curricula, greatly enhanced library resources, shared faculty appointments, and joint purchasing of materials and health insurance. As Carol Christ, president of Smith, notes in her essay about partnerships, "The College Without Walls," the sharing makes each institution small and large at once, greatly expanding elective possibilities without in any way threatening the very different identities of the campuses.

But what if colleges tied to each other by various regional associations or athletic conferences are not in such geographic proximity?

Sure, that makes collaboration more challenging, but the growing practice of cooperation among libraries provides a model for other areas, even for curriculum. Imagine a blended Internet set of offerings where the instructor would meet students on a regular schedule in a virtual classroom and then travel among the colleges to make three in-person appearances at each in a semester.

Should we oppose such efforts because it will make those scarce full-time faculty positions still more endangered? But they will become fewer still

if we allow the present models of ignorant autonomy to persist. We have been watching it happen for decades now. Expanding the student populations and reach of these colleges is our best hope for reversing that terrible trend. The real question is this: Once small colleges work to help each other, where else might they look for partners?

2. With research universities. This potential form of collaboration goes wanting today, for the most part. Tobin notes "even less formal interaction between liberal arts colleges and research universities, and this deeply engrained mutual disregard, bordering on denial, speaks volumes about the organizational limitations of our highly compartmentalized higher-education system."

While the number of five-year M.A. programs on the books is impressive, the weakness of such programs is depressing. They would be a prime place to start strengthening college-university partnerships.

It is simple to imagine the benefits to small colleges of more access to the research labs and expanded curricula of a university. Some may find it harder to imagine the benefits for the research university side of partnering with a small college. But note that one of the members of the Five Colleges Consortium is the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

There is also the example of Kalamazoo and Oberlin Colleges' sending faculty to the University of Michigan in exchange for those colleges' training graduate students and employing its Ph.D.'s for a year or two as undergraduate instructors. The weakest two aspects of most doctoral programs are their pedagogical training and their failure to offer Ph.D.'s a true diversity of career possibilities. Small colleges can offer exactly that valuable teaching experience and provide an example of faculty life at a teaching-oriented campus.

Further, the glut of Ph.D.'s in some disciplines makes a postdoc experience at a small college tremendously valuable. Offered a place in two comparable doctoral programs, what top candidate wouldn't choose the one that featured a valuable internship at a small college in partnership with the university?

3. Between academe and the outside world. Speaking of internships, a third kind of collaboration we need more of is with government, nonprofits, business, and public schools. Carol Christ emphasizes the possibility of connecting internships and classroom work more closely, "linking the academic, the practical, and the professional." Here, much more conversation is vital between faculty members and the people in both the development office and alumni relations. Alums enjoy nothing so much as mentoring current students and proffering a helping hand. Take it!

The connections don't have to just be curricular. There are also ties to the community and the region that can be developed, whereby a college

helps in confronting a local or regional problem facing a nonacademic entity. Rick Cherwitz's brilliant intellectual entrepreneurship program at the University of Texas can be adapted to small institutions as well. In addition, organizations like Imagining America provide examples of how disciplines in the humanities and arts can be just as efficacious in their own forms of tech transfer as the social and bench sciences. And speaking of the sciences, if we need to build that most expensive of all facilities, might a hospital or a health research company wish to join with our campus and help to finance construction costs?

4. With community colleges and high schools. To return closer to home, small colleges can easily create stronger links with two-year colleges, the fastest growing kind of institution, and high schools. Who knows better than a great high-school teacher how to teach first-year composition to students who were his or hers four months earlier? And why not renew the intellectual excitement of a high-school teacher with a work/study semester or summer spent at a liberal-arts college? As for facilities, sharing lab and gym resources would seem a no-brainer.

A small college can ensure a pipeline of students by partnering with a community college. Furthermore, community-college facilities can be amazing. When I was at Drew University, we talked a

lot about doing more with media studies, but the expense of creating facilities was daunting. Yet at nearby Morris County Community College, those facilities already existed and were impressive. Collaborating with two-year colleges is an enactment of the new liberal-arts dictum that merges the reflective and the actual.

These four types of partnerships constitute a huge challenge but are eminently doable. They will require a set of people at a college who devote themselves to imagining and then seeking out those connections; they won't get done in anyone's spare time. I invite readers to nominate other forms of partnership or provide different examples of each of these in the comments below.

More often than not, because true and lasting collaboration depends on mutual advantage, negotiations will prove fruitless. But that one time in 10 that a new connection is made could eventually become five in 50, or 10 in 100, and by then everything could become vastly different and better—for institutions and students alike.

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A College Puts Students to Work, for Their Future and Its Own

An urban, historically black college
in Dallas relies on student labor
to keep it running

By SCOTT CARLSON



THERE'S something romantic about the work college, harking back to the medieval monasteries that lit the way for Western higher education. At a work college, students learn not only in classrooms but also through jobs grand and lowly: tutoring peers, managing applications, mowing the grass, milking cows on the campus farm, cleaning toilets.

As colleges generally struggle to keep tuition increases down—in part because of all the offices they maintain and services they provide—the model seems attractive for purely financial reasons. Why hire support staff and outsource other work when you can get students to do it cheaply?

“There are so many schools that are asking about this right now,” says Robin Taffler, executive director of the Work Colleges Consortium, which represents Alice Lloyd, Berea, Blackburn, Ecclesia, Sterling, and Warren Wilson Colleges, and the College of the Ozarks. But the uninitiated soon discover, she says, that the logistics and finances of a work college are far more complicated than they might look.

This week Paul Quinn College, in Dallas, announced that it, too, would become a work college—making it the first urban and first historically black institution to do so.

And Michael J. Sorrell, who has spent the past eight years rescuing Paul Quinn from closure, seems to be guiding it into the transition with eyes wide open.

“I am under no illusion that we will save a million dollars toward the running of the school,” he says. A lawyer who consulted for businesses and sports teams before becoming president of Paul Quinn, Mr. Sorrell will earn a doctorate in higher-education administration from the University of Pennsylvania this spring. The focus of his dissertation: work colleges. For the past two years, Paul Quinn has experimented with the model with each new class.

Becoming a work college, Mr. Sorrell says, “allows us to give our students two types of education for the reasonable cost of one.” A liberal-arts foundation, learning to think critically, is crucial. But given the increasing focus on employability after college, so are practical skills and job training.

“The marketplace has consistently said that college graduates need more real-world work experience,” says Mr. Sorrell. (He got some, he adds, at his parents’ barbecue restaurant, on Chicago’s South Side.) At Paul Quinn, where 85 percent of students are eligible for Pell Grants, most need more opportunities to build their résumés.

UNUSUAL APPROACH

Compared with programs at the consortium’s seven federally recognized work colleges, all located in rural areas, Paul Quinn’s approach will be unusual, akin to co-ops at institutions like Drexel and Northeastern Universities.

Some of the 285 students at Paul Quinn will work on the campus—in the dormitories or cafeteria, on the grounds or the farm—as they would at other work colleges. (Even though Paul Quinn is in the heart of Dallas, it established a farm on the former fields of its discontinued football program, selling most of its produce to a company that works with the Dallas Cowboys.) But the college is also

courting local businesses as work settings.

“Being in an urban area, what you can say to students is, Want to be a doctor? Great. Your work assignment will be in a hospital, of which there are 15 locally,” Mr. Sorrell says.

Under his plan, businesses will get students’ labor for a sum that will go toward their tuition, plus stipends. A model for the program is one run by the Cristo Rey Net-

work, a group of 28 Roman Catholic high schools around the country that place urban, underserved youth in jobs for a fee that helps support the schools.

Aspects of Paul Quinn’s plan are still unclear. Conversations with local businesses are “ongoing,” Mr. Sorrell says, declining to share the number or type that have signed on. “We’re pretty pleased with the response we have received,” is all he says. As the college grows—he would like it to enroll 2,000 students someday—it will need to find more employers to support the program.

If becoming a work college pans out as Mr. Sorrell envisions, the cost of a Paul Quinn education will drop considerably. The college is already planning to cut its sticker price to \$14,275, from \$23,850, mainly by doing away with tuition discounting. The work program will knock off \$5,000, while Pell Grants, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, and state grants will cover an additional \$6,975 for many students.

“The marketplace has consistently said that college graduates need more real-world work experience.”

That leaves a tuition bill of \$2,300—or less than \$10,000 over four years.

AMATEUR PLUMBERS

It's that kind of math that has led many struggling private colleges in recent years to consider work programs. Leaders there may have a notion of a "Henry Ford model," says Steven L. Solnick, president of Warren Wilson College, who is on Mr. Sorrell's dissertation committee. "You pay the students, and they buy your product, and it is some kind of magic bullet. That is a misperception."

The reality is more complex. "Operating the college on a work model removes various degrees of freedom that you would have in normal operations of a college," Mr. Solnick explains. When a traditional college hits tough times financially, it can lay off staff members and maybe replace them with lower-paid student workers, or it can call off or postpone various projects. At a work college, students are already doing the work of staff members—that's the starting point—so the college can't eliminate jobs as easily, because students need them to fulfill the mission of the place.

Does a work college save money in operations? Probably, but administrators have a hard time calculating how much. Students who are doing, say, plumbing or carpentry are paid less than profes-

sionals, but it takes them longer to do the work, and they might make more mistakes or generate more waste than the pros would. They also need continuous training: The work-force cycles through every four years.

What's more, students' expectations and the campus environment have changed drastically from what they were 100 years ago, when Appalachian kids traded sweat equity for education at an earlier iteration of Warren Wilson. More colleges now compete on amenities, with students spending a lot of their nonclassroom time on recreation.

"It's difficult to reconcile that with a business model in which a lot of the services are provided by students," Mr. Solnick says. Traditional colleges these days focus on students' learning for a fraction of the week, "treating them as clients or guests or whatever for the rest of the time," he says. "That is an easier model."

The traditional model largely involves building facilities and keeping them running as cost-effectively as possible. At a work college, the jobs involve not just toil but, ideally, lessons in critical thinking, problem solving, or responsibility, which takes a lot of planning by the college. Work must not only get done, but get done meaningfully.

"Carpentry, plumbing, landscaping, or forestry are not the ends," Mr. Solnick says. "They're the means that we use to teach students the skills that we think will make them successful."

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Sweet Briar's Activists Turn to the Sober Work of Governing

Opponents of the college's closing play a role in guiding it forward

By JACK STRIPLING

IN the coming months, the new governing board of Sweet Briar College can expect a crash course in postrevolutionary affairs. On Thursday, July 2, a peaceful transfer of power is expected at the financially struggling women's college north of Lynchburg, Va. A phalanx of activists, who managed to help keep the college open with a shrewd mix of litigation and social-media organizing, will be installed as members of Sweet Briar's newly constituted Board of Directors.

In a wholesale leadership transition, the board will be purged of its previous members, who had decided in March to close Sweet Briar. James F. Jones Jr., the college's president, will also step aside, making way for the appointment of Phillip C. Stone, a former president of Bridgewater College, in Virginia.

Several of the new board members were affiliated with Saving Sweet Briar Inc., a nonprofit group that helped to stave off the college's closure with legal challenges and a broad-based fund-raising effort. The college's new directors must now trade the passionate work of protest for the more sober task of governing, and it is a transition they say they welcome.

"There were very smart, purposeful people involved in this from the beginning, thinking about how to run the college," said Teresa Pike Tomlinson, a Sweet Briar alumna who has been named to the board. "This is not a dog who has caught a car. These are people who know how to drive cars."

Ms. Tomlinson, who is mayor of Columbus, Ga., joins an eclectic mix of new directors, who include

a battle-tested college president, a Washington lobbyist, a financial consultant, the executive vice president of a conservationist organization, and a couple of professors, among others.

Under a legal agreement approved this week, the plaintiffs in three lawsuits challenging Sweet Briar's closure were authorized to nominate the new board members. The settlement allowed for a few of the existing directors to stay on, but they have since resigned their posts.

It was the previous board's opinion that Sweet Briar was on an unsustainable financial trajectory, and directors described the decision to close the college as heart-wrenching.

But critics of that decision, who will populate the reconstituted board, say their predecessors underestimated the college's resilience.

"This was a failure of faith," Ms. Tomlinson said. "They got locked into a decision-making process where they could not see any possibilities going forward."

Under the settlement agreement, Saving Sweet Briar is charged with moving \$12 million of pledged donations into college coffers over the next couple of months. The college will then be authorized by Virginia's attorney general to draw \$16 million from Sweet Briar's \$84-million endowment.

Formerly outside observers, Sweet Briar's new directors will soon have access to all of the college's internal financial information. It will be a truth test of their prevailing assumption, which has been that their predecessors relied on false projections about the college's potential and too easily surrendered as a result. But Ms. Tomlinson, a lawyer who specializes in corporate-corruption



CHRONICLE PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA SCHMALZ

Teresa Tomlinson, an incoming board member, speaks at Sweet Briar's commencement, in May 2015. The mayor of Columbus, Ga., and a lawyer who specializes in corporate-corruption cases, she has her eye on the next challenge: "We need people to go in and do the deep dive and make sure there aren't any more surprises."

cases, said, "We need people to go in and do the deep dive and make sure there aren't any more surprises."

IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES

News that Sweet Briar will open this fall has been met with jubilation, but the college's monthslong existential crisis sent the institution into disarray. Many professors and staff members, who were told they would lose their jobs, have found employment elsewhere. Students, who are more than ever the lifeblood of this tuition-dependent institution, have made other plans. Indeed, many of the very people upon whom the college would rely to rebuild have dispersed.

These are the sorts of challenges that Gen. Charles C. Krulak, an incoming board member, seems to relish.

General Krulak, a retired commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps and former member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, became president of Birmingham-Southern College in 2011. When he arrived, the college's bonds had been downgraded to junk status and its future seemed uncertain. But General Krulak, who will step down on June 30, is widely credited with turning things around.

When he read about Sweet Briar's struggles, General Krulak volunteered his consulting services to the Saving Sweet Briar group. The college's challenges, he told the group, were similar to those he had encountered at Birmingham-Southern, which also drew heavily on its endowment to offset enrollment declines. The difference, he said, was that Sweet Briar's debts were not as severe as Bir-

mingham-Southern's and its assets were greater.

"What really got me was the idea that a school that has the history of Sweet Briar ... would go down without even a fight at all," he said. "In looking at their situation I believed that they had the ability, if given the time, to turn it around."

As upbeat as the new board seems to be, there is no denying the challenges for Sweet Briar. The college is scrambling to persuade students to come back and bracing for a dive in enrollment.

"The real concern is the incoming class," General Krulak said. "If that's real, real small, which it's probably going to be, then you're going to have that going through the stomach of the snake for the next four years."

A more immediate concern, however, is the state of flux and uncertainty in which Sweet Briar now finds itself. The skeleton crew of remaining employees, who had been charged with winding down the college, now awaits orders from an administration that has yet to seize control. In the meantime, people say they feel in limbo.

"It's totally bizarre," said Georgene M. Vairo, a future board member and a law professor at Loyola Law School, Los Angeles. Absent a new president and board to provide direction, "nobody in the old administration thinks they are able to order a sandwich, but that's going to change."

From the beginning, those working with Saving Sweet Briar have tried to focus on what might happen "when we get the keys back," Ms. Vairo said. But getting the college up and running will take some improvisation, she said.

"This is a lot of flying by the seat of our pants," Ms. Vairo said. "But it's worked so far."

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Why Is It So Hard to Kill a College?

Neither trustees nor presidents want to be known as the ones who pulled the plug

By BETH MCMURTRIE

HUNDREDS of colleges in the United States live on the financial margins. Typically small and private, they struggle to pay bills, recruit students, and raise money. Yet few of them fail.

As Sweet Briar College's projected demise and unexpected revival illustrate, small colleges are a resilient bunch. There are about 1,600 private, nonprofit four-year colleges in the United States, but only a handful close each year. In 2012, the most recent year for which data are available from the National Center for Education Statistics, just two of those institutions shut down.

College leaders and their advisers say that a number of factors keep troubled institutions in business. For one, even broaching the idea of a college's demise is emotionally fraught. To students, professors, administrators, alumni, and trustees the meaning of their time on a campus depends, in many ways, on the college's continued existence. Students and alumni may have had life-altering experiences or developed important networks, while professors may have found a community of like-minded people with whom they could picture spending their careers.

As a result, colleges will often either delay hard choices or find creative ways to keep going, says David L. Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, which represents private, nonprofit institutions. "We're dealing here with a host of very compelling intellectual and emotional and professional forces."

Moreover, neither trustees nor presidents want to be known as the ones who pulled the plug. "The phrase 'not on my watch' probably sums it up," says Mr. Warren. He recalls his time as senior vice president at Antioch University in the early 1980s, when, because of financial difficulties, he was responsible for closing down most of the college's off-

site, degree-granting learning centers. "I became known at the Grim Reaper," he recalls.

That desire to avoid turning out the lights sometimes results in fatal choices, as leaders put off maintenance or convince themselves they can spend their way toward increased enrollments. "If you have a college really committed to staying alive and you don't get yourself in desperate debt, that is one of the keys," says Mary-Linda Merriam Armacost, a past president of Wilson College, a Pennsylvania institution that nearly closed in 1979.

THE ADAPTABLE SURVIVE

If avoiding major debt is the first criterion for survival, being adaptable is the second, says Ms. Armacost and others. "Small colleges are certainly pretty nimble and pretty entrepreneurial, and if they get an idea they can ramp up pretty quickly," says Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges, which represents about 700 small and midsize liberal-arts colleges.

One form of entrepreneurship, he says, is to add programs that bring in revenue. Mary Baldwin College, like Sweet Briar a women's institution in Virginia, opened a College of Health Sciences last year. Utica College, in New York, started nursing programs, including one in Florida. "You get cross subsidies in all of this," says Mr. Ekman.

Mr. Warren calls the various factors in a college's survival strategy the five M's: mission, market, money, model, and the media. Many struggling colleges find a larger purpose in their work because of their mission, whether it's reaching disadvantaged students in urban areas or in the hills of Appalachia. They're willing to run bare-bones operations because they believe strongly in the value of their work.

Smart colleges also continually evaluate their

markets in order to find new money, Mr. Warren says. Are there underserved adult students in their area? Should they start recruiting in China? They may change their business model by going coed or adding profitable programs, like business degrees. Finally, if they can find ways to better spread the word, they can draw in new students.

“Probably about 20 percent of our clients were institutions that were struggling mightily and realized that if they didn’t do something significant, they were destined to close,” says John Stevens, president of Stevens Strategy, a higher-education consulting firm. The ones that change in alignment with their values, he says, are the ones that succeed.

Sometimes the proposed solutions are more wishful than practical. “People tend to think, ‘We haven’t found the money, but it’s there,’” says Mr. Warren. But maybe there really are no strong or lasting new markets to explore, or if there are, they don’t fit the college’s mission.

As he watched the intensity of faculty and alumni opposition to Sweet Briar’s closing, Mr. Warren says he wondered if they felt that the leadership had not done all it could to explore those different strategies. “None of these questions,” he says, “should go unanswered if raised.”

Ms. Armacost, an adjunct professor at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education, says that for colleges like Wilson and Sweet Briar, new money, committed alumni and other volunteers, and a change in administration also seemed critical to survival. “Some colleges don’t have that kind of bench strength.”

She notes that two other colleges announced this month that they were closing: Marian Court College, a Roman Catholic institution in Massachusetts, and Clearwater Christian College, in Florida. Both institutions have wrestled with debt, declining enrollment, and limited endowments and donor support.

TROUBLED PUBLICS RARELY DIE

Struggling public institutions have their own set of issues. Joni E. Finney says politics, bureaucracy, and tuition increases are three top reasons why so many of them remain open. Ms. Finney, an expert on the public finance of higher education and director of Penn’s Institute for Research on Higher Education, says state higher-education systems rarely kill their struggling campuses. No matter how feeble the outpost, she says, “it’s always been someone’s legislative district.”

There also are no incentives for administrators

to close a campus, since there’s no guarantee the cost savings would be pumped back into the system. In public institutions, she notes, the market is largely shaped by a set of public policies rather than by student demand or price.

Public institutions that operate as part of a larger system also engage in a game of one-upmanship, in which administrators, faculty members, and local politicians push for more money, more programs, and more degrees rather than ask tough questions about how best to serve the community. “Within a system framework, everyone needs to be the top institution,” she says. As a result, it’s rare for a system to voluntarily scale back or close campuses (Georgia has consolidated some of its institutions in recent years).

Finally, even when state support for higher education has dwindled, administrators have often avoided hard choices by raising tuition. “It’s probably insulated them from changes they need to make in programming, students, and mission,” says Ms. Finney.

Small colleges may be adaptable, but Mr. Ekman says it’s a continual challenge to meet the changing needs of their markets. Many flocked to online education early on, he notes, only to saturate the market. The same happened to colleges that saw pharmacy schools as their lifeline. Health sciences now seems a good bet, but that too could change. “It’s a matter of identifying the right niche and moving quickly to fill it,” he says.

And as nimble as many colleges are, some higher-education administrators and consultants say that it may become easier to kill the weakest among them.

“The forces that kept a college going are changing,” says Kent John Chabotar, president emeritus of Guilford College, in North Carolina, and an expert on college finance. The numbers of Americans who are of traditional college age has declined. The recession has drained many families’ savings accounts, leaving them with less money to pay for their younger children to go to college. And fewer tax dollars are going into higher education.

“I think you’re going to see an acceleration [in closures], particularly in schools that are 1,000 students and under, in a rural location, without a larger endowment, and without a market niche,” says Mr. Chabotar.

Mr. Stevens, the consultant, agrees that it’s a particularly difficult time for small, independent colleges. Still, he says, “every decade there’s a new doomsday view of the future of higher education.” “And somehow,” he adds, “it survives.”

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The Small-College Survival Guide: Sweet Briar Edition

Institutions in tough circumstances have found lifelines to keep themselves open

By IAN WILHELM

AS SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE scrambles to reopen, at least for another academic year, its leaders are probably looking closely at what has worked for other small colleges to increase enrollment and reduce financial pressures. As a rural liberal-arts college that enrolls only female students, Sweet Briar faces a variety of challenges, but other institutions in tough circumstances have found lifelines to keep themselves open. Here are a few ideas Sweet Briar might try:

Focus more on career preparation. Randolph-Macon College, in Virginia, recently developed what it calls “The Edge” to focus on student outcomes. As part of that effort, the college started a boot-camp weekend in which sophomores retreat to a nearby hotel to polish their personal narratives and get advice from alumni.

Start graduate and online programs. Several small liberal-arts colleges have sought to build nontraditional programs. For example, Caldwell University, in New Jersey, has started to offer online courses and programs for veterans and active members of the military, while Becker College, in Massachusetts, started its first master’s course, in mental-health-counseling, this year.

Overhaul the curriculum. In 2011, Centenary College of Louisiana slashed the number of majors it offered, from 44 to 22, while Agnes Scott College, in Atlanta, has shifted its curriculum to focus on leadership.

Find new revenue sources. Antioch College has been through a Sweet Briar-like experience before — it was shuttered in 2008, and alumni brought the college back to life. Since its reopening, the small college, in Yellow Springs, Ohio, has worked hard to find creative ways to generate funds. For example, it is considering opening a

residential community on its campus for families and retirees.

Find a partner. Such deals can be tricky to pull off, but more colleges in recent years have formed partnerships to share resources and save money, or have merged completely.

Go coed. In 2013, Wilson College, in Pennsylvania, opted

to allow men into its undergraduate program. The move outraged some Wilson alumnae, but administrators said it was an important move to counter enrollment problems. Wilson, like Sweet Briar, has seen its board decide to close — 36 years ago, in 1979 — but remained open after a legal victory led by students and faculty members.



CHRONICLE PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA SCHMALZ

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Once a Champion of Small Colleges, Now a Tough Critic

By LAWRENCE BIEMILLER



D.L. ANDERSON FOR THE CHRONICLE

Alice Brown has been a longtime supporter of small colleges, but is not shy about offering a tough-love message on whether they can survive.

IN a dusty corridor in Virginia Intermont College's Main Hall, Alice L. Brown has stopped in front of the Poetry Club's bulletin board, where poems by seven students appear beside their photos and profiles. "All these little schools give students so many opportunities," Ms. Brown says after a few moments. "There are a lot of kids whose lives aren't going to be as rich as they could be without the liberal arts."

Through the next door is an empty hallway

strewn with dry leaves, and past that the main dining room, where stacks of plates await bargain hunters.

Virginia Intermont closed in May 2014, after a long struggle with declining enrollment and deteriorating finances. Bill Best, who as facilities manager is one of a handful of remaining employees, says things got so bad at one point that "we were submitting purchase orders to the president for \$10," and he was paying for toilet valves and caulk

out of his own pocket.

"It's a mess out there for these little schools," says Ms. Brown, a former president of the Appalachian College Association who spent much of her career raising millions for small mountain institutions that she says were doing "wonderful things."

But she suggested meeting here at Virginia Intermont to make a point that a number of people undoubtedly would prefer not to hear from someone with a résumé like hers: "A lot of struggling colleges should give up the fight to stay alive."

Many small liberal-arts institutions, she says, are "hanging on by a thread" and have been reluctant to risk making changes even as enrollment and revenue decline. For some, she says, it's already too late.

"Somebody will say, If you don't do X, Y, and Z, in five years you're going to be closing. The problem is, they needed to do that 25 years ago."

She's the first to argue that many students — particularly students from isolated regions in Appalachia — do better if they attend colleges that aren't too far from home and that can give them a lot of personal attention. But, she says, "we don't need three colleges with 600 students apiece within a 30-mile radius, where the only difference is their denomination."

Virginia Intermont, she notes, is two miles across town from King University, another small institution, and within an hour of three other liberal-arts colleges — Emory & Henry, Milligan, and Tusculum. East Tennessee State University is 45 minutes away.

"I watched this college die a long and slow and agonizing death for years," Ms. Brown says of Virginia Intermont, which closed after an extended struggle to keep its accreditation and a last-minute attempt to merge with a small Florida college. Arthur J. Rebrovick Jr., whom Virginia Intermont's trustees hired to close down the college and sell the campus, says Virginia Intermont owes creditors and former employees between \$10 million and \$20 million, and has "lawsuits stacked up to here." The campus has two possible buyers, and he's keeping his fingers crossed.

As you might guess, Ms. Brown's warnings are not the kind that many small-college presidents are eager to be talking about with donors or reporters. But William G. Bowen, a former Princeton University president who worked with her while he led the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, says he is "a huge fan of Alice" and that she is "doing very valuable work" by taking on an unpopular but important subject. "She is by no means always in favor of closing colleges in trouble — she's very balanced in all this."

NOT LOVED BY SWEET BRIAR

What may most anger some small-college sup-

porters, though, is that after Sweet Briar College's board voted a year ago to close — a decision that alumnae eventually overturned — Ms. Brown was among those who suggested publicly that the board had made a responsible choice.

"No college closing is celebrated with joy by those who love it, regardless of the circumstances under which it closes," she has written since, in a book-length study of the roots of the Sweet Briar drama that is being considered by the Johns Hopkins University Press. "But it does seem more honorable to close with resources still in hand so that obligations to employees and students can be met, creditors can be paid, and at least part of the mission of the college might be preserved."

The Spencer Foundation, which supports education research, commissioned the study before the board's decision was reversed — but not before it had provoked plenty of charges, countercharges, and bitterness.

"One could (and many did) argue that Sweet Briar was in good financial shape for a small, rural college," she writes in the study. However, she says, "there was no answer to the question, 'What would it take to make Sweet Briar so attractive that future students would choose it instead of any of the hundreds of other choices open to them?'" Building new dorms and recreational facilities had not accomplished that goal; adding degrees in business and engineering had not accomplished that goal."

She says Sweet Briar's directors "had considered where the college seemed to be heading, not just where it was standing." But she also says the alumnae who led the fight to keep Sweet Briar open "deserve a lot of credit," not only for their donations but also for their dedication.

Her arguments apply far beyond Sweet Briar. "The biggest thing is, boards don't pay attention," Ms. Brown says over dinner that evening in Abingdon, Va. "They don't want to hear bad news." And too many presidents, she says, think that "if they hunker down long enough, things will go back to the way they were." Meanwhile, the hotel she's staying in, the Martha Washington Inn, was once a women's college named for the same person. It closed in 1932.

Ms. Brown seems an unlikely turncoat, a voluble and energetic storyteller with a long memory, a penchant for research, and a hint of stubbornness. She "grew up in Troutman, N.C., saying 'crick,'" as she likes to say. Her father stayed in school only as far as the third grade, and her mother as far as the sixth, but "from the time I was born my parents knew I was going to Appalachian State Teachers College" — now Appalachian State University.

She held several teaching jobs before enrolling in a graduate program at the University of Kentucky. In 1984 she went to work for a two-year-old program at the university that channeled money from the Mellon foundation to small-college facul-

ty members so they could do research or work on advanced degrees.

Out of that grew the Appalachian College Association, which became a stand-alone organization in 1993 with Ms. Brown as its president. She was “remarkable, a force of nature,” says Jennifer L. Braaten, president of Ferrum College, in southern Virginia. “She knew us and she knew us well.”

A FAILURE TO COLLABORATE

Over Ms. Brown’s years at the association — she retired in 2008 — she calculates that she raised about \$50 million. Initially she worked mostly with faculty members and deans, but eventually Mellon and others began suggesting that the colleges cooperate more closely, she says. Faculty members, librarians, and technology administrators did collaborate fairly well, Ms. Brown says, but presidents were “real resistant.”

She cites an experiment in which three institutions shared a central personnel office but gave it up when a three-year Mellon grant ran out. She recalls “a dinner for four or five presidents where I said, There’s \$40,000 in the middle of this table. If you guys can figure out one thing to do with it collaboratively, you can take it home with you.” No luck there either.

“My great frustration at ACA was that colleges wouldn’t collaborate,” she says. “I worked at that organization for 25 years, and for 20 years I thought it was the best thing since sliced bread. I drove myself crazy those last few years trying to get those colleges to work together. I thought, These colleges are gonna die if they don’t.”

Since she retired, she’s been working as a consultant and writing articles and books with titles that could give college presidents nightmares: *Changing Course: Reinventing Colleges, Avoiding Closure* (which she wrote with Sandra L. Ballard and published in 2011), *Cautionary Tales: Strategy Lessons for Struggling Colleges* (2012), and *Staying the Course: How Unflinching Dedication and Persistence Have Built a Successful Private College in a Region of Isolation and Poverty* (2013).

She keeps in touch with a range of people, although she knows some presidents would just as

soon not see her on their campuses, fearing that she might prophesy end times.

Not so Jake B. Schrum, president of Emory & Henry since 2013, who welcomes her the next morning and describes what the 1,100-student college is doing to remain healthy and avoid becoming the subject of Ms. Brown’s next dismal report. Faculty members and administrators are taking a close look at how big the college should be, for one thing, because Mr. Schrum is “trying to be realistic,” rather than promising that the college can grow its way to a stronger bottom line. At the same time, an undergraduate program called Project Ampersand — “Explore your passions and connect them to the common good” — gives admissions officers a way to frame the college’s liberal-arts offerings in a way that is distinctive and, with luck, compelling.

Mr. Schrum tells Ms. Brown that Emory & Henry ended up with 20 Virginia Intermont students after that institution closed, and also took over its well-regarded equestrian program. “We looked at acquiring Virginia Intermont,” he says. “If we’d been stronger, we might have. We would take down the nonhistoric buildings and create a Ph.D. program in innovation and creativity that would combine the liberal arts and business.”

But the numbers didn’t add up. Instead, Emory & Henry is renovating an empty hospital in nearby Marion, Va., to house a three-year doctor of physical therapy program and a two-year occupational therapy program. There will be no tuition discounting, says Mr. Schrum, who calls the new programs “our ace in the hole.” Beyond that, the college is looking at ways it could profit from land it owns on both sides of busy Interstate 81.

Afterward, Ms. Brown says, “I can remember going out to campuses, the poorest ones, and thinking, If I had money I’d give it here, because it could really make a difference.” And even though she refers to herself now as a “pessimistic curmudgeon,” she starts making a list of little colleges she’d suggest visiting — Brevard, Mars Hill University, Carson-Newman University, Centre, Alice Lloyd.

“You haven’t been to Appalachia till you’ve been to Alice Lloyd,” she says with no trace at all of pessimism. It’s half an hour from anyplace, she warns, but “it’s the epitome of a school that does what those kids need.”

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LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER

St. Catharine College of Kentucky, in better times. The Roman Catholic institution is the latest in a string of small colleges to shut down amid financial problems.

3 Small Colleges Close. Is That a Trend?

By LAWRENCE BIEMILLER

It's been a rocky spring for a few small liberal-arts colleges. Dowling College, which has two campuses on Long Island, and St. Catharine College, in Kentucky, both said this week that they would close — and their announcements came just two weeks after Burlington College, in Vermont, said it was shutting down.

Trustees at all three institutions waited until after graduation to make their decisions, which explains why the announcements came so close together. But their proximity served as a rude reminder that among many of the nation's smallest private colleges, “none of us is very far from the wolf's door,” as G.T. (Buck) Smith, president of Davis & Elkins College, said on Wednesday.

Even so, Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges, said nothing he's heard suggests that the three closures represent

anything like the beginning of a trend.

“While it's true that the financial pressures on many small colleges are increasing,” he said, “I doubt that we will see more than the usual small number of closings each year.” A recent count by the council, he added, showed that an average of two or three small colleges had closed every year for the past three decades.

“The challenges are still what they have been — student numbers, competition, and discount pressures,” said Robert R. Lindgren, president of Randolph-Macon College. “I haven't heard anything different in that respect recently.”

In some ways, the three closings reflect issues common to many small — and not-so-small — institutions. But in other ways, each of the situations is unusual:

- Burlington College, which dates to the ear-

ly 1970s and has counterculture roots, borrowed in 2010 to buy a piece of property from the local archdiocese, and ended up with “crushing” debt. It had fewer than 200 students.

■ Dowling College, which split off from Adelphi University in 1968, ran through seven presidents in the past dozen years and was said to have \$54 million in debt. Undergraduate enrollment had dropped to about 1,700, and one of its two campuses was partially shuttered.

■ St. Catharine College, which had been a two-year college until 2003, racked up debt for residence halls, a health-science facility, and a library — and then got put on the Education Department’s “heightened cash management” list after a review of its finances turned up “severe findings.” The college, which had about 600 students this year, predicted it would enroll only 475 in the fall.

Debt is the common theme among the three. Mr. Ekman and others noted that lenders that might once have given colleges a fair amount of flexibility with repayments have become much less forgiving lately.

“That’s 100 percent Dodd-Frank,” said Barbara K. Mistick, president of Wilson College, naming the 2010 law that placed new controls on a variety of financial services. “If you talk to bankers, they’re under increased regulation too. Small banks tell me they have regulators that practically have their own desks.”

‘THEY RAN OUT OF RUNWAY’

Elizabeth Kiss, president of Agnes Scott College, said that when small colleges run into problems, “in many cases, it’s just bad luck.” Colleges that took on debt just before the 2008 crash, for instance, could end up in much worse shape because of it than those that borrowed 10 years earlier.

“Probably their strategy was, If we build it, they will come,” said Ms. Kiss of borrowing by the three institutions. “And maybe if they’d had a longer runway, it would’ve worked. But they ran out of runway.”

But Ms. Kiss and Ms. Mistick both said that colleges need to be “proactively dealing with their fiscal stress.” At meetings of the Council of Independent Colleges, Ms. Mistick said, “the sessions on fiscal issues are better attended than ever before — that’s a data point.” Ms. Kiss (whose name is pronounced “quiche”) said that “since the ’08 crash, a lot of presidents who weren’t necessarily sweating the finances on a regular basis had to start doing it.”

All three colleges that are closing had also tried to arrange mergers with other institutions, but

with no success. Alice L. Brown, a former president of the Appalachian College Association who has written about college closures, said on Wednesday that while mergers make sense in some cases, “you can’t wait until the last minute to find a partner, and you have to have something the partner wants.”

She noted that North Central College, in Naperville, Ill., announced last month that it planned to acquire Shimer College, which has a prestigious great-books curriculum but has fewer than 150 students in space leased from the Illinois Institute of Technology, in Chicago. If the deal goes through, according to a news release, “North Central would create a ‘Shimer Great Books School’ within North Central’s academic structure.”

Ms. Brown is less optimistic than Mr. Ekman, however, about the future of small colleges that don’t have deep pockets. “These little schools don’t have any money to experiment by offering new options or programs,” she said. “And by the time they get on the train, it’s too late” — other colleges have beaten them to whatever the punch is.

“What I see is that a lot of people still have their heads in the sand,” Ms. Brown said of some small-college leaders. “They’re in a state of denial, thinking that God’s going to bless them and some donor’s going to come along with \$50 million and it’ll be just like what it was once upon a time.”

The three colleges also had declining enrollments. At a time when even the strongest colleges compete hard for students, a college that has any kind of stain on its reputation, like a bad report from the Education Department, can find students headed elsewhere.

But small colleges also attract many of their students from middle-class families whose incomes have been largely stagnant for nearly a decade, Ms. Mistick noted. And as flagship state universities have lured elite students with honors colleges and similar programs, small liberal-arts colleges have found themselves enrolling more lower-income students and students eligible for Pell Grants.

“We serve a marketplace that is feeling some stress,” she said. But she added: “I would be on the optimistic side. Even in a down market there’s opportunity, and I do think that people get creative in challenging times.” Some colleges, she said, “are doing really interesting things.”

Ms. Kiss noted that four women’s colleges — colleges that many would say have niche appeal at best — “had their largest first-year classes ever last year.” The four were her own institution and Salem, Scripps, and Simmons Colleges.

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MICHAEL MORGENSTERN FOR THE CHRONICLE

The Real Reason Small Colleges Fail

By WILL WOOTTON

THE NEWS that little Burlington College in Vermont was shutting down after more than 40 years is, I'm sure, without meaning or interest to virtually all collegebound students. That's understandable, I guess. But as a nation and as a higher-education industry, our alternatives to large-scale higher education have just been reduced by a meaningful iota that should cause another slight tremble through the troposphere of academe.

I take Burlington College's demise personally because I spent 25 years of my working life at two Vermont colleges that any number of times could have preceded Burlington, which closed its doors for good on May 27, into the grave.

I labored in the administrative trenches of Marlboro College for 19 years, from 1983 to 2002, in the middle of which Marlboro was down to 165 students and two paydays in the bank. After that, and after a two-year stint at an even more improbably diminutive institution, Montserrat College

of Art, in Beverly, Mass., I became president of Sterling College, the smallest of all, in far northern Vermont, where I served from 2006 to 2012, through a recession that could have tipped the place over, irretrievably, at any moment.

Even now, I feel the stress of those years return whenever a small college succumbs, and I'm reminded how close it was for me and my institutions. What we had to do, and not do, to survive long enough to build strength, on top of sheer resiliency. So I want answers: How did this happen? Who was not paying attention? Who did not understand the fragility of the institution and the weight of their responsibility?

In many people's minds, the demise of Burlington College, like a number of other small institutions recently shuttered or nearly so, reinforces the idea that such institutions are inherently frail, that their size renders them unsustainable. Conflating that stereotype with assumptions about academic quality, curricula, student success, and institution-

al history leads to a conclusion that small colleges are suspect — they must be because they fail.

Of the 1,600 private nonprofit colleges and universities in the United States, almost 30 percent have enrollments of under 1,000 students. And though closings have amounted to less than one percent of private colleges, according to David Warren, president of the National Association of Independent College and Universities, a Moody's Investors Services report last fall indicated that the pace appears to be increasing. As we know, when one of the more recognizable small institutions is threatened with closure — Sweet Briar, Mills, Antioch — and brought back from the brink, at least temporarily, there follows a flurry of new stories about small colleges and the economic peril they face.

But I can tell you from experience that if it were small size alone, if the diseconomy of scale were that overwhelming, then all these places would have expired years ago and only the behemoths of our industry, the land-grant universities, the flagship campuses, and the elite private colleges, would still exist.

In reality, the pressures on small colleges are broadly identical to those on large colleges. However, the tolerance for institutional error and institutional crisis is exponentially minuscule at the small, the tuition-driven, the experimental, the curricularly focused, and the relatively new.

I'm not privy to the details of Burlington's slide to oblivion, but responsibility must lie, as at all colleges, with the board of trustees.

This is where the mistakes are made, years before the actual shutting of the doors, because small colleges don't die in a moment. They linger, struggle. Presidents are let go. Others are hired. New trustees are hard to come by. Boards, weakened by years of tension and diminishing resources, find their members beginning to perform administrative tasks to help out. By the end, leadership is reduced to the intricacies of closure.

And all this happens at a time when a board's expertise, history, and experience is most critically called for, if it exists. So the problem, compounded at smaller institutions where the margins for error are tiny, is not so much lack of money, which often seems to happen all of a sudden, but a long-term lack of professionalism, independence, and leadership at the board level.

When chaos strikes larger institutions, their sheer bulk and institutional depth helps overcome or simply absorb issues. For the smaller places, the effect can be show-stopping.

Luckily, most of the time crises do not result in closure. Instead, institutional change for the better happens. Steps are taken. Programs developed. New support is found. That's how small colleges

emerge from their adolescence, after 50 or 60 years of struggle, into something approaching, in another 50 years, maturity.

The fact that Bernie Sanders's wife, Jane, was president of Burlington when it purchased what amounted to an entirely new campus in 2010 has fueled this story. But small colleges frequently take big chances to significantly alter their way forward, to leap out of the holes they think they are in, often using a springboard of big plans and real estate and money they do not have. Sometimes it works. I've tried it myself, but have also been held back from excessive risk by more than one board. (In Jane Sanders's case, she left the college in 2011, soon after the property deal was agreed upon.)

Small colleges worry as much about their missions as their incomes. We have students to serve. Budgets to stretch like Silly Putty. Communities to engage. Regulatory agencies to appease. Making money, however vital and practical, is just one of a number of equally critical concerns ... until, of course, it becomes the only critical concern.

And that's what you read about, the short history of an institution weakened by poor leadership and felled by fiscal blunder, instead of the awful warping and final disappearance of a mission, a curriculum, the disillusionment of generations of alumni, and the bitter disappointment of a community at the lost potential everyone believed in, suddenly dissipated, not to return.

The dust from the exodus out of Burlington College had not yet settled when Dowling College, on Long Island, announced its closing, followed by St. Catharine College, in Kentucky. Within months we'll no doubt learn of another small college under scrutiny and in distress, and the story and lessons of Burlington College will slip from public notice, except locally, where we will be pondering things a good while longer. After all, 13 of the now 16 independent colleges in Vermont have undergraduate populations of between 125 and 700 students.

And what about that slight tremor through the troposphere of higher education?

Gone, by now. Or soon.

The industrialization of undergraduate learning isn't necessarily a bad thing. But the power of American higher education has always been in its energy, its unique — even wild — diversity, and its almost biological integration with its town, city, or region. When a small college dies, all that is brought into question — and higher education is diminished, iota by iota.

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