

Liberal arts colleges face host of challenges

By William C. Kashatus

For the last 13 months, my son Peter has been engaged in an exciting but emotionally draining odyssey — the college search process. His journey took him to 12 colleges in six states. All but two were small liberal arts institutions.

Despite his early protestations, I monitored his progress and intervened when I felt it was necessary. Not that I subscribe to the “father knows best” theory, but I have a little experience with small liberal arts colleges.

Not only am I a product of one, but at various times in my career, I served as an admissions volunteer, Division III recruiter, and adviser to student-athletes in Philadelphia’s independent schools. That’s also why I was both pleasantly surprised and profoundly disappointed in some of the changes I observed during my son’s search.

The increasing economic pressures and demands of higher education have significantly altered the missions of small liberal arts colleges over the last few decades.

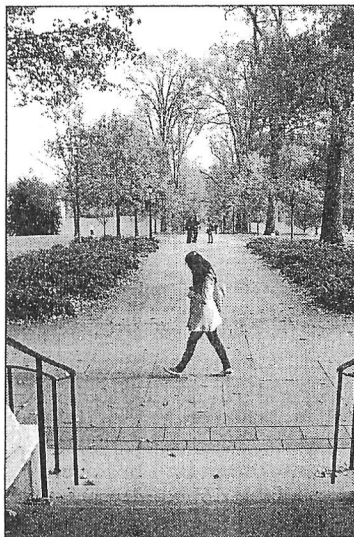
Once, those colleges were distinguished by interdisciplinary learning and the “great books” curriculum — great works of the

past in literature, philosophy, history, and science — as well as an emphasis on the critical reading, writing, and thinking skills required for an educated labor force and constructive citizenship. If it was founded by a religious group, as many small colleges were in the mid- to late 19th century, the education and culture of a college was also strongly influenced by the principles and beliefs of the denomination.

However, escalating costs and stiffer competition with state and private universities, with more course offerings and employment-ready programs, have forced small liberal arts institutions to redefine themselves and the way they do business. And make no mistake: Small colleges, like state and private universities, have become businesses.

Here are some of the lessons — both good and bad — I’ve learned over the last year:

- Many select small colleges are offering considerable financial aid to incoming freshmen as a way to offset student-loan debt. Financial aid comes in many different forms, including need-based aid, grants, and academic and athletic scholarships. It can amount to significant savings at selective small



On Magill Walk at Swarthmore College. CHARLES FOX / Staff

colleges that charge \$60,000 per year in tuition, books, room, and board. That figure represents a 126 percent increase in annual cost since 1983, according to a recent joint report by the U.S. Education and Treasury Departments.

While that financial aid is good news for students and their families at a time when the United States has amassed \$1 trillion in student-loan debt, it does not bode well for the colleges that will see a decrease in marginal

revenue return per pupil.

- Many small colleges offer students research opportunities, internships, employment-ready programs like computing, and even career counselors who assist in developing courses of study that will lead to a job after graduation.

This is a direct response to struggling middle-class families that demand a return on their investment, as well as a marketable skill for their children after graduation. Some of these parents are products of a liberal arts education, and they once placed a priority on intellectual curiosity. Now, when the cost of a college education is so staggering, they view academic exploration as a waste of time and money.

The danger in catering to employment-preparedness is too much reliance on the community college model of vocational training, which employs adjuncts rather than full-time and tenured faculty who have more contact and closer relationships with the students. It also diminishes the quality of education and social life at the college by limiting a student’s ability to explore other possibilities in and beyond the curriculum.

- Small colleges have more impressive facilities than ever.

Smart classrooms, high-tech labs, plush dormitories — many with single rooms — and athletic facilities that are comparable to some Division I programs are now common. But at what price?

Private colleges have been forced to borrow billions to finance capital-improvement projects, with annual spending on interest payments per enrolled student jumping 161 percent since 2002, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In addition, if interest rates rise as the Federal Reserve’s bond-buying spree comes to an end, small colleges with limited endowments could face bankruptcy, according to Eduventures, a Boston-based higher-education consultant.

There is no question that my son will choose a small liberal arts institution. Both of us believe that such a broad-based education does more than prepare students for a job; it lays the foundation for a future career while also preparing them to compete in the marketplace of ideas.

I can only hope that Peter’s son or daughter will enjoy the same opportunity.

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