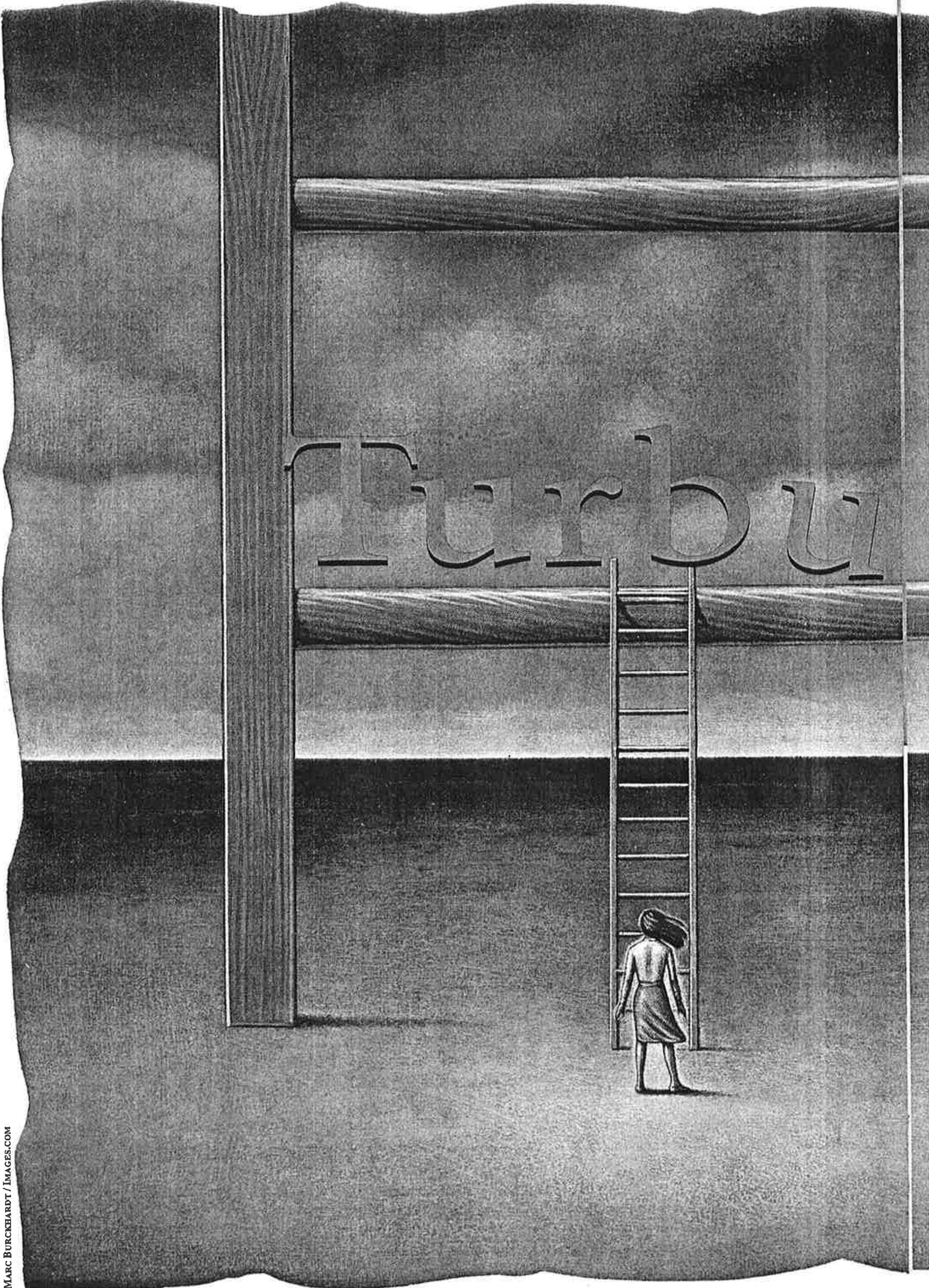

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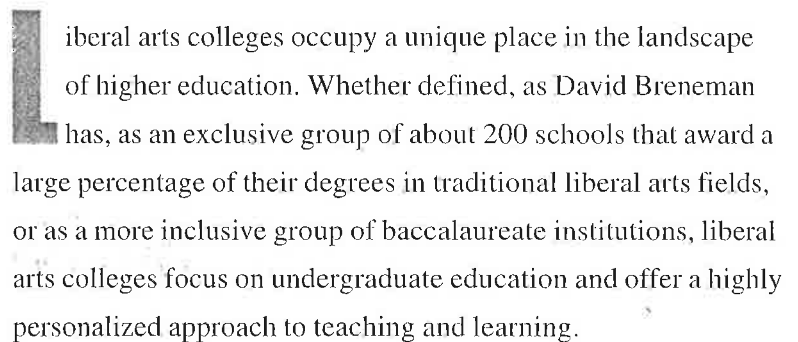

Liberal arts colleges occupy a unique place in the landscape of higher education. Whether defined, as David Breneman has, as an exclusive group of about 200 schools that award a large percentage of their degrees in traditional liberal arts fields, or as a more inclusive group of baccalaureate institutions, liberal arts colleges focus on undergraduate education and offer a highly personalized approach to teaching and learning.

Their classes are an ideal forum for developing students' analytic, writing, speaking, and critical thinking skills. More than any other type of school, liberal arts colleges provide their students with opportunities to engage in independent study and collaborative research with faculty. These institutions seek nothing less than to prepare students for extraordinary lives that will make significant contributions to the larger society. And, the results are impressive—inordinately large numbers of liberal arts graduates go on to pursue graduate degrees, make impressive contributions in the arts and the sciences, and become leaders in business, government, and non-profit organizations.

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Four Issues Facing Liberal Arts Colleges

BY J. L. STIMPERT

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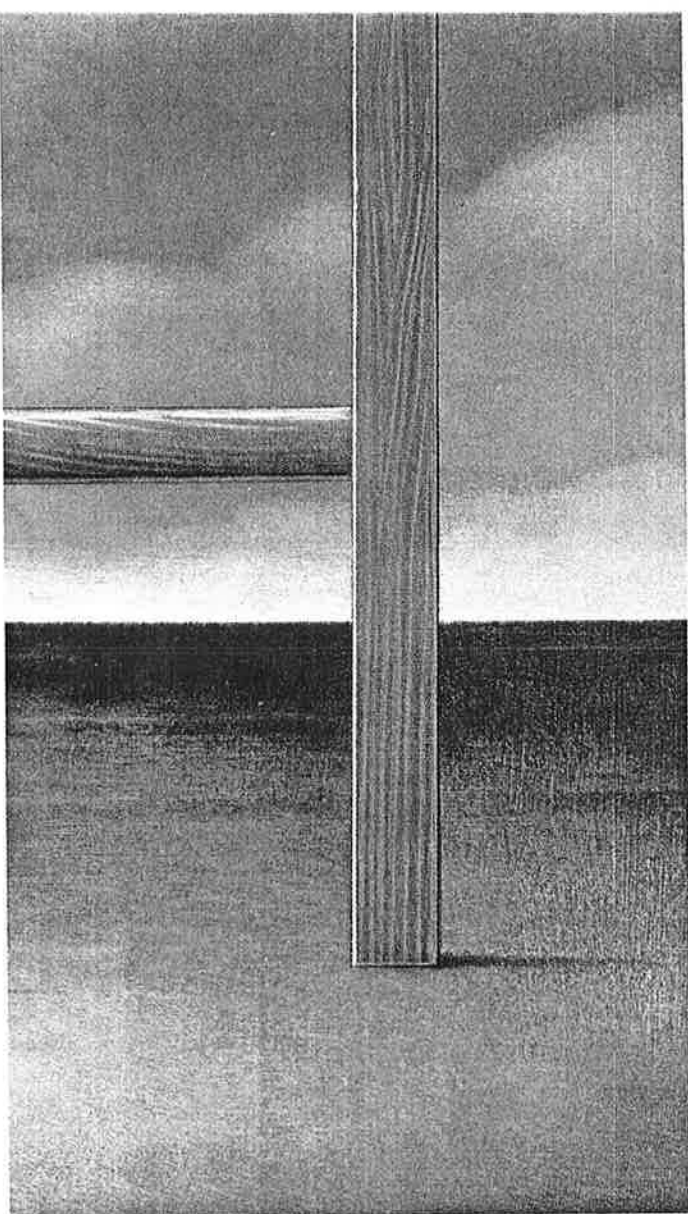


Faculty members also thrive at liberal arts colleges. They have many opportunities to work closely with talented students, their teaching skills are valued, and their scholarly activities and creative endeavors are appreciated and encouraged. Alumni are usually quite loyal to their colleges and, years later, they are still speaking fondly about their college days. In the introduction to his book, *The Distinctive College*, Burton Clark captured the essence of liberal arts colleges this way: "In an age of giant universities and mass higher education, these small places retain impressive status in American society and a hold on the hearts of many. The private liberal arts college is the romantic element in our educational system."

In spite of their unique qualities, liberal arts colleges, which are found primarily in the United States, serve a relatively small niche in the world of higher education. Less than 5 percent of all U.S. college students attend them. And while small colleges should benefit from favorable environmental trends throughout this decade, the next several years will present many challenges. Record numbers of young people will be graduating from high school, but fewer prospective students and their families understand the objectives and benefits of a liberal arts education. And while many high school students and their parents find the small classes and personalized approach to education offered by liberal arts colleges appealing, they often balk at the high cost of private institutions, especially during times of economic uncertainty.

Liberal arts colleges also face intense competition. Small colleges vigorously compete with each other, not only for talented students and faculty, but also for financial support from donors. While the professional and pre-professional programs offered by large public universities have long been competitors, an even greater threat may be the more than 1,000 undergraduate honors programs that have been established at large public universities. These programs replicate many aspects of the small college experience within the context of a large university, and tuition rates are usually far below the cost of most private schools.

Though currently serving a very different student population, liberal arts colleges will also eventually face competition from new, for-profit institutions that feature evening and weekend classes and distance learning programs. These new providers question key features that are at the heart of the liberal arts college experience, including: Why are full-time faculty important to the educational process? Why should a college education necessarily take four years to complete? What is so special about pursuing a college education in a residential setting?

Related to all of these issues are heightened concerns about the cost of higher education and new demands for accountability. Private colleges, in particular, face growing pressure from prospective students and their families to demonstrate superior outcomes in order to justify the premium prices they charge. In response, many small colleges (and their accrediting associations) are now investing considerable effort and resources to document and assess student learning.

This turbulent environment raises many issues for small colleges. This article focuses on just four specific challenges that are central to the character and survival of liberal arts colleges: the need to craft a distinctive and compelling institutional identity, how small colleges might derive more advantages from their size and residential character, the changing roles and expectations of faculty members, and the financial challenges facing small colleges.

Institutional Identity

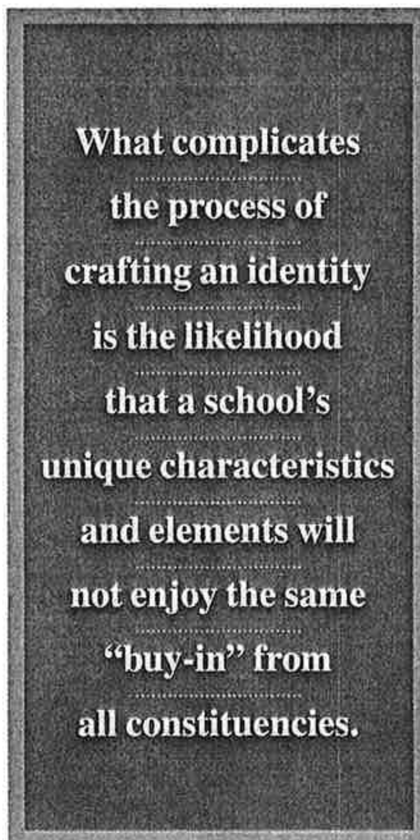
The highly successful small college will have a compelling identity that communicates in just one or a few sentences what it is, what it aspires to be, and what distinguishes it from the many other competing colleges and universities. Some will balk at discussions of institutional identity because they associate the topic with the negative aspects of marketing and advertising. It's important to realize, however, that the most distinguished liberal arts colleges are "brands" that convey powerful messages about the value of attending, working at, and donating money to those institutions.

Others confuse identity with the college's mission statement, but mission statements tend to be rather lengthy assertions of educational objectives that often fail to convey what is special or unique about any particular school. All too often, they offer lofty—but not particularly distinctive or memorable—prose. Identity, in contrast, reflects the character or essence of an institution. While faculty and other college personnel often expend much effort in writing and communicating their mission statements, they tend to underestimate the impor-

tance and value of crafting a compelling identity that captures their institution's essence and uniqueness while also helping focus institutional resources on priorities, activities, and programs that are most consistent with the school's identity.

A compelling identity will have several benefits. First, it will help position the college in the higher education marketplace and it will play a key role in a college's efforts to communicate with external constituencies, including prospective students and their parents, alumni, and benefactors. An effective identity helps an institution "tell its story" by emphasizing how its mission, people, educational programs, and culture are different from those found at other colleges and universities. Ideally, a statement of identity will also educate prospective students, their parents, and the public about the purposes and value of a liberal arts education more generally.

In addition, a distinctive identity can be especially powerful in socializing students, faculty, and staff to the institution's core values and how it approaches teaching and learning. The resulting widely shared understanding of institutional identity and culture can become a very effective way to communicate the college's aims and expectations to faculty and students. And a compelling identity can and should be highly motivating for students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends of the college.



Beyond this, a clearly articulated identity can help small colleges focus their efforts and resources. Since very few liberal arts colleges can afford the breadth of programs found at large universities, a widely shared understanding of institutional identity can bring much needed discipline to the resource allocation process. Specific activities and programs that contribute the most to a school's identity can and should be supported over those that are inconsistent with or detract from its character. By holding fast to a widely agreed upon institutional identity, small colleges can avoid the "mission creep" that frequently dissipates their resources.

A school's identity will most likely reflect its strengths or its unique characteristics. For example, a distinctive identity is often built on specific aspects of a school's mission, the reputation of certain exemplary academic programs, or the strength of one or more departments. Outstanding student accomplishments or educational outcomes can also be significant sources of college identity, as can a unique campus culture, historic events or traditions, and even an attractive geographical location.

For example, Berea College's identity is a product of its work program, the full-tuition scholarship it awards every student, and adherence to its "Great Commitments"—a set of principles that has guided the college for decades. Earlham, more than most liberal arts colleges, celebrates its religious heritage as a Quaker institution, and is strongly committed to international education and sending large numbers of students on to graduate study. Earlham has adopted a motto of "Engagement with a Changing World" as a way to embrace these distinctive elements and provide the college with a unifying identity. My own institution, Colorado College, has both a unique "block plan" academic calendar as well as a beautiful setting at the foot of Pikes Peak—two distinctive elements that are central to the college's identity.

Unique characteristics alone will not make an institutional identity compelling, though. Rather, which characteristics and elements are emphasized and how they are combined, communicated, and made coherent will determine whether a college succeeds in crafting a powerful and effective identity. What complicates the process of crafting an identity is the likelihood that a school's unique characteristics and elements will not enjoy the same "buy-in" from all constituencies. In fact, the very qualities that make a particular college distinctive may be misunderstood or may not even be valued by some constituencies. And, a distinctive identity can be a double-edged sword: it may readily attract some prospective students and motivate faculty who find it compelling, but it may also deter prospective students and discourage faculty members who cannot relate to one or more of its elements.

For example, a school like Earlham might have great success at getting its students interested in teaching and research and it may send a very large number of its graduates on to leading doctoral programs, but will prospective students and their families find this success a compelling reason to attend Earlham? Similarly, current students, faculty members, and alumni might value a small college's religious heritage and character, but prospective students might find those same qualities anachronistic. Or, consider that prospective students might find a college located in the Rocky Mountains a very attractive option, but the college's own faculty might worry that those students could not possibly be as academically committed as students who opt for a liberal arts college in the middle of Iowa or Minnesota.

To what extent, then, should schools emphasize their success at getting students into PhD programs, their religious heritage, their beautiful setting, or other distinctive elements in developing and articulating their identities? As these examples suggest, the challenge is to craft an identity that is, as one college president has put it, "distinctive, without being peculiar." In other words, a college's identity should draw on distinctive elements that are not so general or watered-down that the identity loses its uniqueness. But the college must ensure that its identity is compelling and sufficiently broad to attract a sufficient number of students and a talented faculty.

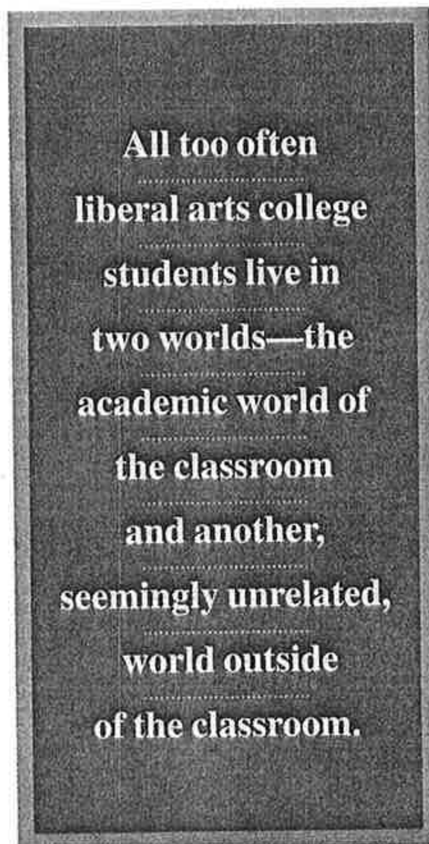
The Two Worlds of Student Life

No other type of educational institution can offer such a personalized approach to undergraduate education and be-

cause of their size and residential character, liberal arts colleges have unparalleled opportunities to combine in-class and co-curricular learning experiences in ways that educate and shape the whole student—intellectual, moral, physical, social, and spiritual. Liberal arts colleges also have the infrastructure to support a highly personalized and holistic approach to undergraduate education, including dedicated faculty members, low student-faculty ratios, academic and residential facilities, athletic and wellness programs, and career planning, health, and counseling services.

In short, the size of liberal arts colleges, their dedicated faculty members, residential character, programming, and facilities should combine to create unique learning environments that cannot be matched by other types of educational institutions (and thereby justifying both the value and high cost of these institutions to prospective students and their families).

Yet, student life on most small college campuses falls far short of its educational potential. All too often liberal arts college students live in two worlds—the academic world of the classroom and another, seemingly unrelated, world outside of the classroom. While faculty members of small colleges can offer students a highly personalized approach to education, too many students see faculty outside of the classroom only sporadically. Life in most campus residence halls is not particularly conducive to study and learning. While drugs are inimical to clear and critical thinking, the illicit use and abuse of alcohol and other controlled substances are a routine part of college life.



Most small colleges are poorly prepared to serve the increasing numbers of students who arrive on campus requiring either ongoing counseling services or prescription drugs to control behavioral and psychological disorders. And, in spite of a longstanding commitment to diversity, students from different backgrounds often fail to integrate and learn from each other in ways it's hoped they would.

To address these challenges, liberal arts colleges must think creatively about how the various components of student academic and co-curricular life can be combined in synergistic ways. Since most of our campuses offer far more educational and co-curricular activities and programs than students can take advantage of, any new effort to better integrate the curricular and co-curricular components of student life will probably need to work within existing student time constraints by not adding more programming.

In addition, students should not feel so over-programmed that they have little time for creative exploits and independent investigation. Meanwhile, faculty must develop greater appreciation for the educational and developmental potential of co-curricular activities and programs. In short, small colleges must view every program and activity as having educational potential, and they need to think creatively about how to realize that potential. Here are some possible avenues.

First, we must find ways for student residence facilities to become more effective living and learning communities. Nearly all small colleges offer a wide array of student housing options that include single and double rooms and suites in traditional residence halls, small theme houses, apartment-style residences, living-learning centers, and Greek houses.

How do these different housing options balance the often competing objectives of promoting a college-wide community, developing individual responsibility, and providing a place for students to study and contemplate? Would greater faculty involvement in residential life help to bridge the gulf between students' curricular and co-curricular lives? How can the residential experience encourage students from different backgrounds to interact with and learn from each other? Would more careful matching of roommates encourage this kind of learning and also increase student satisfaction with their collegiate experiences? Do student conduct policies and procedures complement other educational objectives?

Second, can student services such as career planning, health and counseling services, and athletic and wellness programs be better integrated into the larger educational mission of the college, even though they are not a part of the traditional academic curriculum? Student academic advising is one way to make this linkage and would be a natural avenue for better integrating a college's academic and co-curricular offerings. First-year programs, senior seminars, service-learning opportunities, and living-learning centers are other possible avenues for bridging academic and co-curricular learning opportunities and for implementing a more holistic approach to education.

Another area of opportunity is to improve the effectiveness and educational value of clubs, publications, student government organizations, and athletics and wellness programs. These activities provide extraordinary opportunities for students to assume leadership responsibilities, to come to a greater appreciation of organizational and political processes, and to develop communication, team building, project management, and financial management skills—all of which are important to college and later career success.

Finally, all schools emphasize the importance of diversity and most liberal arts colleges work tirelessly to increase the number of students from minority and under-represented groups. And, in the best tradition of liberal learning, small colleges frequently encourage dialogue and learning among students who hold different viewpoints. Yet, all too often small colleges fail to open their students to diverse perspectives.

The classroom is obviously an important forum for encouraging this type of dialogue and learning, but faculty members must acknowledge that much of this dialogue and learning will

have to occur as students live together and interact outside their classrooms. Well-designed new student orientation programs, workshops, and other campus activities can also be catalysts for this type of learning and interaction, but these programs alone—no matter how well executed—are insufficient. They must be bolstered by shifts in campus cultures that give added importance to the value of dialogue and the free-wheeling exchange of ideas and viewpoints.

Changing Faculty Roles and Expectations

The professoriate is changing, and with these changes comes the need for small colleges to renew their commitment to faculty governance and how they recognize and reward the contributions of faculty members. The liberal arts college professor once happily wore many hats—revered teacher, friend and counselor to students, part-time administrator, perhaps part-time coach—and his wife was at home raising the kids and frequently cooking meals for students who would gather around the table as part of the professor's extended family.

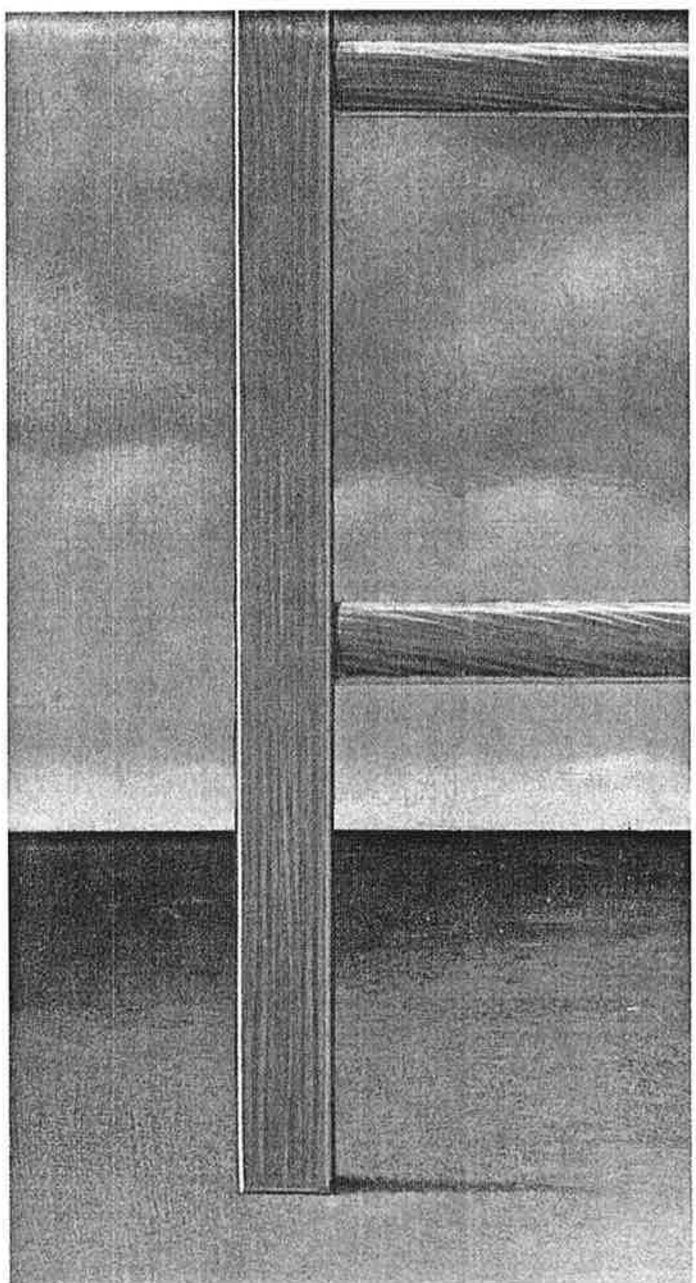
Such days are nearly over, and newer generations of college faculty are not only much more diverse demographically, but they also have different professional and personal priorities. New faculty members happily focus on their teaching responsibilities, but most also want time to be active scholars. If they have a spouse or a partner, that person usually works outside the home so they must manage dual careers and often the challenge of raising children. And, they frequently seek to draw a line between their professional and personal lives.

In addition, small colleges increasingly have higher expectations of faculty members. To improve their academic reputation, many liberal arts colleges aggressively recruit faculty from prominent PhD programs. And, while they still expect faculty to be outstanding teachers, many liberal arts colleges are also raising the bar and requiring faculty members to be actively engaged in scholarship and other creative endeavors as a condition of tenure and promotion.

These shifts in expectations are having a profound impact on faculty roles and college governance. While professors once immersed themselves in college governance and a broad range of related campus service activities, today's faculty members have gladly delegated most of their schools' day-to-day administrative and governance tasks to professional administrators.

While many faculty have welcomed this change, it poses a significant risk for liberal arts colleges—that their faculty members can become disengaged, and, taken to the extreme, that they can develop the same "independent contractor" mentality that has come to characterize the role of faculty at large research universities. As a consequence, they run the risk of losing the faculty involvement and interest in decision-making processes that fundamentally shape their identity, character, and culture.

As former university president Richard Breslin noted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* a few years ago, professors can easily become so specialized and focused on their own disciplines and scholarship that they lose sight of the overall college mission. And if faculty members are not engaged, senior staff will be required to make more and more



college-wide decisions so that faculty come to play an increasingly marginal role in college governance.

Faculty involvement in both college governance and a wide range of other non-scholarly tasks is essential at liberal arts colleges for at least three reasons. First, faculty must take full responsibility for some activities, including the design and assessment of the curriculum and the review, tenure, and promotion of their colleagues. Faculty members also play an absolutely critical role in student academic advising and, in particular, helping first-year students adjust to campus life and mentoring sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

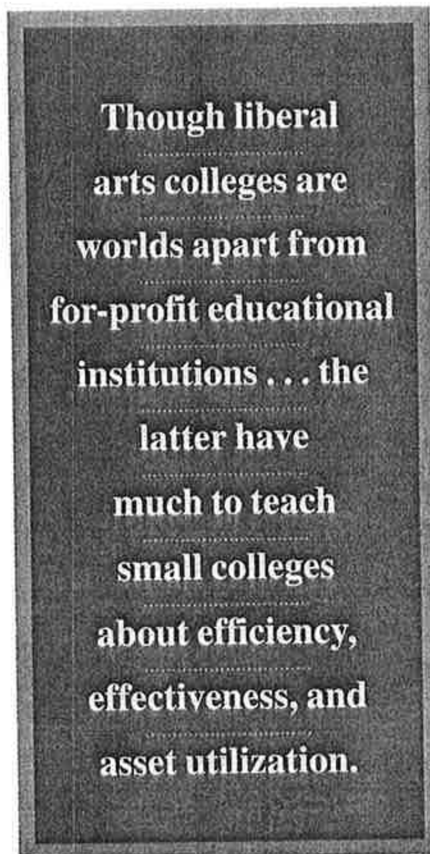
Second, faculty members need to be involved in other governance tasks because their influence will directly or indirectly shape the character of their colleges. These tasks include planning college events, developing compensation and benefit policies, and designing and participating in student co-curricular life.

Finally, many tasks need faculty involvement if they are going to be done well. For example, when prospective students and their families visit colleges, they often want to attend classes and meet with faculty members. Face-to-face meetings between faculty members and prospective students

and their parents can be very influential, and they are an important complement to the professional admission staff's efforts. Faculty members are also uniquely qualified to reach out to alumni and potential donors and to assist in many other college advancement and development efforts.

Too often participation in these important activities is categorized under the vague label of "college service," and these contributions are widely assumed to be less important than teaching, scholarship, and other creative endeavors. To ensure that faculty members make significant contributions to the life of their institutions—contributions that go beyond their teaching and scholarly activities—faculty leaders, deans, and presidents must reaffirm their commitment to faculty governance and emphasize the importance of other service activities, and they must design reward structures that adequately recognize and compensate the exemplary governance and service contributions of faculty members.

This is not to suggest that all faculty members should be expected to apply some fixed percentage of their time and effort to college governance and service activities—some faculty will be more inclined and talented in these venues while others will naturally excel at teaching, scholarship, or other activities. Fortunately, small colleges have never been as narrow as the large research universities, which measure success largely or solely in terms of publication or creative output. Small colleges can acknowledge the full range of faculty talents and they have the flexibility to design salary structures that reward good teaching, exemplary research, and essential governance and service contributions.



Financing the Liberal Arts College

Liberal arts colleges face several unpleasant financial realities. They have always been labor intensive, relying on a full-time faculty rather than graduate students or adjuncts to teach relatively small classes. Over the last few decades, small colleges have also become increasingly capital intensive. They must maintain state-of-the-art science laboratories, first-rate facilities for the fine arts, smart classrooms, and wired residence halls. In addition, prospective students now expect that colleges will have athletic and wellness centers that mirror the best health clubs.

As vibrant intellectual centers, liberal arts colleges are always tempted to expand their offerings—new courses, new academic programs, and new student services that will compete with longstanding budget priorities. Salaries and benefits must stay competitive, which is increasingly difficult when health care costs can rise as much as 20 to 30 percent or more in a single year. And, few liberal arts colleges are large enough to enjoy the benefits of scale. They must support a wide range of academic departments and majors, maintain their libraries, classrooms, studios, laboratories, student centers, and wellness facilities, and offer essential student services regardless of whether they enroll 1,000 or 2,000 students.

The picture is equally grim on the revenue side. Most liberal arts colleges have been raising their tuition charges faster than the rate of inflation, but these tuition increases tend to be offset by financial aid programs that are driven by the need to meet enrollment goals, maintain affordability, and compete with other colleges and universities for outstanding students. As a result, tuition increases are often accompanied by ever-higher discount rates (the difference between tuition and what students actually pay). And because few colleges have endowments that are large enough to generate all or most of the money needed to finance student aid budgets, most liberal arts colleges use tuition dollars from full-paying or high-paying students to subsidize students with significant financial need.

No easy answers to these financial challenges exist, but financial strength and long-run institutional viability will require an emphasis on controlling costs and enhancing revenues. On the cost side, colleges could benefit from a review process that would periodically evaluate all activities and programs along a number of criteria, such as: 1) how centrally they relate to the institution's identity and mission, 2) whether the college currently does or could do these activities especially well, and 3) whether these activities are helpful in attracting or retaining students. Proposals for new activities and programs might be evaluated against these same criteria. Ideally, a college would systematically review all of its activities and programs every five years or so; at a minimum, activities and programs might receive some sort of evaluation before any new or replacement hiring is approved.

Though liberal arts colleges are worlds apart from for-profit educational institutions in terms of their mission and culture, the latter have much to teach small colleges about efficiency, effectiveness, and asset utilization, and any small college could benefit by focusing on these same concerns. For example, how effective was the last dollar spent on student recruitment? Are financial aid dollars being used in ways that improve access for students from low-income or needy families? Or, are financial aid dollars being spent on merit awards that attract good students but leave them and their parents doubting that a liberal arts education is worth the full price of tuition?

Other questions include whether additional investment in student life would pay off in terms of greater student retention? Is the college maximizing the use of its classrooms, studios, and laboratories? Has it adopted aggressive plans for controlling utility expenses? Has it looked for ways that technology might reduce educational and operating costs?

Liberal arts colleges also need to reconsider the objectives

of their consortia and regional associations with an aim toward identifying how collaboration with other small colleges could improve program offerings and save money. Member schools in many consortia already coordinate in providing international programs and other educational opportunities. Other consortia are investigating ways their members can collaborate to reduce the costs associated with information technology and library services.

On the revenue side, the long-run financial stability—and even survival—of the small college ultimately depends on developing effective recruiting and admission strategies that consistently meet target levels for enrollment and net tuition revenue. Such strategies must emphasize the value of a liberal arts education and de-emphasize the role of financial aid discounting. And while small colleges' recruiting and admission strategies will naturally focus on traditional college-age students, colleges also need to consider new opportunities to increase revenues that are consistent with their overall purposes and missions. Two obvious opportunities are more aggressive courting of nontraditional students and the development of semester, year-long, and summer programs that would attract students from other colleges and universities.

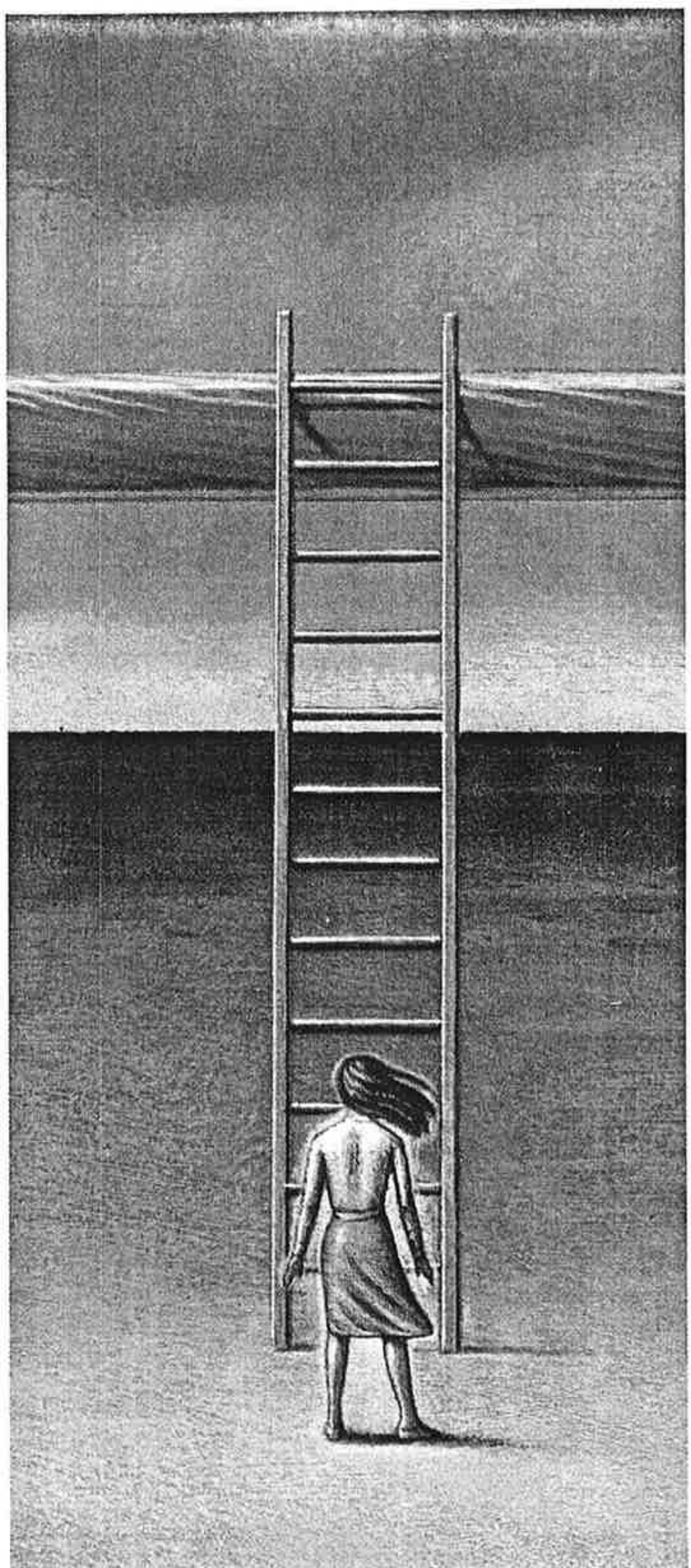
Some small colleges have already embraced these ideas and now lead a dual existence, serving a largely traditional student population in a residential setting while also maintaining satellite campuses or programs offering adult education or professional programs. While such a model may be inconsistent with the identity and mission of many liberal arts colleges and is not recommended for every college, it does represent a way that many small colleges have succeeded in diversifying their revenue streams.

Second, small colleges need endowments that are large enough to fund a bigger share of financial aid expenditures and to enhance their academic and co-curricular programs. As colleges plan future capital campaigns, there will be no shortage of worthwhile funding priorities, but college leaders would be well advised to consider giving greater emphasis to increasing their unrestricted endowments. And capital campaigns that include new facilities construction projects should also explicitly include the goal of raising enough additional endowment to support the operating and maintenance costs associated with these new buildings.

Developing an effective recruiting and admission strategy and raising unrestricted endowment are intimately related to the first point of this article—the importance of developing a compelling institutional identity. The identity that a college crafts will be the basis for its recruiting efforts and admissions strategies. And any development effort, especially one aimed at raising large unrestricted endowment gifts, will be more successful if donors find the college's identity and mission distinctive and appealing.

Conclusion

This article could obviously have raised many more issues or topics. Instead, it focuses on just four broad issues that are critical to the future of small liberal arts colleges. These are issues that every college must address not just once or occasionally, but continuously in order to keep pace with changes in a dynamic and increasingly competitive higher education marketplace. They are also issues that tend to be avoided because they call for tough decisions and, at times, for significant resource reallocation.



When small colleges do invite dialogue on these issues, they often lack the courage or institutional will to act on those discussions—opting to maintain the status quo, but inviting cynicism among those who had hoped that such discussions might lead to needed change. This article's observations are offered to stimulate not only thought and discussion but also meaningful actions that will strengthen liberal arts colleges individually and collectively, so the extraordinary form of higher learning that they provide might be enhanced and continue to play its vital, historic role in our society. ▣