

The background features a faint, sketchy illustration of a conductor in a white shirt and dark tie, gesturing with his arms. He is surrounded by several musical staves with notes and clefs. The overall style is light and artistic, blending with the text.

A Discordant Melody of Sameness

To meet the competition from public and proprietary institutions, small liberal arts colleges can avoid the path to extinction by taking the path of distinction.

ANYONE WHO TRAVELS THE UNITED STATES cannot help but be struck by the abundance of private liberal arts colleges—1,600 at last count. Though most of these schools are small, they have hearts as big as the country.

Nearly all have wonderful stories to tell and retell to successive generations of students and alumni. Their chroniclers speak of the sacrifice of the “founders” and the great challenges of the present. Whether established by evangelizing religious or dedicated lay people, these institutions set out to provide the best possible liberal arts education to a well-defined constituency.

In the last decade or so, there has been a major change in the core of these institutions. Futurists began predicting their demise. Doom-sayers pointed to a potential scarcity of 18-year-old students, weak economies, and skyrocketing costs.

• BY WILLIAM J. CARROLL •

To their credit, most of these colleges survived—indeed, some thrived. But survival was not without costs. As private liberal arts colleges proliferated, they began to encounter competition. Transportation improvements had made formerly unreachable campuses reachable, and then the Internet made every potential student a college’s next-door neighbor. So the schools had to learn to compete with one another in a more disciplined and organized manner.

As competition increased, so did efforts to develop new programs for new populations of students. New pedagogical approaches to the adult learner emerged, with classes offered anywhere and at any time. As if the intense competition between the small liberal arts colleges were not enough, state institutions joined the fray, advertising and marketing themselves in the same style as their smaller counterparts but with the significant advantage of state-supported low tuition.

Finally, the onslaught of proprietary schools—propelled by the Internet—has become a concern if not an imminent threat to the once-quiet world of private liberal arts colleges.

This boiling cauldron of activity over the past several decades has served up consequences unseen (or not readily admitted to) by most in our field, particularly among the younger academics, for whom it is now the status quo.

But just as a boiling cauldron in the kitchen, over time, reduces its contents to a mushy uniformity, something very similar has happened to our private liberal arts colleges: They have been reduced to sameness. My review of a sampling from their current enrollment literature suggests the following as evidence:

- Viewbooks and admissions materials nearly all portray the same things—small classes, individual attention, liberal education, a menu of highly attractive academic majors, sports, and highly prepared faculty, most with terminal degrees.
- Students are known by name, not by number.
- If you graduate from these institutions, you will join an elite group of alumni in service to God, family, and nation.



- Your liberal arts education will propel you to be great at whatever you choose to do in your professional life.

- You have been prepared not only for a career; you also have been prepared for life.

(If you are skeptical of these generalizations, gather enrollment materials from your liberal arts college and others and throw in some materials from the public for good measure. Remove all identifying characteristics from the literature, and put all the materials on a table. Challenge your faculty, staff, alumni, and students to determine which literature comes from your institution. If your promotional materials do not readily stand out, you'll see what I mean.)

In our drive to compete and be successful, we leaders of private liberal arts colleges are singing a melody of sameness.

High Costs of Conformity. A major source of the phenomenon of sameness is graduate schools that prepare students to be faculty in our nation's colleges and universities. Graduate programs everywhere tend to produce similar products. Young, terminally degreed individuals seek institutions where they can ply their trade.

What these scholars may not know, however, is that some of what they learned in graduate school was below the radar of consciousness. Students will admit that through their graduate school experience they learned the content of their discipline and how to teach that discipline (through mentoring by outstanding graduate faculty). What they may not know they learned was an allegiance to their discipline. Loyalty to discipline over all is, in a sense, a subliminal message. Young faculty members seek to go out and reproduce their graduate school programs in the colleges that hire them. In that way the seeds of sameness are systemically spread throughout the land.

The costs of this "homogenization" of our institutions have been high. Academic majors have proliferated, and few have been cut. Small institutions typically offer 25 to 50 different majors with the associated costs of faculty,

support personnel, supportive physical infrastructure, and materials. The mad scramble in adding technology to keep up with the competition, with no real measurable change in the classroom, has brought many institutions to the brink of financial crisis. The average cost of technology has climbed as high as 7 percent of budgets.

Powerful associations have emerged to advocate for strategies that deny higher education much variety. The standard for the industry has become what other association members are doing. This has become a mantra

heard at faculty meetings when new ideas or programs are offered: “Who else is doing this?” With this herd mentality, all institutions move at the same pace, in pretty much the same direction. And just as the great herds of buffalo, once abundant in this country, were reduced to near extinction, the same fate is possible for our private liberal arts institutions.

The birth of the new millennium has not diminished the dire predictions of futurists; in fact, the warnings have intensified and have become more immediate.

A prediction by Northwest Nazarene University business and mathematics professor Sam Dunn in the *Futurist* magazine suggests that by 2025, half of today’s existing independent colleges will cease to exist in their present state. Indeed, the *New York Times* in 2002 reported that since 1997, 27 of the nation’s private colleges had announced plans to close—a 35 percent increase over the previous five years.

American higher education has been caught in a logjam for decades—a logjam held together by sameness. The last two years have seen the gradual breakup of the logjam. Interestingly, the very phenomena that caused the sameness early on—technology, competition, new pedagogies—are now driving a wedge in the sameness. When the logs are freed, where will your institution be?

Can it continue to be all things to all students in tough economic and demographic

times? If a limited number of students have almost identical choices of institutions to attend, why choose your institution? One need not be a mathematician to realize that at some point in the future, a declining pool of students will reemerge with too many higher education institutions from which to choose. Institutions that do not stand out from the herd will suffer; institutions not chosen by a distinctive group of students for a distinctive reason will close.

Distinctions at Benedictine. Clearly, the path to extinction might be avoided by taking the path to distinction. Many of our institutions, at one time, were clearly distinct from others. To succeed in the years ahead, small private liberal arts colleges must return to their distinctiveness. In some cases, the distinctiveness remains at the surface of the institution and can be recaptured. In other cases, distinctiveness has to be developed anew. Let me use my own institution as an example.

Benedictine University (originally St. Procopius College) was founded in Illinois in 1887 to serve the needs of male Czechoslovakian immigrants. Clearly, this demarcated the college from other institutions. Moreover, the founding monks embraced the guiding principle that science would shake the world, and the institution needed to be part of that future. So monks were sent to the University of Chicago and other prestigious universities to study science and prepare them and their students to live in a scientific world—and to play a part in forming that world.

The early emphasis on science paid great dividends. Faculty worked on the Manhattan Project, and major radiation devices used in the space program were developed on campus, for example. Yet in recent decades, a gradual malaise in the science programs has slowed their growth and progress toward excellence. What caused the malaise? What caused the university to lose track of the vision so clearly laid out by the founders?



How can any institution be excellent at so many courses of study? Are those programs truly excellent?

A number of factors are suspect. The declining number of faculty-monks and the corresponding increase in nonreligious faculty are probably the chief suspects. Like most liberal arts institutions during this period, Benedictine enjoyed substantial growth. To service an expanding student population, lay faculty representing myriad disciplines were hired at an unprecedented rate—and therein lies the problem.

The enthusiasm and zeal for science evidenced in the early days of the institution now had to share the stage with individuals who came to Benedictine with the same zeal for their own disciplines—history, political science, psychology, business, education, and so on—all disciplines that make up today’s typical liberal arts college. New faculty came with a desire to recreate their graduate school experience on the Benedictine campus. As a result, new departments, new majors, and an expanding nonscience curriculum emerged. The university now offers about 50 majors.

College presidents I speak with often refer to the “3 a.m. phenomenon”—a time in the middle of the night when we are wide-awake thinking about our job’s many challenges (almost like a strategic analysis every evening). During these wee hours, I often wonder how any institution can be excellent at so many courses of study. Are these programs truly excellent? What constitutes “excellence” when applied to academic programs, anyway? Successful graduates? Published faculty? National recognition? All of the above?

The 3 a.m. phenomenon reminds us that true excellence would mean that there are no equals. If every program at every liberal arts college is “excellent,” haven’t we just redefined “average”? In all honesty, the majors offered by our colleges are good and produce competent graduates, but they are not all excellent. Some are and have national reputations and prolonged periods of success to

attest to that excellence. Most, however, have no distinguishable characteristics to label them as “excellent.” Again, the melody of sameness plays loudly.

A Drumbeat of Excellence. If our colleges and universities cannot be “excellent” in every program they offer, perhaps the focus should shift to a single excellence that will define the institution to the public. At Benedictine, the faculty and administration are working to regain its excellence in the sciences, but with a twist. The university not only produces excellent scientists, it produces scientists grounded in the Catholic-Benedictine liberal arts tradition. In other words, these scientists not only know how to do science, but they also can raise the important question of whether that science should be pursued. By reclaiming its scientific heritage and excellence, Benedictine will break the recent generation of sameness and will begin to distinguish itself from other liberal arts institutions.

Microsoft founder Bill Gates, in his book *The Road Ahead*, says that the failure of many companies in the 1980s and 1990s was due to the inability of the management team to see the road ahead. I suggest that the same is true for private liberal arts colleges and universities in the first decade of this century.

We face an uncertain future. Institutions that can see the road ahead but also around the corner will thrive. Does seeing around the corner suggest that we need to return to our differentiation or that we should continue to dance to the melody of sameness?

Maybe we need to learn from the memory of the great herds of buffalo that no longer roam our great plains. Will your institution have the courage to look around the corner? Will you continue to hum “the melody of sameness,” or will you march to a different drummer? ♦

William J. Carroll is president of Benedictine University in Lisle, Ill.

