

The Threats to Liberal Arts Colleges

IN 1998, A POLL OF UNIVERSITY OFFICIALS conducted by *U.S. News & World Report* ranked the University of Arkansas fifty-third in academic reputation among the fifty-four schools of the nation's five major athletic conferences. Also in 1998, the University of Arkansas increased the number of first-year students scoring in the ninety-fifth percentile on standardized entrance tests by 42 percent. It used a heavy marketing campaign, but the key difference was an increase in the scholarship budget from \$1.8 million to about \$4.4 million. Approximately \$1.5 million of the increase came from the family of the late Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart Stores Inc., with headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas. The funds were earmarked for full scholarships targeted specifically at academically superior, not economically poorer, students. University officials have reported success. Many students who would have gone to out-of-state schools are now staying in Arkansas. And the quality of these students has added new vitality to academic life at the university. There is little doubt that the university's academic reputation will rise, since at heart it depends most heavily not on history, faculty, or facilities but on the quality of the students.¹

The University of Arkansas is a long way from most of the schools that are referred to as "prestigious" or "selective" liberal arts colleges. But the trends showing up in Fayetteville reflect the many pulls that threaten to undermine the status, role, and maybe even existence of those liberal arts colleges. Among the growing trends evident in this example are competi-

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tive marketing, merit-based aid, private support for state schools, and student choice being heavily influenced by price. Underneath those trends are implicit assumptions that the reputation of a school will not diminish or enhance the generic credential it grants and that enough money will provide a critical mass of high-caliber students anywhere. Is there a university today that does not have some elite honors college or scholarship designation, worth \$20,000 or more over four years and granted with some pomposity to a select group of eighteen-year-olds four months before they sit down in their first college class? Considering the high correlations between family income and academic performance, a large portion of that money will go to students whose families could easily manage the full tuition. Around schools like Arkansas, there have always been jokes about recruiting the best football team that money can buy. Now the joke has been turned on the student body at large.

Merit scholarships alone will not undermine the rich history of the nation's more selective liberal arts colleges, but the issues behind them reflect the risky economics, aggressive competition, and eroding purpose that threaten the future of those schools. As a trustee of Williams College, I am at the tail of a long line of thoughtful, devoted board members. They have had many concerns over the years, but surely none had to worry about competition from the University of Arkansas. We worry about such things now.

There are other trends commonly cited as threats to the liberal arts colleges, including culture wars and identity politics. But those are winds that buffet every shore. There is not much reason to think that they affect liberal arts colleges more than the largest research universities. Indeed, the small residential community, where students actually know vast numbers of their peers on a personal basis, mitigates trends based on division.

But some of those issues raise real concerns. For instance, the culture wars include sharp critiques of curriculum, usually along the lines that we have fallen away from some golden age of a core that taught the verities of Western civilization. In fact, the supposed core has always evolved, the golden age was not really that golden, and there are parts of Western civ that fall

short of pure *veritas*. There are, however, serious problems in today's curriculum. Not every course in the catalog should discuss every permutation of race, gender, and sexual preference. Not every professor specializing in an obscure corner of scholarly life needs to teach a course reflecting his singular interest, as if to replicate the thickest university catalog. Again, though, these are widespread issues, clearly not restricted to selective liberal arts colleges.

Likewise for the impending doom threatened by various forms of electronic teaching. In terms of convenience and cost, but probably not effectiveness, the prospect of going to class by television or computer is an attractive one. If such teaching is to displace the traditional forums, though, it is likely to follow a clear order: first, professional and vocational courses that are required as part of employment, thus addressing the many motivational problems of distance teaching; second, the colleges and universities where teaching modes most closely resemble television watching, namely, large lectures before passive students; and third, and only then, the colleges where the educational process *and* campus life are heavily based on the personal interaction of students and faculty.

TO MARKET, TO MARKET

The most serious threats to liberal arts colleges are not the battles of ideology or the shifts of technology, although the latter will have some indirect effects. In a market-driven world, the primary threat to liberal arts colleges is found in the marketplace. Many of the market forces are beyond the influence of individual schools or even whole categories of schools. They include demographic, economic, and geographic shifts; cultural trends, including materialism and utilitarianism; and the dominance of market economics as a determining force. In addition, there is probably an overcapacity in higher education in general, and liberal arts colleges share in that problem. There may simply be more pure liberal arts colleges than we need, at least as the market defines need.

Within the category of liberal arts colleges, there are special market forces. Specifically, those schools may be slowly under-

mined by the economics of their business and the marketing of their product, and the results may challenge the very purpose for which those schools exist. Competition within the liberal arts sector leads colleges into high spending. Like the modified winner-take-all aspects of sports teams, the best colleges spend a lot to attract the best students, with great success. Their competition makes perfect sense within their own realm. The same competition, however, drives up costs and price (both full or discounted). It complicates the issue of access, for it scares away many diverse and able students. And it causes liberal arts colleges in general to suffer in comparison to other sectors of higher education—at least to the extent that higher education is regarded as a credential with a price.

The first thought about the higher-education marketplace that comes to almost anyone's mind these days is price. The most selective schools are pushing beyond the previously unthinkable limit of \$30,000 a year—a figure that does not cover many of the costs of actually attending college, from computers to travel to an occasional movie, and that amazingly may represent less than half of the college's per-pupil total expenses. Many schools below that top tier are into the \$20,000 range. Charges for public colleges have gone up too, and one can make various arguments about percentages, but the absolute dollar spread shows the high price of the selective schools.² In context, it should be noted that almost three-quarters of all full-time undergraduates attend four-year colleges and universities that charge less than \$8,000 a year. That figure hides the substantial subsidy from private and public sources, but it also dramatizes just how much more the selective colleges are asking.

Couple that with other trends. Twenty years ago, the major part of student aid was in outright grants; now it is in loans. Over the same time, the income distribution of the nation has been slowly shifting. The rising tide of prosperity has raised the front end of the boat more than the back. The result is that net tuition (after student aid) as a proportion of family income at private institutions is three times greater for low-income students than it is for high-income students. Increases in financial

aid have not kept pace with increases in tuition, and, sure enough, all this has had an effect.

The probability that a student from the highest income group (over \$100,000 annually) attended a selective institution increased from one in five in 1981 to one in four in 1997. Colleges sometimes claim that tuition is not increasing any faster than the incomes of the families from which their full-paying students come, but just as important is the fact that this highest-income group may be declining as a proportion of all families with children attending college. The most respected analysts of these movements suggest that “taken to their logical conclusion, these trends suggest that a restratification of American higher education may be under way.”³

That would be a particularly ironic result, for in the past few years the better liberal arts colleges have gone to exceptional efforts—using everything but the maximum charge, the so-called sticker price—to escape their old elitist images and broaden their student base. In part this is a matter of modern social conscience, but it is also basic marketing. In general, the highest performing students want to go to a college where the other students are equally bright but different in as many ways as possible. Today’s top students welcome diversity and, usually having grown up in more homogenous suburbs and schools, will actively seek it out as part of their college selection. The better a college assembles a diverse student body—in race, ethnicity, geography, and the like, but also in the full range of talents from athletics to performing arts—the more likely it is to draw the best, most open, and most creative students to its academic pool.

Then why does tuition keep going up? The simple answer is that selective colleges are also competitive colleges. They raise tuition because every extra dollar will go towards better faculty, facilities, and financial aid, thus attracting the best student body, which is the ultimate source of a school’s quality. Beyond that, they compare themselves to a Mercedes in an educational market of mostly Fords and Chevys, and their price makes a statement. Indeed, to lower the price would send a signal of lesser quality, and at the upper end of these schools there is a clear correlation between tuition and selectivity or reputation.

In that odd market sense, there is no incentive for any school to reduce its price. Doing so would be a self-inflicted injury. A particular school can attract better students and thus is a better school by raising its price, within reasonable peer comparisons. Unfortunately, there is also a tragedy of the commons at work here. The rational decision for the single school works against long-term survivability for all the schools as a group.

Furthermore, costs are increasing and are doing so faster than familiar indices, largely because education is still a labor-intensive business. But further costs have been added over the years. Curriculum has been expanded: Thirty years ago, some of the best liberal arts colleges did not offer much, if anything, in certain familiar subjects, including anthropology, religion, and theater, let alone the more “modern” subjects now filling the catalog, such as environmental science, biochemistry, or Asian studies. Faculty have come to expect that research will be a large part of their roles, which means colleges must provide relief from teaching, which means more faculty need to be hired. Technology is adding a new element to overhead expense. And the creep of social problems into campus life requires greater spending on student health services, security, counseling and other support services, especially with the customer expectation that the college should address social problems therapeutically. High-end liberal arts colleges, which pride themselves on ignoring economies of scale on their academic side, often face a difficult time with these new added costs, for they are imposed on a small base.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

The resources of selective liberal arts colleges do not depend solely on the tuition of current students, of course. As in the past, many of them continue to benefit from extraordinary generosity, and here a discussion of the economic model begins to overlap with marketing. Colleges have two sales departments, admissions and development. The former is creating some problems for the latter, which already faces difficulties from outside forces. Suppose, for instance, that the lofty admission goals at the better schools were met. Each incoming class

would be geographically and racially diverse. Most students would go on to a graduate school (or two). The academic quality would be so high that many graduates would pursue careers in research and teaching. This would mean that their alumni would include fewer members of families with substantial net worth, the surest course to having capital wealth to contribute in the future. Fewer would wind up living near the college, the easiest way to maintain alumni involvement. More would enter the job market with high debt, delaying for many crucial years any established habit of contributing to the college. More would hold dual loyalties, with a strong tug at their pockets from their professional graduate schools, which would often be geographically closer to their chosen homes, especially in fields like law or medicine. On the face of it, the alumni of the future would then be less able and less likely to support the college and its students than were the alumni who supported past undergraduate years. That is not to say that admission offices should not go ahead and pursue their current goals. They should, but there may be some unintended consequences.

This concern might be overdrawn. Perhaps the experiment is already being run. After all, colleges that began to broaden their base a generation or two ago are still raising lots of money. Even so, it takes some faith in social and economic mobility and in personal attachment to the college to assume that today's admission trends will not bring their own financial drawbacks later. Maybe that faith is justified, but like many issues based on faith, there is at least enough doubt to cause some worry. As if that were not enough concern for the development office, though, there are also erosions of current outside support. A higher proportion of private money is going to public higher education. The University of Tennessee, not known as a national academic center, recently raised more than \$430 million in a capital campaign for private funds. Even in the face of stagnant state support, that is a lot of money, and this is not an unusual example.

There are other reasons behind this shift. First, more businesses now fall into the categories of national or multinational (rather than regional) and public (rather than private). Corporate centers are more widely scattered, especially away from

the New England–Ohio–Virginia triangle that holds so many of the selective liberal arts colleges. Great fortunes have been built in the Southeast and the West, where private liberal arts colleges are relatively scarce. All these changes fit the example of the Walton family gift mentioned earlier. In many other cases, the largest owners of corporations are now pension funds and mutual funds, rather than single families with strong ties to old schools. More importantly, both corporate and foundation giving has gone through a wave of accountability focused on words like outcomes, results, and effectiveness. That trend produces strong biases favoring the specific over the general, research over teaching, and the quantifiable over the abstract. For business, this often relates to specific payoffs for the donor—newspapers give to journalism schools, drug companies give to chemistry departments.

All this reflects a marked movement toward integrating all corporate charity into the corporate business plan, a philosophy that leaves little room for general support of the liberal arts. At its logical conclusion, businesses and some foundations will regard liberal arts colleges the way they previously regarded secondary education—as general preparation with no direct link to measurable corporate purpose, and thus outside their charitable strategy. The more that graduates of liberal arts colleges go on to graduate school, the easier it is to place the colleges in that lower preparatory tier.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

The temptation, then, is to change the college's mission to get in on the funding. These selective liberal arts schools will never be research universities, but now one hears the phrase "research college," a ratcheting up of status to aim for the best of both. In the abstract, the concept makes some sense. Certainly, better teachers pursue scholarly activity outside the classroom, even if it does not involve the artificial and stretched concept of original research. Artfully done, by professors with a strong interest in teaching, research integrated into the student curriculum can be productive pedagogy.⁴ But the concept of a research college bears considerable risk. It may attract faculty

whose primary interest is not in teaching, who resist leading the general courses that are an important part of undergraduate studies, and who think that a university model of exploited teaching assistants, specialized courses, and obscure, almost frivolous research topics is perfectly appropriate at a college of fifteen hundred students. Academic specialization itself can separate faculty from students, which is contrary to the mission of the liberal arts colleges.

Indeed, faculty recruitment is often the justification for the tilt toward research. A new faculty member, after all, has usually just spent six years or so at a research university, doing what she really wants to do. It may take some semblance of the old research site to lure the young scholar into a new teaching orientation, especially for the schools that aim to be just as selective in seeking top faculty as they are in seeking top students. At least, so the rationalization goes. In fact, it is hard to draw the line between the faculty's desire for a diverse and intellectually challenging curriculum and its desire for courses meant largely to indulge scholars with their own specialized interests. In a four-year regimen, students can "vote" by course registration in only a limited way. Besides, the design of the curriculum still rests heavily with the faculty itself.

In the broader market context, the risk involves what business would call product differentiation. If the college is to be just a smaller version of a research university, then why not go to the bigger university? Chances are it will offer more and charge less. This leads then to a general critique of higher education, which might challenge the whole idea that institutions built on undergraduate enrollments should subsidize the scholarly life of the faculty, in some ways at the expense of undergraduates, state and federal governments and private donors. We will not go down that path here, but it is useful to keep in mind, since the liberal arts college is supposed to be a quite different model.

The top-tier liberal arts colleges largely stick to that different role. In many ways, they can do so because most of their students will go on to graduate school or into certain premium jobs, such as investment banking, that do not yet put great weight on an advanced degree and which still favor the better

liberal arts colleges. The next tiers, however, present an immediate problem of definition. At many liberal arts colleges, more than 60 percent of degrees are awarded in professional fields. Granted, there is usually a heavy component of liberal arts courses outside of one's major, but they frequently become accessories to the professional course rather than freestanding intellectual interests. Why then even call them liberal arts colleges at all? This question leads to the purpose of the pure form and the threats to that purpose.

In the last century, colleges were quite explicit about their purpose. As an 1829 faculty report at Amherst put it, "Our colleges are designed to give youth a general education, classical, literary, and scientific, as comprehensive as an education can well be, which is professedly preparatory alike for all the professions." Many went beyond that curricular view. The Yale Report of 1828 said that the study was "especially adopted to form the taste, and discipline the mind, both in thought and diction, to the relish of what is elevated, chaste and simple."⁵ Those purposes stood well when education was meant to produce a good Christian, and then when it was meant to produce a gentleman, to use the categories of Williams historian Fred Rudolph.⁶ For the third time period, defined by the student who enters and leaves as a consumerist, the purpose becomes more problematical. In that time, since World War II, college education has moved strongly away from the general and surely away from the chaste and simple. Hundreds of colleges still place the name liberal arts upon themselves, but in fact they graduate thousands of students in nursing, journalism, criminal justice, business, and almost any undergraduate degree to match a job that one can imagine. At many of the hundreds of schools that call themselves liberal arts colleges, the term represents nostalgia more than curriculum.

PRESSURE OF PURPOSE

There is another side of student consumerism. Call it vocationalism, credentialism, or even dollarizing—students and their families have defined undergraduate education in starkly utilitarian terms. Young people do not go to college to become

fuller persons, better citizens, or more lively intellects. In postwar America, college education is justified by the additional lifetime income it will produce.

Some of this has reflected the booming economy and competitive market orientation of the postwar years. Some of it has reflected the outright materialism that came with growing affluence. Some of it, perversely, was created by higher education itself. Pushing forward to attract and satisfy those consumers/students also pushed up costs, and whether the price was borne in cash or prolonged loan payments, the resulting second thoughts of the payers leaned strongly to the economics of life. Those who paid had grown up in the depression, when security became intertwined with employment, and this echoed into the years as a demand that their children pursue “something better,” especially better than a manual skill, but still “something you can use,” which meant use to economic benefit.

Materialism brought a parallel development—narcissism, to choose the blunt term. Colleges espoused old images of opening up broad new worlds for students. The students, it turns out, began to focus on themselves instead. College was their chance to discover their career and other personal interests, and maybe to dabble in some self-exploration as well, both in class and out. Women’s studies and black studies are the clearest examples, but so are the rise of current-events and pop-culture courses and earning academic credit for everything from nutrition to physical education (once considered an academic oxymoron). In many programs, credit is given for career-related outside employment, which turns the pure concept of a liberal arts education absolutely on its head.

There are clear measurements of these abstractions in the American Freshman Survey. In 1966, more than 80 percent of respondents checked off “Develop a meaningful philosophy of life” as the purpose of college, but by 1990, that figure had dropped below 50 percent. Conversely, some 45 percent listed “Be very well off financially” as the purpose in 1966 (and it dropped even further by 1970), but by 1996 the number had risen to more than 70 percent.⁷ (This would seem to imply that the greatest increase in personal wealth in the world’s history has also increased personal economic insecurity. In fact, it may

merely reflect the fact that more wealth produces more desires, the very basis of modern materialism. This is a somewhat philosophical point, but it has direct effects on how the nation regards higher education, and thus on the marketplace for those services.)

The several dozen liberal arts colleges in the most selective ranks have managed to resist these trends best. It is easier for them to do so, since so many of their students will go on to graduate school, thus reducing the need for a “useful,” career-based undergraduate major. Oddly enough, however, so have some of the schools at the lowest economic tier of liberal arts colleges. They have not had the resources to develop an additional, career-oriented curriculum. Their funding rests on a restricted base. Their appeals for both students and support are often focused by religion, race, or proximity, and secularism, desegregation, and mobility have taken their toll. Some have closed, and this remains the most vulnerable category of higher education.

In the middle are several hundred nominally liberal arts schools. Some have strayed farther from the traditional liberal arts concept; some remain more true to it. All face escalating costs, increasing competition, and relatively meager capital resources. Many are quite locally based, relying on part-time, nontraditional, nonresidential students, all far from the higher model of liberal arts colleges. These schools suffer the greatest ambiguity about their mission, for they see economic salvation in meeting student demands for specialized training. Without large endowments, economics forces them toward a larger scale, undermining the smallness that is part of their social and pedagogical (but not curricular) attraction.

In sum, schools in this middle category suffer most in comparison to public colleges and universities. They are likely to cost more, offer less, shortchange faculty, defer maintenance, and scrape for full-fare students. The more that the broad, middle-performing cohort of prospective students regards higher education as a generic credential, the more these middle-level schools will suffer competitively. The more that this same public sees higher education as a vocational credential, the more these schools will suffer as well. In other words, credentialism

in general will have to loosen its grip for these schools to reverse their current steady decline, and that seems an unlikely prospect. The trend only increases when such schools get into a downward spiral, in which declining enrollment forces cost-cutting, which visibly harms quality, which sends enrollment lower, and so on.

WAVING TO THE LIMITED

Even if the greatest threat is aimed at mid-level colleges, there is a danger for the top-tier schools too. The danger is that they will go the way of high-end American passenger trains in the late 1940s: they performed exceptionally well, but people began to use automobiles and planes more often. Eventually, the best passenger trains suffered not just because of direct competition for their passengers but because they were isolated. It did not mean as much to be the best when they were almost the only trains, and the decline was inevitable as their infrastructure disappeared. When people wanted to travel, their first thoughts turned to the car or plane. The full range of train options had narrowed too far to keep the best trains viable.

This analogy cannot be followed forever; after all, planes were faster than trains. There is a danger, though, if upper-tier liberal arts colleges become more isolated than they are today. They might no longer be seen as the premier example of liberal arts colleges, which is still a legitimate alternative form of education for almost anyone. In many ways, they might be perceived the way secondary boarding schools widely are today, as remnant centers of economic privilege—once central and powerful, now mostly a social holdover.

The governance of these schools adds to the antiquated image. At its best, the faculty is the soul of the institution and the heart of its excellence. At its worst, it closely resembles a bad legislature, a council of self-absorbed egos that puts process above substance and personal prerogatives above group adaptation. The administration may be considered no better. Any president who can claim to be the intellectual head of a college is probably failing as its funding and administrative head. Deans and academic vice presidents often preside in a proud amateur-

ism. Actual training or experience in financial management, personnel, counseling, or almost any other field directly relevant to their work is usually a serendipitous coincidence. The colleges in turn, then, look like small hospitals of the past, in which doctors ran everything (usually by committee) in ways that left them perfectly unprepared for the rapid shifts in medical care that modern technology and government finance engendered.

The image of the liberal arts colleges as elite remnants of the past will be even more difficult to shake if the colleges cannot control their escalating tuitions. In theory, the competition of liberal arts colleges with schools like the University of Arkansas should force them to hold the line. Suppose that with enough money the UAs of the world can manage to draw students, even if it is only a core of students, from the high-performing ranks and that they can offer an education in the midst of those high performers for free rather than for \$30,000 a year. Then the elitist image will become self-fulfilling, for the liberal arts colleges will draw most heavily from those for whom \$30,000 is only a minor concern.

Such a difference will have its greatest impact on students from poorer economic backgrounds, for even with good financial aid, the burden of attending the selective liberal arts schools will weigh disproportionately on them. There is not much evidence, though, that the children of high-income families want to attend a college composed almost exclusively of their own demographic sector. Indeed, children of the affluent are less likely now to favor private schools. The proportion of college freshmen from families earning more than \$200,000 who attended public institutions rose from 31 percent in 1980 to 38 percent in 1994.⁸ These families clearly maintain their ability to pay a premium price. What seems to be weakening is their willingness to pay it.

Relatively low, flat-rate tuitions at the public schools are obviously part of the draw, and the class snobbery that used to lead some to private schools has diminished greatly. Special honors colleges within the university, set up as if to say a student can be part of a school like Swarthmore but stay in Fayetteville, pretend to offer the best of both worlds. Merit

scholarships can drive the tuition savings up to \$25,000 a year or more, and at that level the price of prestige has reached the limit for many affluent families. These merit designations function like a Lexus does in the luxury car market. They allow top students to forget the Mercedes, overcome the obstacles of both quality and status, and settle for a car that is actually made by Toyota.

The competition of those same liberal arts colleges with each other, however, leads in the opposite direction. That competition—for the biggest market share of the best and brightest students—pushes costs ever higher. Rising prices at the top colleges and universities exceed estimates of the rising operating costs facing the schools, and one economist measuring the spread attributes much of it to “unbounded aspirations.”⁹ Colleges are marketers, and fresh new facilities, expanded programs, sought-after teachers, and generous financial aid are the marketers’ tools. Unfortunately, they also require more and more from both tuition and donor support, which leads us back to the insidious trap: increasing quality decreases access. As long as liberal arts colleges are perceived as the way to go for many of the best students, financial aid provides the main avenue around this trap. As more of the best students come to believe they can find an equally good education and experience in other places, though, the liberal arts colleges will increasingly have to seek a different avenue. Already there are signs that financial-aid departments may turn to discounting practices that make airline fares look simple and equitable by comparison.

During the postwar years, higher-education institutions grew because of larger populations and increased college attendance rates. They could look successful just by capturing a portion of that growth, so they had little incentive to wonder what students they were getting. Now, as participation rates are leveling off and as state governments face demands that restrict support, the need to look good has been extended to the quality of the school, which has to include the quality of the students. In many instances, pressure in that direction also comes from public officials concerned about economic development. In many

cases, restricting the student body pays off by increasing the per-pupil subsidy.¹⁰

Add to that the broad merit scholarships that are primarily aimed at keeping students from migrating. Georgia's Hope Scholarships, given for rather average high-school performance, are rapidly becoming a middle-class entitlement rather than aid to the poor. Like Medicare and various other government programs, the broad base of political support for these scholarships has derived from the very fact that they are *not* meant just for the poor.

All this leads universities to raise standards and to compete for better students, and in recent years that competition has extended to the very best students—the ones who might otherwise go to Harvard or Yale, Williams or Amherst.

THE ENEMY WITHIN

The marketplace threats to liberal arts colleges, in sum, are from within and without. So-called merit aid, which is actually a host of discounting techniques, is a stark effort to buy market share of high-quality students. It may, however, turn out to be a powerful force, swamping the economics of need-based aid in its wake. Outside sources of support have growing weaknesses, and in the worst scenario, the high-quality liberal arts colleges could be left with no one but the children of the wealthy, who then turn out to be unwilling to attend if no one else is.

Many of these schools have great endowments, so an early demise cannot be predicted. They already rely heavily on those endowments to compete with one another and may have to draw on them more heavily in the future, since their competition for students and for quality is broader than they have ever encountered. Competition will present special problems for maintaining need-blind/full-need aid policies, now remaining in just a few schools, and for the high-price/high-aid strategies behind them.

The entire category of liberal arts colleges coasts forward with a certain vulnerability, however. All spend to the hilt. Indeed, they feel an almost fiduciary duty to maximize the quality of the education they offer to those currently enrolled.

But what if things were to go bad? These are not swiftly adaptable institutions, and they have high overhead. Because no student pays the full cost, the schools could not simply increase enrollment to cover their basic costs. High financial aid is the only way around the quality/access trap, but a real economic crunch could escalate financial aid into untenable levels. In a rather short time, all but a handful of colleges could find the drain on endowment unbearable.

There are mitigating factors to these glum scenarios, of course. There are no particular signs that the states will all suddenly return to the largess of old, and public schools may face cost pressures that will undermine their other great advantages of size. If the insistent critiques of higher education in general ever turn into action, liberal arts colleges might find new favor, but there is now heavy inertia within the business-supported, government-run universities of the nation. If the job market becomes so disjointed that employers see more benefit in a general degree, followed by continuing education and retraining as years progress, then the emphasis on specialization might weaken—but that is unlikely.

This last point bears its own irony. If one asks the chief executive officers of business corporations and nonprofit organizations what they prize most in an employee, the list resembles the mission statement of a liberal arts college—critical thinking, oral and written communication abilities, conceptual application of quantitative skills, a commitment to lifelong learning, and the like. The list seems to be little noticed in the CEO's own personnel departments, however, for more and more jobs go first to those with specific vocational credentials. Given the choice, a newspaper publisher is likely to favor the history major from Middlebury to fill a beginning reporter's slot, but a cautious director of human resources, or even a cautious managing editor, is likely to hire the journalism-school graduate from Kansas. Somehow, the professional certificate seems to assure safety, and hiring is now a risk-averse activity.

Liberal arts colleges face many threats, including rising costs (and price), problematic access, weak governance, and a changing status in the marketplace of higher education. Yet the threats present no obvious remedies, for many of the possible adapta-

tions for the modern market would wreck the model itself. That would be a particularly perverse result at a time when larger universities are copying the model in honors colleges within the larger institutions—accepting by imitation that the liberal arts model remains the ideal form of undergraduate education.

If the nation places even greater emphasis on higher education as a fungible commodity and a generic credential, however, liberal arts colleges will be at a continuing disadvantage. A small band of the faithful will see a greater good in the liberal arts, but if the brilliant biology researcher of the future sees no more widely than his own future prizes, he is likely to begin that career as a freshman at a research university. If the lawyer figures it will be the law-school record that determines her first job, and thus her future happiness, then she will likely aim to save her family thousands of dollars for the four years of undergraduate prep work.

If results are increasingly measured in dollars, liberal arts colleges will suffer—unless they are seen even more clearly as the precise antidote to that way of measuring the world. As scholar and social critic Todd Gitlin wrote recently, “Little attention has been paid to the strongest reason to cultivate knowledge that is relatively enduring: to anchor a high-velocity, reckless, and lightweight culture whose main value is marketability.”¹¹ The real threat to the best of the liberal arts colleges is that Gitlin’s exhortation is ignored, that as a culture we choose trends over permanence, image over substance, money over values, and the market over meaning. It is the liberal arts that can spare us from that world; if that fails, however, the colleges that hold the ideals of liberal arts in the highest esteem will be threatened themselves.

ENDNOTES

¹Jennifer Pinkerton, “UA Scholarships Attract More Bright Freshmen,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, 27 September 1998.

²See, for instance, The College Board, *Trends in College Pricing 1998* (New York: The College Board, 1998).

- ³The National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, "The Choice-Income Squeeze: How Do Costs and Discounts Affect Institutional Choice," *Change* (September/October 1998): 53–56 (based on research by Michael McPherson and Morton Schapiro).
- ⁴The qualifier "artfully done" may explain contradictory conclusions about whether research bears any correlation to good teaching. See, for instance, a positive conclusion in Zachary Karabell, *What's College For?* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 134, and the contrary assertion in Christopher J. Lucas, *Crisis in the Academy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 193.
- ⁵Lucas, *Crisis in the Academy*, 52–53.
- ⁶Frederick Rudolph, *Mark Hopkins and the Log*, 2d ed. (Williamstown: Williams College, 1996), appendix.
- ⁷"The American Freshman: Twenty-five Year Trends," cited in David W. Breneman, *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving or Endangered* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1994), 141.
- ⁸Peter Passell, "Affluent Turning to Public Colleges, Threatening a Squeeze for Others," *New York Times*, 13 August 1997, p. A16.
- ⁹Joyce Mercer, "Expensive Ambitions," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 April 1996, p. A33–35, describes Charles T. Clotfelter, *Buying the Best: Cost Escalation in Elite Higher Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- ¹⁰For a fuller discussion of this economic model, see discussion papers published by the Williams Project on the Economics of Higher Education. A useful beginning would be Gordon C. Winston, "The Economic Structure of Higher Education: Subsidies, Customer-Inputs and Hierarchy," Williams College, 1996.
- ¹¹Todd Gitlin, "The Liberal Arts in an Age of Info-Glut," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 May 1998, p. B4.

A measure of further disaggregation, then, is clearly called for if one is to come to terms adequately with the changing nature of professional life even in the tiny, liberal arts college sector of the American academic universe. A century ago, the great *condottieri* of the university “revolution” in America were notably condescending towards the institutions characteristic of this sector—what one of them dismissed as “a regime of petty sectarian colleges.” Thus David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford, confidently predicted that with time “the college will disappear, in fact, if not in name. The best will *become* universities, the others will return to their place as academies.” A century later, however, his prediction has proved to be incorrect. While they no longer dominate the American higher educational scene, they are far from having been nudged into the world of secondary education—from which, in any case and *pace* Jordan, they had not emerged in the first place. Nor have they *become* universities—or, at least, not universities as he understood that term. They remain instead what they have always been, direct lineal descendants of the single-college universities that, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, had emerged in Spain, Scotland, and Ireland. They remain, that is to say, small universities devoting themselves exclusively to undergraduate instruction, representing a distinctive strand in American higher education and constituting the institutional arena where about 8 percent of American academics now pursue their professional careers.

—Francis Oakley

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Complexity and Change”

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