Breaking Away From Leviathan:

COLLEGES CAN THRIVE WITHOUT FEDERAL FUNDING

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August 2022

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ISSN 1935-3510

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Can an academic institution be truly free if it relies on government funding? Perhaps in some perfect world, but today in the U.S., however, unencumbered generosity is not part of relationship between the federal government and higher education. Federal dollars mean federal mandates, and those mandates grow increasingly draconian. More and more, they stifle debate on open questions, demand denial of verifiable scientific truths, eliminate due process for students accused of misdeeds by other students, or insist on unequal treatment for different groups in ways that corrupt the academic mission.

Adding to the problem, most academics and policymakers insist that accepting federal funding—including grants and loans to students—is the only way a college or university can viably function in today's economy.

Yet, despite such claims, it is still possible for academic institutions to remain free of government mandates by rejecting federal funding. The Martin Center located 19 such schools successfully operating in the United States, and we tried to find out what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why they are good for the intellectual life of the nation.

We discovered that they keep the doors open and the lights on in many different ways. Some of these independent institutions attract large amounts of money from private donors, while others practice austerity to reduce costs. Just about all of them are able to reduce the cost of an education below that of other private schools.

Academically, the independent schools are free to choose their own paths. Most offer students greater immersion in the Western intellectual tradition than schools that submit to federal mandates. At the same time, other independent schools are innovating with original pedagogies that show great promise for the future. And without federal mandates, independent schools are able to uphold standards in ways that other schools cannot.

The ability of independent schools to function outside the boundaries of the federal government efficiently and effectively—offering lower tuition than most other private schools while holding high academic standards—suggests that federal funding is hardly necessary. And it poses a further question: does federal funding hinder education rather than improving it? It may be that it does.

Another promising development is that most of these independent colleges are relatively new; they comprise a growing phenomenon. And the future of this phenomenon looks bright—at least without further interference from a federal government fearful of losing control over higher education. For more Americans are becoming aware of the federal government's encroachment on academia and they increasingly desire freedom from its control over intellectual matters.

Indeed, independence from the government may be the best way to keep the spirit of free inquiry that lies at the center of higher education truly free. We hope that this report contributes in some small way to an awareness that it is both possible and desirable to break free from the educational Leviathan.

INTRODUCTION

"He who pays the piper calls the tune."

—English proverb

At first glance, American higher education is an enormous monolith with little variation in perspectives. A prevailing ideological orthodoxy that brooks no opposition has almost complete dominance over academia, despite this orthodoxy running counter to the beliefs of the average American. Its adherents cast aside reason to promote a radical political agenda, and it is amazing how far it has been able to progress.

One major reason why the orthodoxy has been able to gain a stranglehold over campuses is the increasing role of federal funding. The largesse heaped on higher education has grown steadily since World War II—most often in the form of student financial aid and research grants. And with federal funding comes many mandates. Indeed, it is not out of line to suggest that our government has conducted a campaign of social engineering using the various "titles" of the Higher Education Act of 1965 that govern academia and threats to withhold funding as weapons to bludgeon universities to promote this engineering.

And yet, even at the height of government influence on higher education, there are signs that many Americans are ready to break free from conventional academia. Academia is failing in many ways, and its deterioration has been accompanied—or even advanced—by increasing federal involvement, and awareness of this trend is growing.

This paper is about colleges that have broken free—they do not take money from the federal government, even federally backed student loans. It starts with an inward desire and drive to be free. "Being independent has to be in your DNA, from the trustees on down through the faculty, administration, and staff," Michael Buckman, Grove City College's vice-president of business and finance, told the Martin Center. Grove City was the plaintiff in the court case that set the initial boundaries for colleges that wish to opt out of federal mandates.

"Once a month, somebody contacts me who wants to start a new college," New Saint Andrews College president Ben Merkle told the Martin Center. He said that he cautions those inquiring that starting a new college is a major endeavor. "It's a lot easier to start K-12 schools. For colleges, a bigger financial base is needed. There's a huge hill to get over initially: you have to pay a lot more for Ph.D.s than for regular teachers, and you can't rely on volunteers for non-teaching functions like you can at the K-12 level."

With the choice to forgo federal funding, these independent colleges are freed from many government regulations and from pressure to submit to the orthodoxy. And it may be that doing so releases the forces of innovation, tradition, and the spirit of free inquiry from current constraints.

Certainly, the autonomy that comes from "going it alone" must be weighed against of the loss of revenue from federal sources—which, for almost all academic institutions, is substantial, and for many, is a hardship. One of the central issues of this report is how schools can maintain their independence from government mandates and survive financially.

This paper will explore how independent colleges are motivated and operated—with the hope that more schools will see it is possible to shed government interference. Such flight from government control can only be healthy for the nation's intellectual life.

PART I. THE INSTITUTIONS

The Martin Center was able to locate 19 functioning colleges offering undergraduate baccalaureate degrees that intentionally forego all federal government funding, including financial aid programs for students. There may be more.

The 19 independent institutions we found are:

Institution	Year Founded	Location	Undergraduate Enrollment
Bethlehem College & Seminary	1998	Minneapolis, MN	121
Boyce College **(Southern Baptist Theological Seminary)**	1998 1859	Louisville, KY	983
Christendom College	1977	Front Royal, VA	493
College at Mid-America	2018	Memphis, TN	NA
Faith Bible College International	1959	Charleston, ME	356
Grove City College	1876	Grove City, PA	2,283
Gutenberg College	1994	Eugene, OR	14
Hillsdale College	1844	Hillsdale, MI	1,468
Minerva University	2012	San Francisco, CA	1,000
New College Franklin	2009	Franklin, TN	28
New Saint Andrews College	1994	Moscow, ID	148

Patrick Henry College	2000	Purcellville, VA	311
Pensacola Christian College	1974	Pensacola, FL	4,540
Principia College	1910	Elsah, IL	404
Sattler College	2018	Boston, MA	77
Texas Baptist College **(Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary)**	2005 1908	Fort Worth, TX	456
Thales College	2022	Raleigh, NC	NA
Wyoming Catholic College	2007	Lander, WY	185
Yeshiva Toras Chaim Talmudic Seminary	1967	Denver, CO	NA

Data source: School websites.

Not surprisingly, information gathering proved difficult. For one, these are all private schools, which means they need not provide information to outsiders. Second, many of them are quite private about their operations; only a few were willing to discuss their operations with the Martin Center.

Of the 19 colleges, only eight currently report information to the National Center for Education Statistics, stored in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The eight are Hillsdale, Grove City, New Saint Andrews, Principia, Texas Baptist, Boyce, Patrick Henry, and Bethlehem. They will be used for much of the analysis, since IPEDS data is reliable and standardized. While the sample is small, it is sufficient to illustrate important patterns. Additional examples and illustrations are taken from others in the list of 19.

In addition to relying on statistical information, The Martin Center also conducted interviews with officials from five institutions: Grove City, New Saint Andrews, New College Franklin, Thales, and Minerva.

INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Schools that reject federal funding in order to remain true to their missions tend to share many characteristics. For one thing, most were founded recently. But not all. Hillsdale and Grove City are in a category of their own in many respects as they date back to the mid-19th century. Principia—loosely affiliated with the Christian Science church—was founded in 1910. Boyce College and Texas Baptist College were both created recently from long-existing Baptist seminaries that focused on graduate degrees: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, founded in 1858, and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, founded in 1908.

All of the rest in our sample were founded after World War II, starting with Faith Bible College International, which opened its doors to students in 1959. Twelve of the 19 were founded after 1990.

Almost all the schools that currently eschew federal funding have intensely religious roots, which may explain their need to fend off government intrusion. Some are attached to, or grew out of, Christian seminaries. Some are explicitly Baptist, but others are Presbyterian, Catholic, and non-denominational Christian. The list even includes one Jewish Talmudic seminary.

In the last few years, however, though, several secular schools that reject federal funds and the mandates that accompany them have opened—or will soon do so. Two of them are especially innovative. One is Minerva University, which opened its virtual doors in 2014. The school is entirely online and recruits students from the entire world.

> "Being independent has to be in your DNA, from the trustees on down through the faculty, administration, and staff," Michael Buckman, Grove City College's vice-president of business and finance, told the Martin Center.

The other is Thales Academy in Raleigh, North Carolina, which will begin a full schedule of classes in the fall of 2022. It also has a distinctive format, with students spending half the day at paid internships at local businesses.

These schools also tend to be small. Pensacola Christian College is easily the largest, with roughly 4,500 undergraduate students. Hillsdale and Grove City are the only others with undergraduate enrollments above 1,000, and even they are on the small side: in the fall of 2019, Hillsdale's enrollment was 1,619, while Grove City's was 2,481. Boyce College has nearly 1,000 undergraduates, and Minerva University has grown rapidly to about 615 students since 2013. At the other end of the spectrum, tiny Gutenberg College has a mere 14 students; the rest have fewer than 500, many intentionally so.

The locations of the independent colleges vary. Eight are located in large cities, seven in small towns (fewer than 20,000 people), and four in mid-sized municipalities. Their geographic spread is considerable, with every region of the country represented.

According to average test scores of incoming freshmen, students at these colleges tend to be in the upper-middle range of academic abilities (at least, at those schools that report them). Minerva University is the most exclusive; while it does not use test scores, it has one of the lowest admission rates in the country.[1] Hillsdale has the highest SAT average of 1363 (combined math and reading); while an excellent average, it is still below those of the most prestigious institutions, such as the Ivy League schools.[2] Patrick Henry is a close second, at 1310.[3] And, at the other end of the spectrum, Boyce College's SAT average of 1139 is well above the 1030 mark that the College Board, which creates and administers the tests, considers to be the benchmark for true college ability.[4] The same goes for Texas Baptist College with its 1104 average.[5]

All in all, independent colleges admit students who can handle rigorous reading of important historical texts that frequently forms the basis of the education they provide.

Graduation rates vary widely. Grove City graduates 82 percent in four years,[6] Hillsdale 78 percent.[7] On the other hand, Faith Bible College International has a four-year graduation rate of only 33 percent.[8]

ORIGINS

Independent colleges can be classified according to their origins. One such classification includes schools such as Hillsdale and Grove City, which were founded by churches in the nineteenth century, not as seminaries to train clergy but as multi-purpose academic institutions. In this, they resemble the majority of private colleges in the United States. As federal spending became tied to the various "titles" of the Higher Education Act of 1965, they shed their government connections.

Another grouping is baccalaureate colleges that were recently formed out of long-existing churches and graduate seminaries. These include Boyce College, which was created in 1998 by Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (established in 1859); Texas Baptist College; which was launched in 2006 by Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (established in 1908); and Bethlehem College and Seminary, founded by Bethlehem Baptist Church (established in 1871) in Minneapolis in 1998.

A third model consists of newer colleges deliberately founded as independent that are ardently Christian (although they may or may not be non-denominational). These include Christendom College (established in 1977); Patrick Henry (established in 2000); New Saint Andrews (established in 1994); Wyoming Catholic (established 2007); and New College Franklin (established in 2009).

And finally, there are several new, secular startups with unique educational concepts. Minerva University, which opened in 2014, has already vaulted to a high level of prestige, with an acceptance rate lower than all Ivy League institutions. Thales College will open the doors of its Raleigh, North Carolina campus in the fall of 2022.

The following sections discusses representatives of each category in more depth.

A Traditional College: Grove City

Grove City College began in 1876 as Pine Grove Select School. It was founded to prepare students for college and for the training of teachers. It was affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, and the first class had 13 students. Its charter stated that:

> *It is the design of this School to fit young men and women for College, and to prepare those who desire to teach to do good work in the school room.*[9]

The name was soon changed to Pine Grove Normal Academy, and again, in 1886, to Grove City College. According the Grove City website, "by the turn of the century, the enrollment had grown to 660 students, the faculty was enlarged to 20 members, and the campus had increased to 40 acres with four substantial buildings."[10] The school continued to expand in the early twentieth century, in large part because of the patronage of the Pew family, the founders of Sun Oil and the Sun Shipyard.

Unlike many other small liberal arts colleges that gradually secularized in the mid-twentieth century, Grove City saw "an increased emphasis on religious life on campus" in the 1970s.[11]

In 1977, with its renewed Christian focus, Grove City came into conflict with the federal legislation (Title IV and IX of the Higher Education Act) that regulates the conditions by which a college can participate in federal financial aid programs. As indicated above, Grove City sued to be able to continue in such programs as Pell Grants without needing to comply with aspects of the new legislation it found objectionable.

The Supreme Court eventually decided against Grove City in 1984, declaring that its students could no longer receive financial aid unless the school was willing to assure compliance with Title IX.

That did not signal the end for Grove City's independence, however. Instead of complying with Title IX, it has accepted the absence of federal funding. By keeping its tuition low, offering in-house scholarships, and encouraging borrowing from private sources, the college has thrived. School officials

Because it carried the banner of independence from government in the court case, Grove City benefits from its identification with the political conservative movement.

have discovered that there are considerable savings from not officially complying with Title IV and Title IX. Michael Buckman said that, in order to comply, "we'd probably have to double our staff."

Because it carried the banner of independence from government in the court case, Grove City benefits from its identification with the political conservative movement. It maintains close relations with prominent conservatives and think tanks, and students wishing to enter government find such ties valuable for getting political employment and internships.

Today, Grove City College is regarded as an icon of independence, and has an enrollment of roughly 2,300 students, four-year graduation rates often above 80 percent, and an endowment of $125 million.

Emerging from the Seminary: Boyce

Boyce College in Louisville, Kentucky is the late-twentieth century offspring of the well-established Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.[12] SBTS was founded in 1859 "at Greenville, South Carolina, with 26 students and four professors." Classes were suspended at the start of the Civil War but resumed in 1862—with only seven students. In 1877, the school moved to Louisville, where it thrived and grew steadily. After World War II, enrollment tripled, from 1,009 in 1951 to 3,201 in 1982.

Unlike many schools with mainstream Christian roots, SBTS adamantly retained its traditional perspective. In 1958, 13 professors were fired after they "began to agitate to teach modernist views more openly and aggressively."[13] Another challenge to "the inerrancy of the Bible" occurred in the 1980s:

> The majority of Southern Baptists could not in good conscience continue to pay the salaries of professors who undermined students' confidence in the Bible and its teachings. Southern Baptists therefore undertook a campaign to replace denominational leaders and seminary faculties with those who held to the inerrancy of the Scriptures.[14]

In 1974, Boyce Bible School opened at the seminary to provide theological education for ministers without college degrees; those who completed the program received associate degrees. It did not become a baccalaureate college until 1998; it was accredited from the start through SBTS. While offering seven different ministry-related degree programs, Boyce College's enrollment has grown over 700% in the ensuing years and is now nearly 1,000 students.

New Religious Institutions: Wyoming Catholic and New College Franklin

Most of the new independent colleges that have popped up in the last three decades—successful ones, that is—are deeply religious. These are the types of institutions that would suffer the most under Title IX mandates. Two of these schools are Wyoming Catholic and New College Franklin.

Wyoming Catholic

Wyoming Catholic College was conceived in the early years of the new millenium by that state's Catholic establishment, particularly Bishop David L. Ricken of the Diocese of Cheyenne.[15] In 2004, a landowner offered the Church the deed to 600 acres near Lander, Wyoming, giving reality to the conception.

The project moved forward rapidly with the inclusion of Robert Carlson, a Casper College professor and former student of John Senior, the founder of *The Imaginative Conservative*, a prominent right-leaning political journal with a communitarian bent. Classes began in 2007, with an entering cohort of 34 students.

The school provides an explicitly Catholic education, with all students taking the same classes in the same order, and with all graduates receiving a baccalaureate degree in Liberal Arts. The curriculum employs such traditional concepts as the "trivium" (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and the "quadrivium" (music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy), which was an integral part of religious education in the Middle Ages.

One of the school's main draws—one that is truly unique—is its outdoor program, which takes advantage of the Wyoming wilderness. According to its website:

> Every student at WCC begins their college career in the same way: a 21-day wilderness expedition in the Rocky Mountains. This intense experience helps students grow in wonder as they study "God's First Book," grow in virtue as they push themselves out of their comfort zone, and grow as a community as they overcome challenges together.[16]

Students spend at least two weeks in the wilderness every year they attend.

In 2015, the Board of Directors unanimously decided "not to accept Federal student loan programs."[17] And in 2018, Wyoming Catholic received "initial accreditation" from the Higher Learning Commission, the regional accreditor for much of the central part of the country. The next year it arranged for a private company, the Notre Dame Federal Credit Union, to provide loans to its students.

Also in 2015, there were 58 entering freshmen. For the 2020-21 school, it had its highest total enrollment with 190 students.[18]

But more important than having more resources, Wilbur said, is to keep "the vision of the college unencumbered," and to ensure that there is "no way an exterior entity could put pressure on us."

New College Franklin

Greg Wilbur's interest in starting a college began with a sense that "higher education is broken," that it fails to "educate the whole person." Thus, after Wilbur consulted with other like-minded people, New College Franklin was conceived in 2006.

Wilbur said "there were two steps we had to think through financially" before proceeding further. One was "do we want to be 501(c)3?" That is, a non-profit institution. He decided that was the easiest way to incorporate.

The second question was "Would we go down the path of Title IX?" Wilbur said it came mainly down to a matter of religious liberty—but added that there were also practical reasons for rejecting participation in federal programs. He wanted to avoid creating the sort of bureaucracy required for participation, even if it meant going without federal aid. And he did so in a big way. To say that New College Franklin's staffing

is "lean and mean" is an understatement: the school has 10 faculty members—including adjuncts—but only two fulltime non-teaching administrators. (It does have several part-time staff, such as a CFO and librarian). Wilbur admits that it is a problem doing everything that needs to be done with such a small staff.

But more important than having more resources, Wilbur said, is to keep "the vision of the college unencumbered," and to ensure that there is "no way an exterior entity could put pressure on us . . . and say, 'You've taken money from us, therefore you have to do things in a particular way.'"

Unlike most independent colleges, which provide a sanctuary of tradition in a changing world, Minerva has embraced Silicon Valley globalism and cutting-edge technology.

With those questions settled, and with an "in-kind" contribution from Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, which allows the school to use its facilities, New College Franklin opened in 2009. The cooperation between church and college enabled New College Franklin to get up and running without the major expense of a physical campus. Furthermore, the school is a "no frills" institution, according to Wilbur. "There is no aquatics center, no athletic fields," he said.

Wilbur said the school is now looking for a permanent facility near the church. He said the relationship with the church will remain "co-operative, with both institutions using both spaces." New College Franklin's enrollment has grown considerably; in 2014-15, it had 18 students at the end of the year; today it has "39 or 40."[19] Wilbur said that he wants to keep the school small, with a maximum enrollment of 64, in order to maintain the low staffing levels, small classes, and sense of community.

The Innovators: Minerva and Thales

As secular institutions, Minerva University in San Francisco and Thales College in Raleigh are clearly operating outside of the norm for independent colleges. Yet, despite some similarities in pedagogical methods and attempts to throw off old assumptions, Minerva and Thales are also very different from each other.

Minerva began with an abundance of Silicon Valley money, a grand vision, and meticulous planning that closely adheres to that vision. Thales, although it also benefits from a deep-pocketed founder—"fortunately, we don't have to go on some big fundraising campaign," said the school's dean, Grattan Brown—has taken a more frugal, and incremental direction. Brown said Thales's founder, Robert Luddy, who owns CaptiveAire Systems, the nation's largest manufacturer of restaurant ventilation systems, is concerned about "developing the product" and addressing "all of the problems that come up" before throwing around large sums of money. Brown defended the gradual approach: "some might say, 'you need to figure out what you're doing from the beginning,' but that's not the only way to get things done."

The difference between the two schools is especially apparent in their approaches to accreditation. According to school president Teri Cannon—who is also the former executive vice president of regional accreditor Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), Senior College and University Commission—Minerva wanted to enroll only extremely talented students. To do so meant that the school had to be regionally accredited from day one, since such in-demand students will shy away from non-accredited schools. However, regional accrediting agencies such as the WASC will only accredit institutions that have already graduated students—a considerable barrier to start-up schools.

So Minerva arranged for a partnership with the Keck Graduate Institute (KGI) of the Claremont Colleges consortium, which was regionally accredited and, in agreement with WASC, was able to confer that accreditation on Minerva by providing the necessary oversight and infrastructure. When Minerva's first class graduated in 2019, Minerva began to sever the ties to Keck, since the partnership was no longer needed. Minerva received regional accreditation on its own in 2021.[20]

Because of Minerva's successful "incubation" through Keck, WASC has adopted the process Minerva used as a policy for the future, Cannon says.

Thales College, on the other hand, is simply ignoring accreditation from the start. One reason is obvious: since Thales wants to operate independently of federal mandates, accreditation is unnecessary. Another reason, according to dean Grattan Brown, is that he and Luddy wanted to craft the school's design for educational reasons in the startup phase rather than design it to meet the regional accrediting agency's standards. Brown also told the Martin Center that they are starting to reconsider accreditation, since he believes that a school may better strive for excellence when held accountable by an outside authority.

Minerva University

Unlike most independent colleges, which provide a sanctuary of tradition in a changing world, Minerva has embraced Silicon Valley globalism and cutting-edge technology. It was conceived in the early years of the new millennium, a time when many people believed that higher education was about to undergo a massive technology "disruption," with the brick-and-mortar campus replaced by online education. Armed with a unique educational philosophy, an entrepreneurial founder who knew how to get noticed, and some deep-pocketed backers, the new school had many advantages from the start. Its founder, Ben Nelson, was well connected in the hi-tech world, and he was able to create a media buzz by involving celebrities such as Bob Kerrey, a former U.S. Senator, and Larry Summers, a former cabinet-level official under two presidents (and controversial former president of Harvard).

Minerva has fostered partnerships worldwide. Partners include prestigious institutions such as Hong Kong's University of Science and Technology.[21]

Minerva began with an unusual structure. It was initially a union of a for-profit side—The Minerva Project—and a non-profit side—the Minerva Institute for Research and Scholarship that operates Minerva University. The Minerva Project gathered venture capital startup funding and provided roughly $100 million to the non-profit side to quickly get the college up and running at an extremely high level. The Project and the University split into separate entities upon receiving accreditation, but the for-profit side owns the educational programs and software platform, which it developed and licenses not only to Minerva University, but also to roughly 20 other top universities around the world.

In a short period of time, Minerva has grown to roughly 600 undergraduate students with Ivy League-level credentials. There are three main draws for students, resulting in so many applications that Minerva has an acceptance rate of less than two percent.[22] One is keeping its tuition well below other prestigious private institutions: students only pay $14,450 per year. On top of that, Minerva provides financial aid to low-income students. Cannon said, "We have very heavy financial aid for our undergraduate population; over 80 percent of them get a combination of scholarships, our own work-study program, and a small amount of student loans, no more than $5,000 a year." Another attraction is its emphasis on globalism and future technology; students spend time at each of its seven campuses scattered across the globe. The main one is in San Francisco, but the others are located in major cities such as Berlin, London, Buenos Aires, and Hong Kong.

The third draw is its curriculum, including its active learning philosophy, which eschews passive forms of instruction such as lectures in favor of "project-based, hands-on learning."[23] This method appears to produce results; the incoming class of 2016 was tested at the beginning of their first year using a higher education outcome tool called the Collegiate Learning Assessment, and scored at the 95th percentile. At the end of the year, these students' performances rose to the 99th percentile.

At this point, Minerva appears to have achieved its initial goals with spectacular success. Despite offering a world-class education to top students, it does so without excessive costs. "We tried to get rid of all of the infrastructure, physical and otherwise, that is expensive so that we could keep the cost affordable," Cannon explained. For instance, according to Cannon, Minerva has approximately 80 non-teaching staff for between 50 and 60 full-time-equivalent faculty members—a ratio less than half of the national average. And faculty are not tenured, although they may be given time to conduct research.

Cannon said Minerva officials did not expect to have accreditation so quickly and for the time being they wish to keep the undergraduate program "about the size that it is now" and grow other programs that we offer." (Minerva has roughly 600 undergraduates.) She mentioned the single masters program in decision analysis that the school now offers, which it intends to expand. She added that "we have about three other major ideas for new programs in development," all of which are focused on "the science of learning."

Minerva's startup process will not be easily duplicated by others unless they have similar financial advantages. Of course, higher education receives massive charitable contributions every year, so it is not an impossibility that others could found a similar institution.

Thales College

Thales College, on the other hand, with its frugal incremental approach, presents a model that could more easily be replicated by large numbers of prospective college founders than Minerva.

Thales has a unique initial structure, albeit informally so. It is the brainchild of entrepreneur Robert Luddy. Along with his primary business of CaptiveAire, he founded Thales Academy, a network of K-12 schools in Raleigh, North Carolina. The first Thales Academy opened in 2007 and now educates over 3,600 students on 12 campuses in three states.[24] Like Minerva College, Thales K-12 schools use specific, highly structured pedagogical techniques such as Direct Instruction, as well as classical learning methods.[25]

Luddy's philosophy for developing Thales College has been to take advantage of opportunities as they appear instead of writing a big check to cover large startup costs. For instance, the college has used CaptiveAire and Thales Academy employees on a part-time basis to perform such functions as development of the college's website.

Such structural flexibility has allowed Thales College to begin educational activities with Grattan Brown as the only fulltime employee to date. The school applied for a state license to operate in 2018 and is already offering dual enrollment college-level classes to high school students—the same classes that will be offered to incoming freshmen when the college opens its doors in full in the fall of 2022. In the fall of 2021, eight high school students were taking two courses.

The current proposed tuition at Thales for full-time students of $4,000 a term ($12,000 per year, $32,000 for a degree) was set at the amount that would take care of faculty salaries and benefits; Brown said it may be adjusted to take care of other operating costs. Fundraising is not something the school is pursuing, although it has had several donors volunteer money, which was accepted since the donors support the mission. Brown said Thales may have to seek some outside funding for merit scholarships once it is up and running, but at this point doing so is not a priority.

Thales also makes engagement with the larger world beyond the campus a central part of its educational program. But unlike Minerva, with its foreign travel, elite perspective, and a program of engagement that has students closely observe communities without actually being part of them, Thales requires students to work at local businesses to prepare for their careers. And since there is no dormitory, they must live in the community as well. The Thales school day is arranged in accordance with students' work lives; all formal educational activities will take place in the morning so that students will be free to go to internships and part-time jobs every afternoon.

Brown says that Thales students will not begin their internships until their third term. That is, until after the school has been able to smooth off any "rough edges" to prepare students for work above the level of burger-flipping or lawn-cutting. He explained the emphasis on self-reliance and maturity: "We won't get them internships; we will get them opportunities to apply. We will ask employers, 'Will you allow our students to apply?' And it's up to them to win the internship and maintain good performance to keep it."

Brown hopes that the internships will be tied to what students are learning in their courses. And that Thales staff will provide considerable mentorship to help students perform as employees and to see the connections between their jobs and studies.

Brown added that plans are for Thales to grow its first campus to approximately 150 students and no more, but "the future depends on demand" and if there is demand for more Thales Colleges it is likely that "Bob Luddy will open up more campuses."

THE REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

Oversight of higher education—especially for public schools—comes from a dizzying array of institutions and regulations. Various state and federal departments, non-government organizations such as accrediting agencies that are themselves authorized by federal agencies, professional organizations, and legislative bodies.

The following sections explore at some sectors of the regulatory environment from which independent schools are attempting to escape, including accreditation, Titles IV and IX of the Higher Education Act of 1965, and the legal landscape.

Luddy's philosophy for developing Thales College has been to take advantage of opportunities as they appear instead of writing a big check to cover large startup costs.

Accreditation

In most cases, accreditation is a "must-have" for colleges wishing to function at a high level in the United States. It is a confusing apparatus; the accrediting agencies serve two different masters. The first of these is the federal Department of Education, which has designated them as gatekeepers for federal financial aid. If a college is not accredited, federal grants and loans are unavailable to its students. The second is the colleges and universities themselves, who foot the bill to keep the agencies operating.

Because of this dual allegiance, accreditors have, at times, troubling incentives. Ben Merkle said accreditation "has created unhealthy impulses in college leadership." For one, true leaders who take strong stands or innovate are weeded out and cautious followers advance. In the business world, "leaders are chosen for their individual initiative," Merkle explained. But in academia, "senior college administrators are chosen for their ability to demonstrate compliance." In other words, typical academic administrators at schools with federal funding rise not because they are original thinkers or driven innovators, but because they share a herd mentality that is antithetical to the spirit of free inquiry.

Furthermore, some regional accrediting agencies may protect the franchise of existing schools by making it difficult for new schools to get started. Even the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, which, according to Minerva University president Teri Cannon, has a reputation for being open to innovation,

does not confer accreditation until colleges have their first graduating class. This means that new institutions usually must wait at least four years before becoming accredited—a high hurdle for institutions trying to attract their initial students.

Accreditation has different levels. The highest rank is regional accreditation. Although "regional" may sound narrow, in fact the regional accreditors are the most prestigious, based on their long history that began well before the federal government was involved in accreditation. However, schools may also be accredited by specialty agencies such as the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS).

Individual programs within universities generally seek accreditation as well, such as accreditation of a school's business program. Such accreditation may affect whether a program can confer job licensure to graduates, or it can help graduates be accepted into graduate schools.[26] Federal funding, however, is dependent upon the accreditation of the whole institution.

Accreditation by the regional agencies can be expensive, costing hundreds of thousands of dollars for major universities, as they must hire additional staff to collect the requisite information. On the other hand, most of the independent schools have a religious affiliation so they can gain their initial overall accreditation from TRACS, which is more lenient and affordable than the regional accreditors.

Ben Merkle said accreditation "has created unhealthy impulses in college leadership." For one, true leaders who take strong stands or innovate are weeded out and cautious followers advance.

Grove City College is accredited by the regional Middle States Commission on Higher Education, with individual programs having their own accreditors. Provost Peter Frank said that obtaining and maintaining regional accreditation requires lots of labor. "It's a big expense," he said. He cited the Pennsylvania Department of Education's accreditation of Grove City's teacher education program as the most expensive.

In contrast, New Saint Andrews is accredited by TRACS, and Ben Merkle said his school is not overly burdened by accreditation costs. "It's probably between $10,000 and $15,000 a year." The only staff costs are "one lady on half-time for assessment—and she's good at making accreditation requirements align with work I would want us to do anyhow."

However, New Saint Andrews will likely face increasing costs from accreditation. Merkle said that his school recently received "applicant status" from its regional accrediting agency, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. The move is necessary because New Saint Andrews wants to start a "cooperative relationship with the University of Idaho" (also located in Moscow) in order to develop medical technology and engineering programs.

Greg Wilbur, the founder and president of New College Franklin, a very small college in Tennessee, describes a good relationship with TRACS, his school's accrediting agency. Regional accreditation is both "more invasive and more expensive," he said. Annual accreditation costs are only between "$5,000 and $6,000 annually," with additional costs of roughly $20,000 every five years when TRACS makes its "site visit" to the campus.

Furthermore, TRACS provides some valuable services. "An advantage of accreditation is that we don't have enough staff to keep eyes on all the higher education legislation and such," Wilbur explained. "The accreditors keep us informed of all that."

Title IV

Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 governs financial assistance for students. It lays out the rules that must be followed if colleges admit students who obtain federal loans for college. The schools must be financially solvent and in compliance with other government mandates.[27] Title IV also mandates that institutions be accredited by an agency authorized to do so by the Department of Education, and that schools must comply with other sections of the act. Of those, Title IX is the most troublesome.

Title IX

There may have been no more effective governmental power grab than Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 to the Higher Education Act of 1965. With it, the federal government has gained a stranglehold on the academy and therefore over the ideas influencing the nation.

Title IX was originally a relatively short statute, taking up just a few pages. Its initial intention was to prohibit "discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs receiving Federal financial assistance."[28] However, the full list of regulations contained in the Federal Register is now up to 554 pages, with the last revision becoming law in August of 2020. And it has been extended into so many areas it essentially controls the campus social, employment, and intellectual environments.

R. Shep Melnick, in his 2018 book *The Transformation of Title IX: Regulating Gender Equality in Education*, describes how, through a process he calls "leapfrogging," Title IX has been extended far beyond the original intent of the legislation. By leapfrogging he means that the Office of Civil Rights, which enforces Title IX, and other federal agencies deliberately "clarify" and "interpret" the legislation's provisions in ways that extend its reach. Courts often rely on these interpretations in making decisions, pushing Title IX's grasp even further.[29]

Although the initial Title IX legislation applied to all education programs, its initial impact was on athletics. It essentially pitted male and female athletes against each other in a struggle for resources. This competition was interrupted temporarily by the *Grove City v. Bell* decision in 1984 that clarified the penalties for non-compliance with the Higher Education Act but was restored with legislation passed in 1988.[30] In order to achieve parity—with the percentage of athletes for each sex equal to its respective percentage of students—many male sports have been eliminated. For instance, 80 percent of male gymnastics programs have been dropped, leaving only 20 programs nationwide.[31] And female students, who were only 15 percent of varsity collegiate athletes in 1972, are now 43 percent of varsity athletes.[32] While some may regard this parity as fairness, there is far greater interest in participating in athletics among young men than among young women.

But Title IX's mission creep did not end with sports. In an especially egregious case, Russlyn Ali, the assistant secretary for the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights division, issued a 2011 a "Dear Colleague" letter that derived its authority from Title IX.[33] The letter significantly changed the campus sexual landscape by redefining sexual harassment to be no more than "unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature." Consider that it is impossible for a person to be certain ahead of time whether casual comments, such as jokes, will be regarded as "unwelcome" by all within earshot.[34] This is an extremely broad definition, and it is especially oppressive in contrast to the previously used "Davis standard," which is based on a 1999 Supreme Court decision and defined sexual harassment as actions that are "so severe, pervasive, *and* objectively offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to the school's education program or activity."[35]

Also in 2011, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights demanded that "colleges and universities must employ the preponderance of the evidence" standard for guilt when a university was "adjudicating student complaints concerning sexual harassment or misconduct."[36] The preponderance of evidence bases innocence or guilt on a 50.01%, "more likely than not" evidentiary burden that is our judiciary's weakest. That standard is used in civil cases, where all that is at stake is money and reputation. Criminal cases use the far more stringent "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard, since the life and liberty of the accused may be on the line.

The "Dear Colleague" letter based many of its claims on a discredited study that claimed one in five women on college campuses are sexually assaulted.[37] If that were true, U.S. campuses would be one of the most dangerous places on earth for females—but they're not: the actual number of sexual assaults on campus, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, is only about 6.1 to 1,000, or 0.61 percent.[38]

Because sexual assault and rape are not just campus misconduct but are serious crimes, students or college officials must report the allegations to police, which then investigate and determine whether to bring charges against the accused. The 2011 Title IX standards required colleges to rule on these cases *no matter what the police do*. In a number of cases, college authorities have found students guilty of sexual assault even when the police cleared the accused of any wrongdoing.[39]

Furthermore, the Dear Colleague letter permitted plaintiffs claiming sexual harassment or assault the right to appeal not-guilty decisions—creating a "double jeopardy" situation. This has never been allowed in the United States, where nobody can be charged twice for the same crime. Altogether, provisions of the letter created a sexual minefield, especially for male students.

Failure to comply with the standards set by the letter could have resulted in loss of federal funds to an institution—including the federal loans many students use to pay for college. Yet compliance meant yielding control of everyday interactions between students and others on campus to extremist elements in the federal bureaucracy. This was particularly onerous for religious schools that uphold traditional relations between the sexes and enforce traditional standards of conduct. Given current trends, it may come to pass that schools will be forced to allow transgender students the right to use the gender-specific facilities—such as bathrooms and locker rooms—of their choosing.

Fortunately, the Dear Colleague letter was rescinded in 2017. Even so, the letter stands as a stark example of just how much control the federal government expects in return for its "generosity." And, during the years when the Dear Colleague letter was in force, higher education institutions built up "powerful internal bureaucracies devoted to preserving and expanding the dominion of Title IX," according to conservative feminist Christina Hoff Sommers.[40] Furthermore, some states are introducing legislation to maintain the Dear Colleague letter standards.[41]

The future of established academia depends on politics. With the federal government growing more intrusive in academia, particularly with the current aggressively progressive administration, the dictates of the Dear Colleague letter will likely return in some fashion. Indeed, Catherine Lhamon, a strong defender of the letter during her tenure as President Obama's assistant secretary for civil rights at the U.S. Department of Education, has been re-nominated to her former position by President Biden.[42] Since many of the 2011 letter's strictures conflict with religious beliefs, Christian schools that actively reject secularization will be placed in jeopardy if they continue to take federal funds.

Title IX Exemptions

Some schools are exempt from Title IX; they are still permitted to receive federal financial aid even if they do not meet federal mandates concerning treatment of the sexes. The exemptions most applicable to higher education are:[47]

- The undergraduate admissions processes for undergraduate private colleges and universities are exempt from Title IX rules. This permits holding male and female applicants to different standards to achieve gender balance.
- The membership practices of social organizations such as fraternities or sororities are exempt if they are also exempt from taxation.
- An educational institution that is controlled by a religious organization to the extent that application of Title IX would be inconsistent with the religious tenets of the organization.

- An educational institution the primary purpose or which is the training of individuals for the military services of the United States or the merchant marine service.

But most schools do not fit the latter two exemptions, and even some that do qualify choose not to comply out of principle. Independence can be its own reward—and some schools choose it.

The Courts: *Grove City v. Bell*

Grove City College v. Bell was the 1984 landmark Supreme Court decision that determined whether schools could receive federal funding without submission to Title IX regulations. The central issue of the case concerned whether a school had to certify its compliance with Title IX regulations if federal funds were paid to students in the form of individual grants rather than paid directly to the institution.

There were no accusations that Grove City had unjustly discriminated on the basis of gender (or race). Just the opposite: despite an exemplary record on discrimination, the confrontation arose on a matter of principle, that submission to Title IX meant a loss of independence. That is, the school refused to "execute an Assurance of Compliance" with Title IX's nondiscrimination provisions (mandated by the federal government starting in 1976).[44] The government responded to the college's refusal by beginning proceedings to end Basic Educational Opportunity Grants payments to Grove City students. Grove City and four of its students filed suit in the U.S. District Court for Western Pennsylvania in 1978.

Grove City won the initial round in 1980: it would be free from Title IX regulations if federal funds were given directly to students. However, the government appealed and the federal Third Circuit Court in Philadelphia sided against Grove City, reasoning that it did not matter whether the grants were received directly by the college or by students who then paid the money to the college. The school benefited either way, and was therefore required to show compliance with Title IX.

Grove City appealed again. However, the previous decision was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1984. Since then, the law has been clear: comply with Title IX or forego federal money.

There may have been no more effective governmental power grab than Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 to the Higher Education Act of 1965. With it, the federal government has gained a stranglehold on the academy and therefore over the ideas influencing the nation.

BRANDING FREEDOM

An important question for independent schools trying to survive without federal money is whether it is possible to "brand" an institution's independence from the government. That is, by advertising its defiance to "Big Government's" intrusion into higher education, can a school attract students and donors from freedom-loving backgrounds?

The results are mixed.

In Hillsdale College's case, the answer is a resounding "yes." The school has parlayed its independence into a major fundraising angle and recruiting tool. Of the independent schools that report to IPEDS, Hillsdale is the only one that admits less than half of applicants, has the highest average test scores by applicants, and has the biggest endowment. In fact, its endowment will soon top one billion dollars (if it has not already), and in 2020, with the nation's political divide intensifying and Hillsdale's national profile rising, the school managed to raise $231 million.[45]

Other schools are more hesitant to use their independence for advertising and recruiting. They instead emphasize other aspects of their institution. In an interview with the Martin Center, Grove City's provost Peter Frank said that the school's independence from the government "is not our number one selling point." He listed his school's "in-person residential experience, its rigorous Christian liberal arts education," along with more vocational majors such as engineering and "the health fields."

Michael Buckman, vice president of business and finance at Grove City, said that "secular transactional measures play an important role in attracting students to Grove City. These include the school's high graduation rate, which is above 80 percent, and job placement rates and a "return-on-investment" that exceed national averages. He added that it is not so much Grove City's conservatism that is its biggest draw, but its "Christian community and academic excellence."

New Saint Andrews school president Ben Merkle suggests much the same, that other considerations are more important for marketing. "We offer a particular product: academic rigor combined with Christian faith. Most institutions have dropped either one or the other; we have not. Our goal is to educate the whole person, and we feel we accomplish that goal."

But many religious liberal arts colleges can claim such things. While school officials may initially push forward their emphases on academics and faith as major selling points, freedom is a powerful undercurrent at these schools. Jacquelyn Muller, communications director at Grove City, initially raised other qualities such as the affordable cost and the legacy of a highly accomplished alumni—but she conceded that the desire to attend a center of "faith and freedom does matter for some."

At New College Franklin, Greg Wilbur said that the freedom from government is a selling point, but not the major one. Outside donors tend to "embrace the mission" rather than to be attracted by the independence aspect. But the political zeitgeist is opening up possibilities that didn't exist just a few years ago, he said: "The climate is shifting." When he first started seeking money for the new school "15 to 20 years ago," the people he solicited asked "why should we give you money when federal funds are available to you? But today, he continued, "it's more common for people to understand why a college would be wary of taking federal money."

Wilbur also suggested that more public awareness is still needed before branding as independent will benefit a college. He added that he has to put in considerable effort to use it as a selling point to prospective donors. "We're non-traditional in so many ways . . . we have to have so many conversations with traditional-type donors for them to understand why we're doing what we're doing and how we go about it."

Merkle admitted that an "independent freedom culture" is a major foundation of New Saint Andrews's philosophy. He described a "three-fold" approach to freedom. The school teaches the liberal arts intentionally to "educate the free man." In financial matters, it seeks freedom from the government. And it tries to instill a "moral freedom," graduating students who are "free in Christ."

New Saint Andrews reveals its true conservative orientation by producing humorous student recruitment videos that mock the academic zeitgeist, with its secular leftist values and retreat from intellectual standards. The videos show how New Saint Andrews offers a viable alternative to such trends.

Because their status is so unusual and sort of lumps them together, because so many are relatively new, and because they naturally share the growing small-government sentiment, a sense of unity or camaraderie among independent schools would seem to be natural. But officials from several schools deny that relations with other such schools are particularly close. Grove City's "community" is more faith-based," explained Grove City's Michael Buckman.

Merkle also said that his school's key relationship with other schools depends more on their Christianity than their politics. This was a condition that Grove City's Peter Frank confirmed: "We're in contact with like-minded schools (meaning others that take their Christianity seriously) but not necessarily with the independent ones."

But, despite the focus on the Christian community, independent schools do maintain some contact with each other. Greg Wilbur said that he keeps in touch with Merkle, along with officials at Gutenberg, Grove City, Patrick Henry and others.

Nor do they have intense competition for the same students and donors. Peter Frank said that Grove City does not consider other independent schools to be competitors. "It's not us versus them," he said. Wilbur suggests there is competition for students, albeit of the friendly sort, since many of the independent schools offer similar mixes of small classes, Christianity, the classical humanities, and a sense of community.

Relations with the conservative movement—with which independent schools are often identified—vary widely. Some, like Hillsdale, Grove City, and Patrick Henry, embrace their connections to conservatives in government and think tanks. Many others are less open about their political inclinations, emphasizing connections that are primarily religious, not ideological. At the same time, some evidence suggests they have ties to the political side of the small-government, freedom-oriented movement.

Greg Wilbur says his school is not at all political," rather, "there are other things we want to focus on." However, he adds that he wants students to not live in a bubble and to engage with the outside world. He said they want to start up lunchtime discussions on current affairs.

Minerva is the only college the Martin Center spoke to that is neither explicitly Christian or conservative. It is more tied to the global corporate world.

An important question for independent schools trying to survive without federal money is whether it is possible to "brand" an institution's independence from the government.

PART II: FINANCES

Maintaining independence from the government requires that great attention be paid to finances. Schools must make up for the loss of revenue from federal sources, especially student financial aid, which is often the single biggest source of revenue at small private colleges. Clearly, this is possible; otherwise, independent schools would not exist.

COSTS

The obvious way for schools to maintain fiscal stability without the aid of federal student aid is to hold down costs. With a few exceptions, the independent schools do that quite well.

The following chart shows the eight schools that report at least some information to IPEDS, since its data is standardized and generally comparable. While not completely comprehensive, the IPEDS data still provides insight into the institutions' operations.

STUDENT COSTS

	Tuition and Fees	Books, etc.	Room and Board	Other Expenses	Published Cost	Net Cost
Bethlehem	$6,560	$500	$6,500	$500	$14,060	$5,500
Boyce	$11,896	$1,700	$7,450	$1,500	$22,546	NA
Grove City	$18,930	$1,000	$10,310	$850	$31,090	$22,344
Hillsdale	$29,482	$1,200	$11,910	$2,000	$44,592	$23,230
New Saint Andrews	$13,550	$1,600	$4,200*	$1,650	$21,000*	NA
Patrick Henry	$28,400	$500	$11,020	$500	$40,420	$25,585
Principia	$30,720	$1,000	$12,270	$1,000	$44,990	$14,894
Texas Baptist	$8,980	$1,000	$4,555	$1,750	$16,285	$9,612

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2020-21. * Off-campus costs only

There are two "costs" to students to be considered. One is the "published cost of attendance," the official price before discounts and scholarships are taken into account. The "average net cost of attendance" includes reductions in tuition; it is not used for all students, but only those receiving any sort of aid.

It is not always possible to use IPEDS data for matching charges and financial aid to arrive at an actual cost of attendance. For instance, the published cost of attendance at Hillsdale is $44,592 and the average amount of aid received is $1,941, yet the average net cost of attendance to students receiving aid is $23,230. And, while 96 percent of students receive an average of $1,941, 76 percent of students receive institutional aid averaging $3,185. Such numbers can cloud rather than illuminate; it may be that there is unreported discounting going on.

Even so, IPEDS provides great insight into what students actually pay to attend. The published cost of attendance for students—including tuition, fees, books, room and board, and incidentals—at these schools varies. Southwestern Baptist and Bethlehem are less than $20,000, while New Saint Andrews and Boyce are just above that mark. On the other hand, Hillsdale, Patrick Henry, and Principia all exceed $40,000.

But the picture changes when using the "average net cost of attendance." When doing so, it becomes clear that affordability is a strong suit for independent colleges, despite the absence of federal funds. At all of the independent schools in the IPEDS database, the net cost is below the $27,290 national average for all private, non-profit four-year schools (for year 2017-18).

In some cases, the average net cost is exceptionally low; at Southwestern Baptist and Bethlehem, it is even well below the $14,880 average in-state costs at public four-year schools. (Principia's average net cost of $14,894 is almost exactly that of public four-year schools.)

So how can these schools afford to keep their cost of attendance so low?

There is no single answer. Several schools have tremendous revenue flows for their size. Hillsdale in particular is a fundraising superstar, and Principia also has an enormous endowment for a school with only a few hundred students. Such bounty allows them to lavish expenditures upon students without charging exorbitant tuition.

CORE EXPENSES PER FTE ENROLLMENT, BY FUNCTION: FISCAL YEAR 2019

	Instruction	Academic support	Student services	Institutional support	Other core expenses	Total Expenses per FTE Student
Bethlehem	$8,740	$6,049	$651	$3,846	$307	$19,593
Boyce	$4,944	$1,320	$2,802	$4,011	$272	$13,349
Grove City	$13,958	$2,743	$242	$6,774	$4,805	$28,523
Hillsdale	$29,736	$1,944	$8,042	$35,264	$8,385	$83,371
New Saint Andrews	$5,327	$764	$2,772	$3,201	$0	$12,064
Patrick Henry	$16,285	$0	$7,928	$8,225	$6,693	$39,131
Principia	$27,055	$8,864	$19,788	$24,500	$0	$80,207
Texas Baptist	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

Both Hillsdale and Principia spent over $80,000 per student in core expenses for fiscal year 2019. To put that into perspective, that same year, the total core expenses per full-time equivalent student at public and private not-for-profit postsecondary institutions nationwide was $43,088. The key ingredient in their model is fundraising, which is more than sufficient to handle the high expenditures.

For Hillsdale, the expenses per student in 2019 did not even exceed the amount of donations per student, which were $96,556. And according to U.S. News, in 2019, Principia's endowment received a whopping return on investment of $43,877 per student.[46] The school's endowment was roughly $680 million—and, according to IPEDS, the donations were still rolling in, amounting to $19,430 per student. In other words, the endowment growth and fundraising together amounted to roughly $63,000 per student.

But the picture changes when using the "average net cost of attendance." When doing so, it becomes clear that affordability is a strong suit for independent colleges, despite the absence of federal funds.

But for other schools, austerity is the key. And their expenses show it, as all were below the per-student national average. Patrick Henry's expenses per FTE of $39,131 approaches the national mark, but the rest are significantly less than average.

The pattern holds for the most important expense: instructional costs. Again, Hillsdale and Principia spend much more than the national average of $19,130 (for 2018-19), but all others are below that level, some significantly so. Boyce and New Saint Andrews spend only $4,944 and $5,327, respectively. One likely reason is faculty salaries and benefits: none of the IPEDS-reporting schools except Hillsdale have faculty tenure, and none spend money on research. This means professors are full-time teachers, with full teaching loads of three or four courses each semester.

There is no specific faculty workload at New Saint Andrews, but "faculty are focused on teaching, with no research requirements," according to Ben Merkle. Greg Wilbur of New College Franklin said that his school may increase its standard teaching load from "3-3" to "4-3." The school also makes use of several adjunct professors, including administrative employees. "We tend to wear lots of hats," he said.

Cutting frills keeps costs low; education at New Saint Andrews largely consists of "a well-qualified Ph.D." teaching "in a classroom with a couple of books," Merkle said. "We don't have a sprawling campus, and we don't have a complicated STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) program."

Because faculty teach full loads, most of the independent schools do not need to resort to the common tactic of supplementing full-time faculty with part-time adjunct faculty. According to Peter Frank, Grove City only has a few part-time instructors, and the majority of those are for "special situations such as individual music instruction." Michael Buckman, also of Grove City, added that sticking to a full-time faculty focused on teaching not only reduces costs but helps to maintain academic excellence and create a community of learning.

There is also an absence of expensive extracurricular activities at many of the independent colleges, including sports.

As can be seen in the Faculty Salaries table below, another reason why independent colleges are able to cut costs is because they tend to pay faculty less. Hillsdale and Principia are the two wealthiest of the independent schools (and the only two to report faculty salaries to IPEDS), yet even they pay below the national averages across all levels of faculty rank. For one thing, because independent schools focus strictly on teaching, they do not compete for the "star" researchers and scholars who drive up faculty salaries nationwide. For

another, as Ben Merkle intimated, many of the faculty at the independent schools are seeking something other than money and prestige. Rather, they are seeking an intellectual climate more to their liking than the atmosphere present on the radicalized secular campuses increasingly predominate in academia.

FACULTY SALARIES

	Hillsdale	Principia	National Average
No Academic Rank	NA	$25,370	$60,404
Lecturers	$51,521	NA	$63,053
Instructors	$43,720	$55,732	$61,510
Assistant Professor	$52,154	$63,527	$74,804
Associate Professor	$62,926	$71,073	$87,475
Full Professor	$80,508	$85,958	$123,733
Total	$64,187	$71,734	$86,188

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, Fall 2019.

Other perspectives from which to analyze the cost situation are the ratios of faculty to staff and faculty to students. For several decades, academia's costs have skyrocketed. This rise has been driven in a large part by growing numbers of non-faculty—and many would say non-essential—staff members. Government mandates arising from Title IX and Title IV have driven much of this increase. For instance, a Heritage Foundation study revealed that at the University of Michigan, "163 people were identified as having formal responsibility for providing DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) programming and services."[43]

Eschewing those mandates allows the independent schools to streamline their staffs and lower costs. At Grove City, the staff-to-faculty ratio is roughly two to one, well below the national average for four-year private colleges. And New Saint Andrews and Bethlehem manage to get by with ratios well below the national average as well.

But at some independent schools reporting to IPEDS, the results are surprising; they have staff-to-faculty ratios at or exceeding the national average of 3.2 for four-year, private, non-profit schools. It is unsurprising to see Hillsdale and Principia with such high ratios, but Boyce's ratio of 4.5 staff for each faculty member seems like an anomaly; it may be that factors are at work that are not visible with IPEDS data alone.

STAFF, FACULTY, AND STUDENT RATIOS					
	All staff (FT)	Instructional Staff (FT)	Undergraduate Students	Staff to Faculty Ratio	Student to Faculty Ratio
Bethlehem	27	13	136	2.1	10.5
Boyce	237	53	1081	4.5	20.4
Grove City	NA	NA	2481	NA	NA
Hillsdale	555	145	1619	3.8	11.2
New Saint Andrews	36	21	162	1.7	7.7
Patrick Henry	61	19	353	3.2	18.6
Principia	300	65	425	4.6	6.5
Texas Baptist	NA	NA	456	NA	NA

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, Fall 2019.

Student-to-faculty ratios also show no consistent pattern. The national average is 11 full-time-equivalent (FTE) students for each FTE faculty member; using IPEDS data to compute the ratio of FT faculty to FT students yields a ratio that is approximately equivalent. Patrick Henry and Boyce have high ratios; certainly, having faculty teach large numbers of students is one way of reducing costs. But the other independent schools reporting data to IPEDS have student-to-faculty ratios at or below the average. Principia is the lowest at 6.6 students per faculty member—which does not seem surprising given its wealth—but tuition-driven New Saint Andrews is also quite low at 7.7 students per faculty member.

"What does it cost to put somebody through school?" Ben Merkle of New Saint Andrews asked rhetorically. "So many things disguise the actual cost of education. He said that, at private schools, the public can't tell what an education will actually cost them because of the discount rate (colleges frequently "discount" the published tuition to maintain high levels of enrollment). And at public schools, state subsidies veil the true price of a college education, with taxpayers picking up much of the tab to educate students.

Merkle suggests that when all the excesses and smoke and mirrors surrounding the true average cost of education nationwide are removed, that cost is roughly $15,000 per student per year for programs that do not require extensive expenditures on technology, such as engineering. (New Saint Andrews charged $13,950 tuition for the 2020-21 school year, less than half the average charged by private schools nationally).

Furthermore, the independent schools reporting to IPEDS (other than cash-rich Hillsdale and Principia) spend far less than average on expense categories such as academic support, student services, and institutional support. Nationally, private non-profit institutions spend an average of $18,880 on these three items combined. Only Patrick Henry, at $16,153, comes close to that amount; all the rest spend less than $11,000.

The national average for room and board for private four-year colleges during the 2015-16 school year was $11,579. Some of the upper-tier schools reporting to IPEDS—Grove City, Hillsdale, Patrick Henry, and Principia—are roughly equivalent to that average. Somehow, though, the other schools charge significantly less.

Merkle said that one reason for the high average living cost is that many schools use room and board as cash cows. Not so at New Saint Andrews: "We don't have dorms or meal plans. For other schools, meal plans are a big moneymaker, and our students are able to instead shop around for cheap apartments." Greg Wilbur of New College Franklin affirmed this claim, saying that because his school was a "no-frills institution," tuition money "can go directly into instruction."

REVENUES

"We keep the institution running on tuition and the generosity of donors," said Peter Frank of Grove City College.

Without federal financial aid, tuition alone may not be enough to keep the doors open. Independent colleges must keep tuition low to be affordable, since students cannot use federal grants and loans to fill the gap up between high tuition and what they can afford. Therefore, giving by donors becomes doubly important at these schools, many of which need donations to meet their operating expenses.

The following table breaks down the major sources of revenue for the IPEDS-reporting independent colleges.

CORE REVENUES PER FTE ENROLLMENT, BY FUNCTION: FISCAL YEAR 2019

	Tuition and fees	Private gifts, grants, and contracts	Investment return	Other core revenues	Total Revenue
Bethlehem	$6,314	$15,814	$100	$1,545	$23,773
Boyce	$9,202	$4,688	$1,392	$461	$15,743
Grove City	$17,959	$7,755	$4,480	$259	$30,453
Hillsdale	$9,575	$96,556	$17,068	$2,909	$126,108
New Saint Andrews	$9,228	$3,480	$180	$0	$12,888
Patrick Henry	$14,066	$23,744	$1,474	$604	$39,888
Principia	$6,557	$19,430	$43,877	$3,555	$73,419
Texas Baptist	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

Hillsdale's endowment now approaches one billion dollars and the school has new campuses in Washington, D.C. and Connecticut.[48] It has branded itself as the nation's leading conservative institution by connecting with the conservative political movement. One of its main fundraising tools is its monthly *Imprimis* publication, which generally provides the text of a recent campus speech and is distributed free to the public. The list of luminaries featured in *Imprimis* includes Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Milton Friedman, Russell Kirk, and Harry V. Jaffa. More recent contributors include Clarence Thomas, Vaclav Klaus, Sen. Tom Cotton, David McCullough, Walter Williams, and Bernard Lewis. *Imprimis* was once for alumni only, but now it is touted on the school website as "reaching as many people as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*."[49]

Principia College is also flush with money. Its endowment, now $680 million, is the result of over a century of endowment growth combined with low enrollments (now roughly 400 students). It suffers from a shrinking pool of potential students, as Church membership has dropped precipitously since World War II and is now believed to be below 50,000.[50]

Grove City also has a considerable amount of money stored up: $125.6 million, but it relies on other sources to conduct its operations. According to its website "only 1% of the College's operation budget is paid through the endowment."[51]

New Saint Andrews is more typical of the newer independent colleges, being primarily supported by tuition. Ben Merkle said its endowment is "negligible," roughly $30,000. In addition to tuition, the school raises roughly $850,000 a year to cover operations shortfalls and capital expenses.

Therefore, giving by donors becomes doubly important at these schools, many of which need donations to meet their operating expenses.

Because of its relatively short existence (it was founded in 1994), New Saint Andrews does not have an "alumni base of retirees" whose generosity can be relied upon for donations, according to Merkle. He said alumni give about $100,000 out of the $850,000 raised annually.

Board members at New Saint Andrews tend to be generous, Merkle added. They also "network with their own bases to give me introductions" to other potential donors. He said most donors to his school are "successful businessmen ideologically aligned with the school. Many of them are attached to Christian ministries." He said that it is especially important to belong "to a church organization with national reach."

New College Franklin runs mostly on its income from tuition. However, President Greg Wilbur said that the school needs to get about 25 percent of its operating expenses from "reserves," which equates to fundraising. He has yet to create any substantial endowment: "the money that we raise this year pretty much goes into the operating budget and scholarships and maintaining our reserve."

Despite New College Franklin's recent founding, it has "some alumni who give," according to Wilbur: "Our alumni footprint isn't large, but it's deep . . . we have close continued relationships with those who have been part of the program." Still, Wilbur said fundraising is his biggest hurdle in running New College Franklin, and that a lack of visibility is the biggest challenge in raising money: "it's hard without people knowing we're even here."

PART III: CURRICULA

The single most important element of higher education sometimes gets lost in all the concern for finances, regulatory polices, and social issues. But academia is still about education, and this is where independent colleges provide high value by offering alternatives to the education provided by mainstream institutions.

Most independent colleges accomplish this by returning to, or maintaining, the traditional perspectives of the West, particularly those of Christianity, Classical antiquity, and the American founding. On the other hand, independence provides greater space for innovation than does adherence to government and accrediting agency mandates. Minerva and Thales demonstrate that the independent mindset is an innovative one.

Examples of both the traditional and innovative aspects of independence are discussed in the next section.

THE WESTERN TRADITION

Several patterns emerge concerning the curricula offered by independent colleges. One is that the academic offerings at institutions that grew out of traditional academia and some of the larger new schools resemble those of more ordinary liberal arts colleges. Hillsdale, Grove City, Principia, and Pensacola Christian provide a wide choice of degree programs; the latter three even have engineering programs when many ordinary liberal arts colleges do not.

But those schools are the exceptions. Most independent schools concentrate on a few particular majors that reflect their philosophies. And some offer only a single degree in the humanities.

The Association of Classical Christian Schools (ACCS), a non-profit organization that advocates for classical Christian education, looms large in government-free higher education. Classical Christian education is a blending of the secular Great Books approach with traditional Protestant Christianity. While ACCS has focused on K-12 education for the most part, no less than seven of the independent colleges discussed in this report have ties to ACCS. Two of the three institutions that are full ACCS members are independent of federal aid: New College Franklin and New Saint Andrews. Additionally, four of the ten schools designated as "affiliates" by ACCS are independent: Bethlehem, Grove City, Patrick Henry, and Gutenberg. As are all four of the colleges that offer "ACCS-specific" scholarships: New Saint Andrews, Patrick Henry, Gutenberg, and Sattler.[52]

New College Franklin clings closely to the ACCS philosophy. It offers one degree—a B.A. in Liberal Arts. "We want to take the best of the Oxford-Cambridge model of tutors . . . and the idea of the Great Books, but we have done so with a particular religious foundation and also to incorporate the medieval ideas of the trivium and the quadrivium," Greg Wilbur explained, adding that this means a great deal of individual attention and mentoring of students. All students take the same classes with the same people throughout their education. This does not arise from a lack of resources, according to Wilbur, but is intentional. It suits an educational purpose: he regards education as "a conversation"—with one's fellow students, with the faculty and staff, with God, and with knowledge. This conversation forms an organic whole, rather than creating "silos" of different courses. "The conversation that you start as a freshman, you're taking the

same classes for the next four years, so the conversation that starts on the first day of classes can continue for the next four years. Students can make connections between classes and across the years by referring to conversations from previous years."

New College Franklin works on a "small class model." Wilbur said some of the courses he teaches meet in his office, where he leads students in a close reading and discussion of a text by asking questions. He said this works especially well in such classes as moral philosophy and theology, whereas another class such as Greek may be a more lecture-oriented "imparting of information."

> One facet of education in which the independent colleges shine is . . . general education. The theory behind general education is to give students a thorough grounding in the most important knowledge beyond their narrow areas of expertise.

Wyoming Catholic, of course, does not follow the Protestant-based ACCS principles. But its curriculum follows a similar union of the Great Books and Christianity (albeit a Catholic version). The school's website states:

Wyoming Catholic College has a set four-year curriculum. All students take the same courses in the same order. There are no electives. Students graduate with a Bachelor of Arts in the Liberal Arts by completing 140 credits. The curriculum is divided into eight curricular tracks: Humanities, Theology, Philosophy, Math/Science, Fine Arts, Latin, Trivium, and Leadership.[53]

The two major Baptist seminary schools, Boyce[54] and Texas Baptist,[55] both offer multiple degrees—all explicitly theological. The other independent religious schools each offer something unique, in their own ways. Christendom College has seven undergraduate majors that cover a wide a range of knowledge: Classical and Christian Studies, English Language and Literature, History, Philosophy, Mathematics, Political Science and Economics, and Theology. All are taught from classical and Catholic perspectives.[56]

Sattler College and The College at Mid-America take a different approach. While Sattler is explicitly Christian (nondenominational), its curriculum has a decidedly vocational bent.[57] Of its five majors, two are in the humanities (History, Biblical and Religious Studies), while the other three are targeted toward private sector careers: Business, Computer Science, and Human Biology. Baptist Mid-America does something similar, offering two theological degrees (Christian Studies and Biblical Counseling) but also two degrees intended for the business world (Organizational Leadership and Business Administration).[58]

Patrick Henry, while an ACCS affiliate, also specializes in certain secular, vocational disciplines. It has three major programs in the traditional humanities (History, Literature, and Classical Liberal Arts), but it also offers a range of degrees oriented toward politics, government, and business: Economics and Business Analytics, Journalism, Government, Strategic Intelligence in National Security, and Environmental Science and Stewardship.[59] Located in northern Virginia, near the national capitol and the heart of the defense industry, many of its professors have worked in the military, defense industry, federal bureaucracy, or conservative think tanks. This creates a pipeline of employment for its graduates.

Government service and conservative think tanks have also long been mined by Grove City and Hillsdale graduates, so, although those schools offer a full range of majors common to other liberal arts colleges, disciplines related to policy are considered to be strengths and are highly attractive to entering students. Hillsdale has even founded a graduate school of government in Washington, D.C. to solidify the school's relationship with the government and think tanks.[60]

One facet of education in which the independent colleges shine is their core curricula, also known in academia as general education. The theory behind general education is to give students a thorough grounding in the most important knowledge beyond their narrow areas of expertise. This emphasis on broadening knowledge helps to mold them into better people and better decision-makers, not just technically proficient workers. But in most institutions of higher education, general education programs have become so watered down and full of choices as to be meaningless; for instance, students at the prestigious University of Pennsylvania can satisfy general education requirements with such narrow and non-essential—even frivolous—fare as:[61]

- COML 300: Black Italy and Black Italians: Post-Colonial Voices—Contemporary Afro-Italian Literature
- URBS 010: Homelessness and Urban Inequality
- COML 259: Jewish Humor
- EALC079: Religion of Anime.

Or, at the University of Maryland:[62]

- AAST394: Growing Up Asian American: The Asian Immigrant Family and the Second Generation
- HNUH288A: Welcome to the Party: Race, Nightlife, and Identity in America
- HLTH264: Tweets & Likes: Digital Health & Social Media.

Students satisfying core requirements with such courses are likely to remain ignorant of the fundamental ideas of our civilization, thereby defeating the central purpose of general education.

The story is very different at the independent colleges. Schools such as New College Franklin and Wyoming Catholic have no need for general education—their entire programs are essentially core curricula. Something similar can be said for schools such as Texas Baptist and Boyce, which offer multiple theological degrees; their general education programs are intended to mesh with the major programs.

But the independent schools that offer a wide choice of majors excel in crafting general education programs that give students a shared experience and ground them in the essential knowledge of Western civilization. For instance, all Grove City students must take the following five-course sequence:[63]

- HUMA 102: Civilization and the Biblical Revelation
- HUMA 200: Western Civilization: Historical and Intellectual Foundations
- HUMA 202: Civilization and Literature
- HUMA 301: Civilization and the Arts
- HUMA 303: Christianity and Civilization: Modern and Postmodern Challenges.

Sattler College has an extensive core that takes up much of the first two years of all students, no matter what majors they pursue:[64]

- Freshman Courses

- Expository Writing and Oral Communication
- History, Philosophy, Literature and Art of the Ancient World
- Elementary Biblical Hebrew I
- Elementary Biblical Hebrew II
- The Biology of our World
- The Fundamental Texts of Christianity: The Old and New Testaments
- Apologetics
- Statistics and Data Science

- Sophomore Courses
  - History, Philosophy, Literature and Art of Medieval and Renaissance Europe
  - History, Philosophy, Literature and Art of the Modern Era
  - Elementary Biblical Greek I
  - Elementary Biblical Greek II
  - Theology

Clearly, there is a vast chasm between the mindsets dominant in ordinary colleges—even the most prestigious ones—and those colleges that forego federal funding to maintain the traditional culture. Nowhere is this more evident than in the core curricula. And it speaks very well for the independent schools

INNOVATION

The Christian-based independent schools tend to be deeply steeped in Christian and classical traditions, particularly in their core curricula. But that doesn't mean independent schools are living in the past. Schools such as Grove City, Hillsdale, Patrick Henry, and Sattler are explicitly preparing their graduates for employment in today's business and government environments.

And at secular Minerva and Thales, innovation is central. Minerva's Teri Cannon told the Martin Center that "we wanted to reinvent whatever needed to be reinvented and whatever wasn't working . . . that's one of the factors why we didn't use federal financial aid."

At Minerva, students' first year is spent learning skills and knowledge that are applicable to all of the five majors offered. Cannon said that all first-year students take the same four year-long courses, which are "interdisciplinary and integrated with one another." The second year they learn the broader, fundamental aspects of their chosen major, the third they tunnel down more deeply into their majors and prepare for their senior "capstone" projects, and their final year features "senior tutorials "(one-on-one or one-on-two sessions with a professor) and culminates in a capstone project.[65]

The five majors are:

- Arts & Humanities
- Business
- Computational Sciences

- Natural Sciences
- Social Sciences.

Each major has six concentrations. For example, the Computational Sciences concentrations are:

- Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence
- Mathematics
- Data Science and Statistics
- Computational Theory and Analysis
- Contemporary Knowledge Discovery
- Applied Problem Solving.

The concentrations in the Social Sciences major are:

- Cognition, Brain, and Behavior
- Economics and Society
- Politics, Government, and Society
- Theory and Analysis in the Social Sciences
- Empirical Approaches to the Social Sciences
- Designing Societies.

Minerva's pedagogy is based on learning theories developed by Stephen Kosslyn, who was the school's founding dean and chief academic officer, according to Cannon. He had previously taught neuroscience and psychology at Harvard University. In this pedagogy, which Kosslyn called "active learning," lectures and testing are gone. Instead, courses begin with outside preparation, and progress to small online seminars with between 15 and 20 students. These seminars are carefully controlled—"with very detailed lesson plans," Cannon said—in order to make sure that students remain actively engaged. Teachers use debates, polls, and other pedagogical techniques to ensure student involvement. She said that the classes are intentionally small and that they are online but "live" and "synchronous." "It's like everybody is in the front row," she suggested.

One reason the courses are so heavily structured is because Minerva wishes to reinforce 80 "learning outcomes" or "habits of mind" (akin to "competencies") that are introduced in the first year and continually developed and assessed in later years. Memorization is cast aside in favor of application. "We believe people learn best by applying what they are learning," Cannon stated. Instead of tests, assessment is done through projects that force students to develop skills and thought processes. Each class may assign a couple of projects, and there is also a term-long project that requires students to engage with the world beyond Minerva. Another facet of a Minerva education—with its global emphasis—is that students actively observe and analyze the culture in which they are residing for each term.

Thales College is also planning a unique curriculum. All students will get dual degrees; one is a B.A. in Liberal Arts and Sciences, with students choosing a second major. The plan is to offer students their choice of three elective majors, with all three leading toward a career. Two will be offered in 2022: one in Entrepreneurial Business and another in Classical Education and Leadership. The third, Mechanical Engineering, will start classes in the fall of 2023.[66]

Thales' Brown said that because the school will have a small faculty that needs to cover many classes, in the early stages it may be necessary to "outsource" course development and the creation of some course materials—such as pre-recorded lectures—to those who are experts in a specific area.

A distinctive feature of Thales is that all degree programs will be accelerated. Students will attend school in the summer and complete an eight-semester sequence in two years and eight months. The engineering program, however, adds two additional semesters to fit in all the necessary coursework for both the engineering and liberal arts degrees.

At secular Minerva and Thales, innovation is central. Minerva's Teri Cannon told the Martin Center that "we wanted to reinvent whatever needed to be reinvented and whatever wasn't working . . . that's one of the factors why we didn't use federal financial aid."

Like Minerva, Thales will employ a unique pedagogy. It begins with what is essentially a "flipped classroom," in which students are expected to use outside class materials, such as online lectures and reading materials, to prepare for weekly in-class seminars. These seminars are intended to provoke discussion of the material learned outside of class. But the course goes beyond the standard flipped concept. Students will also attend tutorials, which are one-on-one or one-on-two meetings with faculty members, roughly 20 minutes apiece. Grattan Brown said the frequency of tutorials would depend on the subject matter; for a course he will teach on writing composition, he said he will try to meet with every student every two weeks, since teaching students to write requires intensive instruction.

Brown added that the tutorials initially will be about "skill-building and applying classroom knowledge to life and work." Eventually, though, they will be based on the "classic Oxford model," in which students will be expected to "master various points of view" and choose a position to argue against the tutor. He said "teaching students the art of the conversation and how to participate in public discourse" may be the most important thing an education can do. "It's an area where Thales can really stand out," he stated.

PART IV: PEOPLE

Independent schools may not be for everyone. They require a special mindset that both rejects and seeks convention. Certainly, they may not be for all members of the common herd who merely wish to fit into the mainstream of society. But most of these institutions demand a relatively high degree of submission to the school's own social code. And the word "independent" does not mean "free" in the sense of offering lots of choice as do large state or private universities. Many independent schools tend to be highly structured—with relatively strict rules regarding student conduct for the year 2022—and disciplinary. However, as Ben Merkle of New Saint Andrews alluded, it is through disciplined effort that one becomes free from his or her own weakness. For those seeking that sort of freedom, these colleges may be not just a school, but a home.

At the same time, the independent secular institutions such as Minerva and Thales may be less socially structured than many mainstream colleges. Instead, they place a premium on personal responsibility.

STUDENTS

Attracting students is one of the major keys to success for any college. It is especially true for small liberal arts colleges that are largely financed by tuition—which describes many of the independent colleges.

Most of the independent colleges have additional hurdles that other schools do not. For one, many are sectarian and limit their recruiting to those who share their specific beliefs. But even the nondenominational independent schools tend to be more devoted to the practice of their faith than more ordinary colleges that were founded as religious institutions but secularized over time. And it must be remembered that roughly 74 percent of all college students attend explicitly secular public institutions.[67] That means that the students at the independent colleges must be open to—or desirous for—a more constrained social atmosphere and personal lives than their peers. Additionally, most of the independent schools have academic programs that are not mere vocational training or credentialing. They maintain rigorous focus on the traditional humanities that are out of favor on most other campuses and among most students.

All in all, these independent schools are competing for students from a limited segment of the population. That's the bad news. The good news is that that segment of the population is very serious about education and appears to be rapidly growing.

Minerva is the exception to the rule; it recruits from all over the world—only 12 percent of its students come from the United States.

Demographics

Clearly, ardently Christian schools have students who are devout Christians. These schools do not, in general, have the imbalance of male and female students that is happening in most of academia, where six of ten college students are now women. At five of the seven schools with available admissions data, more men than women enroll, contradicting current trends in the academic establishment.

ADMISSIONS						
	Men Applied	Men Admitted	FT Men Enrolled	Women Applied	Women Admitted	FT Women Enrolled
Bethlehem	20	16	12	18	14	11
Boyce	151	104	67	149	100	63
Grove City	924	694	267	773	654	223
Hillsdale	819	390	176	774	379	164
New Saint Andrews	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Patrick Henry	63	54	26	62	53	39
Principia	42	38	28	63	58	38
Texas Baptist	41	41	20	33	33	15

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, Fall 2019.

Average SAT scores show that students also tend to be highly qualified academically. The College Board that administers the tests suggests that a combined score of 1030 is the rough dividing line between students prepared for college or not; all six of the schools reporting SAT scores to IPEDS show a majority above that mark. And four of the six indicate a majority of incoming students have scores above 1200, a mark of excellence at which diligent students are likely to progress to high-level careers.

IPEDS SAT SCORES					
	Reading		**Math**		
	25th Percentile	75th Percentile	25th Percentile	75th Percentile	% Submitting SAT Scores
Bethlehem	640	690	600	630	21
Boyce	528	650	500	600	57
Grove City	576	691	554	693	84
Hillsdale	660	740	640	730	40
New Saint Andrews	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Patrick Henry	645	740	540	670	83
Principia	510	625	500	593	85
Texas Baptist	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

Graduation and retention rates vary. Texas Baptist and Boyce have six-year graduation rates of 44 percent for the cohort of students entering in 2013. Yet Hillsdale and Principia regularly have six-year graduation rates above 80 percent.

Admissions and Paying for School

An intense focus on recruiting students is imperative for independent colleges, as they are largely financed by tuition. And that means students must have the means to pay. The lack of federal student aid, including loans, makes a big difference in the admissions policies of independent colleges. Michael Buckman of Grove City admitted that "we can't compete on pure financial terms."

Payment comes from four main sources: family, loans, scholarships, and the students themselves. Helping students find the means to pay is a major part of recruitment strategies. And there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution. Grove City's student body "cuts across the economic spectrum," said communications director Jacquelyn Muller. "Each of them prepares for college differently."

Private loans are especially important for Grove City students, according to Michael Buckman. He said that the average student debt load at graduation is roughly $40,000—substantially higher than the national average of approximately $30,000.[68]

Ben Merkle said that New Saint Andrews also provides institutional aid—both financial aid to low-income students and some merit aid. He said the loss of tuition revenue from such aid amounted to $500,000 in 2019, which he was able to restore through fundraising.

Just as at Grove City, New Saint Andrews students cut across the economic spectrum. Merkle said that "50 percent are paying their own tuition," although he acknowledges that, in most cases, "Mom and Dad help." But unlike at Grove City, however, New Saint Andrew students avoid debt, in line with the school's Calvinist philosophy. "There aren't a lot of kids with loans here, maybe two or three," Merkle said, adding that the low tuition and potential for low living costs permitted students to work their way through school. "They can make $4,000-$5,000 over the summer, then have a part-time job during school."

He said this approach "makes it harder for us as a school—if the program is too rigorous, can students still have a part-time job?

And yet, there are positive consequences of forcing students to be disciplined, according to Merkle. "If students have completed a rigorous program, while having a part-time job, maintaining their own apartment and taking care of themselves, they will have a momentum for a life of achievement they won't get elsewhere."

The situation is similar at New College Franklin, according to Greg Wilbur. He said the tuition is set deliberately low, since many students are paying for their own educations. "It's set at a mark where, if they're working 15 to 20 hours during the school year and working over the summer, they can pretty much carry their tuition and living expenses. So we have students who graduate without any debt." This focus on an absence of debt plays an important role in the lives of graduates, he added, enabling them to "take lower-paying jobs that reflect their interests, rather than chasing higher salaries. So it increases their options for what they can do." He said they can get married and have children earlier, go to graduate school, and perform any number of other activities that move them forward in life instead of cleaning up the financial mess caused by borrowing for school.

While attracting students is not always easy, according to Wilbur, New College Franklin gets a "steady increasing flow of applicants all the time." Some of the major selling points he cites are "a classical program that has a Christian foundation" and "the idea of a small classroom and the conversation." He added that "we do have academic scholarships and we have need-based scholarships" which "come out of the overall operating budget at this point." He said that he hopes to build an endowment from which to draw financial aid instead of from operations—"something we want to move away from."

Like New Saint Andrews, New College Franklin does not have dormitories or meal plans. Wilbur said that the most popular option is for students to board with local families; others find apartments on their own.

Students' social backgrounds are key for independent colleges' recruitment strategies. Many of the students at independent college come from private religious high schools, classical education schools, and the home-schooled population.

Also valuable for colleges interested in increasing enrollment is developing networks, particularly in the nearby areas. For instance, Grove City's Peter Frank said that they do well at standard public high schools regionally, where they have lots of alumni and can maintain relationships with guidance counselors.

New Saint Andrews deliberately targets graduates of the Association of Classical Christian Schools, as there is a natural affiliation between their educational philosophies. They also aim for regional synergy by holding an essay competition for students in the Pacific Northwest.

Both independent colleges and homeschooling provide a refuge for students from an educational establishment beset by such harmful doctrines as critical race theory and the confusion of gender behavior.

Merkle said New Saint Andrews has been "experiencing its biggest growth spurt ever" in the last two years. The 2020-21 freshman class of 61 students was the largest ever, he said. He anticipated that the 2021-22 freshman class will be between 90 and 100—causing the need to add two more buildings.

In October 2021, when the research for this report was finished, it was impossible to know what Thales College's' initial class would look like. Dean Grattan Brown said they were concentrating their efforts on home-schooled students and those from classical academies, private preparatory schools, and charter schools. Certainly, at least some students will come from the K-12 Thales academies. Brown said one strategy they are employing is to identify students who have interest in the types of programs Thales will offer, then bring them to Thales College for week-long workshops. He said that they had their first workshop in August 2021 on "business and the liberal arts," with "20 rising juniors and seniors."

Homeschooling

There is a natural link between K-12 homeschooling and government-free colleges. While homeschooling parents do so for a wide array of reasons, according to the National Home Education Research Institute, many seek to escape government education mandates. Both independent colleges and homeschooling provide a refuge for students from an educational establishment beset by such harmful doctrines as critical race theory and the confusion of gender behavior.

Thus the independent colleges aggressively recruit among the burgeoning homeschooled population, and homeschooled students form a base of enrollees for such colleges. Many independent schools emphasize special application processes for home-schooled students on their websites. Some examples of the relationship include:

- Roughly 15 percent of Grove City College students are homeschooled.[69]
- Pensacola Christian College advertises that over 1,300 of its nearly 5,000 students are homeschooled.[70]

- Thales College's Grattan Brown said that the home-schooled will be a key target population for recruiting students.

Growth of homeschooling has been explosive in the United States. In 1983, there were approximately 93,000 K-12 students schooled at home; by 2020, there were 2,650,000.[71] The growth has been steady over time, ranging between two percent and eight percent each year. In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic drove the number above 5 million; how much of that is temporary still remains to be seen. A new study by the National Alliance for Charter Schools found that "between the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years … 1.45 million children left traditional public schools." They instead chose charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling—the target markets for independent colleges.[72]

To date, the growth in home-schooling has not yet driven a similar growth in the number of colleges that seek independence. But, given the synergy between such colleges and alternative K-12 education, it may just be a matter of time before K-12 trends translate to a similar pattern in higher education.

FACULTY

Clearly, teaching in an environment free of government mandates—particularly where Christian learning is foremost—requires a different mindset than the ones most common in academia. Teaching in an independent college means one my need to cast off many of the ordinary motivations behind an academic career: money, tenure, or general acclaim within one's discipline.

Even so, according to Peter Frank, Grove City College is part of the overall faculty market. The school gets 50-100 applicants for each opening. Some prospective faculty are unfamiliar with Grove City's philosophy, and the tight labor market for humanities Ph.D.s causes others to look beyond their preferred choices.

But Grove City is not a good fit for all who apply, according to Frank: "We require that they buy into our Christian mission. We screen many out depending on whether they want to buy in or are just sending out applications for every job opening. We maintain our mission and hire for it." He said some faculty are looking for a school like Grove City: "Some faculty reach out to us specifically because of our reputation."

At New Saint Andrews, faculty recruitment is even more targeted. "We tend to prefer faculty with something like New Saint Andrews in their background," explained Ben Merkle. He said his school requires faculty members to have a unique blend of "excellence in the subject" and commitment to "our distinctive mission." Additionally, the school's small size means that the college must be focused on the specific areas of study of prospective professors. "We have only one faculty member in each discipline," said Merkle. "We have to think how their specialty fits in."

Merkle said he has noticed an uptick in the number of CVs he receives from interested prospective faculty members in recent years. "Some of them have had enough at their present schools and want out," he explained. "They are looking for something like New Saint Andrews."

Teaching at a school such as New Saint Andrews can mark faculty members as outside the academic norm. "Our faculty get shamed by colleagues in their discipline for working at a peculiar school. We tend to get people who wear this peculiarity as a badge of honor," Merkle stated. "Teaching here takes a special person."

For those who are specifically attracted to teaching at such schools, given the often-repressive environment for conservatives in mainstream academia, getting hired may seem more like arriving at a sanctuary than just landing a job.

At New School Franklin, Wilbur said finding professors is one of the hardest things he does. "We're asking them not just to be experts in their area," he said, but to be knowledgeable in philosophy and theology and of the Socratic dialectic method of teaching, and to have the desire to disciple students. And that's asking a lot."

He said that, after advertising for a faculty position, he was amazed at the number of people "who had significant careers at significant places with significant achievements who were very interested in coming to our little upstart."

"And when you find those people, you really want to keep them," Wilbur continued. But, he said, rather than being a mere "faculty cog in the administrative wheel," because New College Franklin is so small, professors at his school have "an invested voice in what we're doing." He said that, after advertising for a faculty position, he was amazed at the number of people "who had significant careers at significant places with significant achievements who were very interested in coming to our little upstart." He said he thinks that is "partly because it's easy to get chewed up in the wheel of bureaucracy at a university . . . there's more opportunities for true academic freedom here . . . there is a joy in what we do."

Furthermore, Wilbur said his school pays adjunct professors fees equal to those at the state's top private institutions.

At Thales, faculty will be referred to as "faculty-mentors." This is in part because the tutorial process will develop close ties between students and teachers. Students will also be closely mentored by faculty to help them get hired for paid internships, and once they are hired, to help them perform and grow on the job. Grattan Brown said the role of mentor requires "somebody who is a good scholar, a good teacher, and a good person with strong moral character that you would want to emulate."

PART V: CONCLUSION

The preceding report attempted to answer two fundamental questions about schools that reject federal funding in order to maintain independence from government mandates:

- Is it good that they exist?
- If they are good, is it possible for them to exist?

The second question can broken down into two more:

- Can they exist financially?
- Can they exist politically?

As to the question about whether they are good, the answer must be an emphatic "yes." The report shows that maintaining independence from the government in higher education promotes—remarkably—both tradition and innovation, qualities that are being squeezed out of higher education by establishment orthodoxy. The close reading of important texts—which once formed the basis of all higher education but is gradually diminishing for the majority of students on establishment campuses—is central to many of the independent schools. At the same time, Minerva employs scientifically developed, cutting-edge learning technologies, while Thales plans an approach that fosters both tradition and innovation. Add to that a general tendency of independent schools to maintain academic rigor and standards; there is a serious attitude toward knowledge that is often absent on mainstream campuses that are primarily concerned with white-collar vocational training, and which, sadly, can lapse into mere credentialing for many of their students.

Perhaps, most important of all, independent schools provide some resistance to the unquestioning, herd-like homogeneity into which mainstream government-controlled academia is regressing. And it may be that only by maintaining a spirit of independence can true academic freedom survive.

As for the question of whether it is possible to provide a quality higher education without federal funding, the debate begins—and ends—with the fact that at least the 19 independent colleges found by the Martin Center exist and thrive, educating thousands of college students annually.

Not only do these schools exist, the question of their financial survival has been satisfied by a wide variety of solutions. From Hillsdale's aggressive branding and fundraising to Minerva's venture capitalism to New College Franklin's shoestring approach, these schools are putting to rest the claim that it is impossible to provide a quality education without federal help. If these schools can do it, other institutions should be able to emulate them.

That leaves the question of political survival. At this point, there are no rigid political barriers to creating an independent college or university. The legal framework allows their presence; success or failure depends on the particulars, on the particular leadership and the particular strategies. As for the future, who knows? We are in an age where the federal Justice Department unleashes the FBI and Homeland Security on parents who complain at school board meetings about the radicalization of the curriculum, defining them as "domestic terrorists."[73] In such an environment, predictions of a continuation of the current political order are suspect, at best.

But the fact that the nation has entered an environment in which intellectual freedom is threatened, in the very land that defined human freedom, is the strongest argument for academic independence from the government. The defense of intellectual freedom will not come from the coalition of Department of Education bureaucrats, establishment academics, regional accreditors, self-interested consultants, and weak-kneed legislators that direct much of education policy today. Combine the aggressive power grab of the 2011 "Dear Colleague" letter with the rapidly emerging "cancel culture" of today's campus—such crushing tyranny may very well be the future of higher education in the United States.

It is more likely that such a defense will come from schools that place great importance on maintaining their own independence, even if it means financial sacrifice. In this light, creating, promoting, and defending independent schools becomes a viable solution to a difficult problem.

Consider how conformist mainstream academia has become. Ben Merkle's warning about accreditation creating "unhealthy impulses" in academic administrators described just the tip of the iceberg; the nation's intellectual institutions are not guided by risk-takers or by people who deeply probe important questions. They are instead run by ambitious, pliable individuals who maneuver their way through the meat-grinding maze of academic politics. In such an atmosphere, any deviation from the consensus is disqualifying.

Originality and innovation do not thrive in such suffocating confines. Minerva University was created with rejecting that conformity in mind. Minerva's Teri Cannon told the Martin Center:

> When we did this, it wasn't just to create Minerva University. It was to create models so that other universities and colleges and startups would learn from what we are doing and think about doing things differently.

Starting an independent college or converting a Title IV-participating school to freedom from the government may be difficult, with many hurdles. But it is clearly not impossible, and it has a special advantage: the determined mindset of independent people is at least as powerful a force for success as government largesse in the hands of "educrats" who often squander millions. And the time may be right for just such an endeavor. There is too much about establishment schools that is unsatisfactory to list here. Many billions of dollars are donated to higher education each year; even a small additional percentage flowing to independent schools could make a big difference. The homeschooling boom shows the existence of a growing desire to educate outside the suffocating boundaries set by government-controlled institutions; that phenomenon suggests a similar dynamic may be ahead for higher education.

But the fact that the nation has entered an environment in which intellectual freedom is threatened, in the very land that defined human freedom, is the strongest argument for academic independence from the government.

The defining characteristic of the earliest Americans was their resolve to throw off the constraining chains of the Old World in order to build new institutions that suited their beliefs, no matter how perilous the journey. It may be time for that same spirit to arise in higher education.

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About the Martin Center

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

We advocate responsible governance, viewpoint diversity, academic quality, cost-effective education solutions, and innovative market-based reform. We do that by studying and reporting on critical issues in higher education and recommending policies that can create change—especially at the state and local level.

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