

# When Less Is More: The Role of Small (Really Small) Colleges in Today's Educational Marketplace

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As the president of a truly small private liberal arts college (we currently have approximately 450 students), I regularly reflect on our size and its implications. Like institutions many times our size, we need a faculty with expertise in multiple disciplines, an active and engaged student life program, and the crucial resources to maintain and grow our infrastructure. In spite of these very real challenges, a compelling case can be made for the value of small colleges in today's educational landscape.

Let me begin by noting that there is no single model for a quality liberal arts education or the sustainability of small colleges. That said, "small" needs to mean something of distinctive value. Small colleges are not simply skinned-down versions of larger colleges and universities.

In his best-selling book, *Deep Economy*, Bill McKibben comments on the benefits of "small" education. Smaller institutions, he argues, resemble farmers' markets — you get wonderful and quality seasonal food from people you know and trust. But, you cannot get everything there that you may want precisely when you want it.

Given personal preferences and differences among us, we need both large universities and small colleges — just as we need both supermarkets/mega stores and farmers markets/niche boutiques and everything in-between. So, what are those benefits of small colleges that justify and support their continued role on the college landscape? Let me identify four such benefits.

## 1. Personalization

While people enter college for many reasons, traditional age college students (17 – 23) see a college/university as the place to experience independence — often for the first time. It is where the choices students make — good and bad — are theirs alone, and the consequences — good and bad — are theirs to bear.

Everyone knows the consequences of too much freedom, of course. Students can fail to connect with their peers, professors, college staff, and athletic coaches. They can miss classes without being noticed.

To be sure, students seeking anonymity can find it within all institutions. But it is harder to both *find and maintain* anonymity within smaller institutions

because these institutions can more easily counteract anonymity with initial and ongoing personalization. This personalization is what distinguishes smaller educational environments.

On a small campus, when things are working well, students become known — and quickly. People say hello to them by name when they walk down the halls. Professors realize when students are not in class and reach out to find out why. Slipping through the cracks is not, by and large, an option at a small institution. Small campuses can build and sustain trust among those within the institution.

I recently started monthly dinners at our home, for instance, inviting ten students, two faculty and two staff, all randomly selected. A faculty guest overheard one student on the cell phone with her mother as she approached our front door. "Yes, Mom, really. I am having dinner with the president. Yes, the real president. No, I did not do anything wrong. Call you later." (I wish I could have heard that later conversation.)

## 2. Choice

Large colleges and universities offer abundant choices. But, for some students, all of this choice creates the opposite of opportunity; it creates paralysis. As Barry Schwartz remarked in his book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, choice not only takes time and energy, but it can also create self-doubt and dread. With so many choices, some students cannot identify what they want to do; they cannot find their niche. They cannot

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identify the programs in which they will excel. They cannot thoughtfully determine how to distinguish one opportunity (academic or social) from another.

Fewer choices does not mean sacrificing the quality of the choices; excellent choices remain — just fewer of them. The excellence can take many forms, and small colleges can and should be innovative. I remember telling a president at another university last January that we were introducing a new project-based first-year

course by fall. That would be impossible, he said at his institution; it would take several years just to get the idea through the faculty. It's the difference between turning around a cruise ship and being a windsurfer.

### 3. Navigation

We make all sorts of assumptions about students' capacity to figure things out. We assume they know how (or can determine how) to register for classes, solve day-to-day problems (like lost keys or a lost meal card) and seek help when they are floundering academically or personally or even when they are physically or psychologically ill. We assume they can create opportunity on their own.

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While some students can do this well, others may fail at these tasks. Indeed, the newness of the college or university environs can unsettle the most stable recent high school graduate. Other students, most particularly students whose educational and family experiences are not so privileged, may struggle. Traditionally, the attitude seems to be: they'll eventually figure things out, and there is a real value in floundering and finding one's way. I am not so sure.

I have been reading Ron Suskind's *A Hope in the Unseen*, the amazing story of Cedric Jennings who progressed from an inner city high school in Washington, D.C. to Brown University. During orientation, he lost his temporary ID and since he did not know how to get it replaced, he went without food and bought what limited food he had with the money his mother gave him. Then, he tried to get his permanent ID but he did not have a photo ID to prove who he was (a driver's license was not in his repertoire). That became another hassle. When Cedric was choosing classes, he approached a student employee in the bookstore to determine what classes were full only to be humiliated when another student employee answered sarcastically, "Maybe the registrar knows." One obviously would need to know there is a registrar and what a registrar does in order to approach that office.

A small college's personnel can both be sensitive to these issues and take the time needed to help students learn to navigate. This starts with the recognition that navigation is an acquired skill, and small colleges can, as part of their mission, teach those skills — which will also be helpful in the workplace or in graduate school. Often, we also assume that if we explain things once

(whether during orientation, in written materials, or on the Web), students will get it. But, many students are overwhelmed. The simplest tasks are hard in the beginning. Forget asking for academic help in a difficult course like anatomy and physiology; just getting enough sleep, purchasing books, settling in with a roommate and arriving to class on time are challenging enough.

### 4. Early Engagement

In institutions with large student populations, it is easy for students to lose connections and then fail to progress. Vulnerable students (socially, academically, first generation college) are also at greater risk. This means that the most vulnerable students both fail to get a degree and incur considerable debt in the process. With the rising costs of education, this is a real problem. I have dubbed this the "debt without diploma" phenomena.

Consider these examples. At larger institutions, participation in athletics is largely limited to recruited athletes. At the student newspaper or student government, first year students in many universities are at the back of the line, waiting and watching until an opportunity presents itself. Unfortunately, for many students, early engagement and participation is precisely what they need — indeed, it will be their anchor to windward, their pathway into the benefits of the classroom. While small colleges cannot claim by any stretch to graduate all of their students, small colleges — really small colleges — can create opportunities for student engagement early and often in their lives within the institution.

One of my favorite students is succeeding because he can become co-captain of an athletic team as a sophomore. He keeps his grade point average up so he can play. He avoids too much partying as it risks his ability to participate in sports. He even helps his teammates with schoolwork so they can play. As he expressed to me, "Academics do not drive me; my sport does. And without sports, I would not be in college." He has a GPA of over 2.5, and I sense an appreciation for academics is creeping onto his horizon.

Small colleges cannot pretend to be everything to everyone. They need to find their niche, identify the things they do well, and not be apologetic for their limited selection. But, for some students — including those who are the most vulnerable — small colleges offer the best opportunity. They provide an environment that enables students to feel self-confident, to sense self-worth, to reach success. They need to feel the college is behind them, leading them to new places. They need to know they will be seen and heard. They need the structure. They need the tour guides. That is precisely what small colleges can provide.

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