

# **The Liberal Arts College Adapting to Change**

**The Survival of Small Schools**

**Gary Bonvillian and  
Robert Murphy**



Routledge Studies in Higher Education

THE LIBERAL ARTS  
COLLEGE ADAPTING  
TO CHANGE

GARLAND STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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THE SURVIVAL OF SMALL  
SCHOOLS

GARY BONVILLIAN  
ROBERT MURPHY

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*To Mary, Kathy, and our families  
for their love and support  
throughout this project.*

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## SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

Higher education is a multifaceted phenomenon in modern society, combining a variety of institutions and an increasing diversity of students, a range of purposes and functions, and different orientations. The series combines research-based monographs, analyses, and discussions of broader issues and reference books related to all aspects of higher education. It is concerned with policy as well as practice from a global perspective. The series is dedicated to illuminating the reality of higher and postsecondary education in contemporary society.

Philip G. Altbach  
Boston College

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THE LIBERAL ARTS  
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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Purpose of the Book

This book presents the story of small schools in American higher education. Although its focus is on small liberal arts colleges, the general concepts in the various subject areas of organization, administration, and management of higher education are applicable to all institutions. This book is also about change and how colleges must adapt to the economic realities of managing complex organizations. In addition to administrators, boards, faculty, historians, and scholars of higher education will also find the book useful in understanding the challenges and opportunities facing small schools.

The book will provide a brief historical perspective of small, liberal arts colleges and, perhaps, even a glimpse into their future. These unique institutions tell a compelling story as they have continuously evolved and met the challenge of change in this country's system of higher education. Their need to change has been driven by the financial and market forces which challenge academic leadership from all sectors of higher education to do more with less in an increasingly competitive climate for new students. Further, these changes are affecting the role of leadership and faculty and even the relationship an institution has with its many other constituencies such as students, parents, alumni, and employers. Finally, this book will tell the story of the small school's ability to adapt to change and survive as a distinctive component of our

higher education system for nearly three hundred years in spite of the tenuous conditions under which many have operated.

Like most sectors of higher education, small schools are experiencing a transformation in how they function internally to meet the demands of external social and economic conditions. This transformation has also been influenced by the gradual introduction and development of new management practices in higher education, designed to strengthen the institution's position in the marketplace, while still maintaining their rich and useful traditions and heritage. Many academic leaders recognize the unique nature of the educational enterprise yet acknowledge that colleges have and will continue to be pressured to function with diminishing resources, making this transformation an imperative.

For several decades, we have witnessed colleges and universities attempt to gradually adopt traditional business practices in their drive to become more efficient, fiscally sound and competitive. This has resulted in many, still largely unanswered, questions with respect to optimal models for organizational design, institutional decision-making and strategic positioning. Each of these raises serious questions with respect to the changing role of administrators, faculty, and other major stakeholders who have a vested interest in the welfare of the institution. Thus, an analysis of the constraints and opportunities for these various groups, resulting from the many strategic issues confronting their institutions, will constitute a central theme of this book.

## Relevance and Importance of the Topic

To assure the continued survival of small schools, leaders must be prepared to accept the fact that proven managerial techniques and practices can and are being applied to academic organizations. In recent years, consortium support groups such as The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) as well as respected scholars in the management of higher education have called upon small schools to reconsider their traditional administrative and institutional decision-making practices and examine new approaches to managing the enterprise. Some schools have done so with considerable success. Several of their stories will be presented later in this book.

Of greater concern to those committed to new management and administrative practices is that traditional pathways to the formulation and execution of institutional decisions have relatively well-defined norms and patterns in higher education, ingrained over a long period of time and widely accepted in the academic community. Perhaps nowhere in higher education is this adherence to tradition stronger than in the small liberal arts school. As administration of these schools has become more complex and their vitality is increasingly dependent upon the application of sound management practices, such traditions are being threatened.

Faculty involvement and influence in institutional decision-making is often at the center of these discussions, as their historically held role in campus governance has resulted in a high expectation for continued participation. Today's academic leadership is challenged to meet these expectations while also assuring their institutions are

strategically positioned in the marketplace. Striking a balance between these two demands is often a difficult one for college leadership. The challenge becomes exacerbated by the faculty's tendency to shy away from scrutiny of their own operating practices.

We often think of the strategic positioning of an institution as the prerogative of central administration. However, one emerging question, for all schools, is to what degree faculty should participate in this process. Prevailing questions in the study of institutional management and decision-making as well as campus governance are becoming less focused on which group should exert the most influence. Rather, we are beginning to see a greater interest in partnerships in decision-making, thus acknowledging the legitimate interest of all stakeholders and perhaps more importantly, capitalizing on the distinctive contributions each can make.

There is also a growing awareness and acceptance that the internal functions of the college will be influenced by external factors. Colleges must understand, be capable of adapting to and even learn to benefit from the changing environmental conditions which affect an institution's long-term vitality. Simply put, they can no longer afford to be static in an atmosphere of rapid change. Many small schools have demonstrated an ability to not only cope with but to even capitalize on these conditions, presenting evidence of their tenacity and will to survive.

Advocate organizations such as the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) diligently work to both defend and promote the existence of small schools. Their portrayal of these institutions as vital national assets, should not be dismissed as merely promotional rhetoric. CIC offers the

following points as an argument for both the success and long-term survival of small schools. Perhaps more importantly, it also provides us with a clearer understanding of the character of these unique organizations and reasons why we should seek to assure their existence.

- They each possess a distinctive institutional purpose. Intangible as it may be, these colleges are permeated with a special sense of purpose made up of an intrinsic mixture of historic ideals, moral and spiritual values, devotion to quality, and a clear and direct vision of the future--all with the individual student as the centerpiece.
- They emphasize teaching excellence. Professors teach students in personal settings--and not always in the formal classroom. Faculty research and publications are adjuncts to the teaching process.
- They provide education with a moral and spiritual dimension. Most small colleges were started by religious bodies. This religious heritage, while seldom proselytized, permeates the values of these colleges. They educate the whole person. The small size and residential nature of the colleges enable intimate personal contact among students, faculty, and administrators. Small colleges foster emotional, social, moral, and spiritual development of students--as well as intellectual growth. They emphasize the liberal arts and sciences.
- Because small colleges adhere to the values of

a liberal education, students find it impossible to overspecialize or to merely immerse themselves in vocational subjects. They are free and flexible. Beholden to no one but their own boards of trustees, small colleges march to the tune of their own drummer, not to the beat of a state planning bureau or a federal granting agency.

- They serve their region. Small colleges are sources of great local and regional pride. These colleges exist, in most cases, to serve the citizens of a particular region, even though they are privately supported and attract students from across the country. They are successful. In many cases for more than 200 years and in some cases for less than 20 years, small colleges have produced graduates who have succeeded, pioneered new programs, been the first, the best, the only in a field of endeavor.<sup>1</sup>

Among their other unique characteristics, small schools were, and perhaps still are today, the bastions of liberal arts. They relentlessly cling to the ideology of a liberal education. Even during the Progressive Era when colleges were under enormous pressure to respond with greater social service, they clung to a fundamental belief in a broad-based education. The small liberal arts colleges did respond but not at the expense of their commitment to their own educational philosophy. It was then, and still is today, one of their unique strategic strengths.

Rooted in the British tradition of teaching excellence and a core curriculum in the liberal arts, many colleges

have evolved into multipurpose institutions providing a valuable service to society. While striving to maintain a unique identity among institutions of higher education, such as a fundamental commitment to undergraduate studies and their residential and even communal environment, liberal arts colleges also have survived by being responsive to a changing social climate.

In recent years, there has been relatively little published academic research and even less written in the popular literature on the history, evolution, and survival of small private liberal arts colleges. Yet, as will be illustrated, these unique organizations constitute a significant component of the higher education system.

In the early 1970s, several books were published which are frequently consulted by researchers in higher education. Alexander Astin and Calvin Lee authored one such book, *The Invisible Colleges* (McGraw-Hill, 1972) which addresses the impending challenges of small schools during a difficult economic period.<sup>2</sup> Labeled *invisible* by Astin and Lee due to the relative obscurity of the small schools, the term is also reflective of our general lack of understanding of this sector of higher education. In addition to this work, Burton Clark's *The Distinctive College* (originally published in 1970 by Aldine) was reissued in 1992 by Transaction Publishers.<sup>3</sup> This seminal work provides a clearer understanding of how the history, traditions, and values of an institution can greatly influence its character and survival.

In the 1980s, colleges and universities were also beginning to more closely examine the possible application of business principles such as strategic decision-making and marketing to their organizations. George Keller authored a



popular book in 1983 on the application of strategic principles in higher education. Keller's *Academic Strategy, The Management Revolution in American Higher Education* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), presented a functional and easily interpreted model for examining the positioning of academic organizations.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Philip Kotler and Karen Fox in their *Strategic Marketing for Educational Institutions* (Prentice Hall, 1985) illustrated that colleges and universities could adapt proven business principles to attract new students.<sup>5</sup>

While the Keller and Kotler/Fox books were instrumental in establishing a new interest in the management practices of higher education, they did not focus on the unique organizational conditions of small schools. Important contributions during their time and a basis for some of the work in this book, these publications did provide a new generation of institutional leadership with valuable insight into how traditional business principles and practices could be applied to academia.

## Strategic Strengths and Market Realities

The small schools' historical commitment to the liberal arts and their apparent unity of purpose may yet prove to be the most significant strategic strength of these institutions. For some, however, it could also be their downfall. While their ideological roots provide a much-needed anchor for these institutions, like virtually all other colleges and universities, they have also become increasingly influenced by external social and economic conditions. External environmental conditions invariably affect the market and thus the appeal of any given

institution to prospective students.

In recent years, this phenomenon has had a profound impact on traditional thinking within academia with respect to organizational structure, leadership, governance, and higher education's romantic emphasis on the campus as a community. As can be seen on virtually every campus today, regardless of size or character, a great many management decisions are being made to position the school for long-term competitiveness in the marketplace. Whether it is yet widely recognized or not, these are strategic decisions based on an analysis of the particular strengths of the institution as well as its ability to be responsive under continuously changing conditions.

On at least one front, the small school may have an inherent advantage in the strategic decision-making process which capitalizes on its primary resource, faculty. Recent research has shown the high degree to which faculty at private, four-year colleges are committed to students, their colleagues and the campus as a total community. In a study of faculty attitudes conducted by the University of California at Los Angeles Higher Education Research Institute, scores of different characteristics were measured in both public and private universities, four-year and two-year colleges. A number of characteristics of faculty from private four-year colleges emerged as evidence of their inherent commitment to the organization. They included:

- On the question of professional goals, in particular that of being a good colleague, these faculty ranked second (83.4%) within the six organizational types. Only public two-year

colleges had a higher-ranked response.

- On the question of aspects of their jobs which they found to be very satisfactory or satisfactory as related to relationships with their fellow faculty, they again ranked second (79.7%) to public two-year colleges.
- On the question of the faculty's commitment to the welfare of the institution, they ranked first (87.1%) and significantly higher than in any other categories.
- On the question of whether administrators consider faculty concerns when making policy, these faculty ranked first (61.5%) and significantly higher than most other organizational types.
- On the question of importance of developing a sense of community among students and faculty, these faculty ranked first (60.6%) and significantly higher than all other categories.<sup>6</sup>

As will be reinforced throughout this book, it is imperative that today's leaders in small schools not only recognize but also utilize this high level of commitment of faculty while managing their organizations. While colleges and universities in the United States are preparing to meet mounting challenges of the late 1990s and beyond, this period could be a major turning point for higher education. While some institutions have historically survived and even thrived under such conditions, academic leaders today are less certain their institutions can weather such a challenging period without a close examination of the organization's strategic direction and optimization of all resources.