

Views



The Case of the Disappearing Liberal Arts College

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By **Roger G. Baldwin** and **Vicki L. Baker**

The [continuing saga](#) over the closure of Antioch College (including a plan to [revive it](#)) heightened concern that many storied, but financially stressed, liberal arts colleges may be in danger of closing in a time of economic turmoil. Antioch educated prominent Americans like the civil rights leader Coretta Scott King, the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and the Nobel Prize winner Mario R. Capecchi. The threatened demise of any innovative and influential college that has nurtured generations of leaders, scholars, public servants and social critics would be a loss both to higher education and our nation.

But the focus by reporters and educational policy makers on the potential closure of some colleges may mask a more serious threat to liberal arts colleges: a slow abandonment of their traditional mission in favor of a more “professional” orientation.

This longer-term and more significant trend was first highlighted by the economist David Breneman nearly 20 years ago in a 1990 article that asked, [“Are we losing our liberal arts colleges?”](#) At that time he concluded that many one-time liberal arts colleges were not closing, but gradually transforming into “professional colleges” as they added programs in vocational fields such as business, communications and allied health.

Recent research we have conducted using data from the National Center for Education Statistics confirms that the trend Breneman identified has continued. The 212 liberal arts colleges that Breneman identified in 1990 have now decreased to 137. Many former liberal arts colleges are evolving, consciously or unconsciously, into more academically complex institutions offering numerous vocational as well as arts and science majors. In the process, they may have lost the focused mission and carefully integrated academic program that for generations made small liberal arts colleges a model of high quality undergraduate education. Most likely this trend will persist.

In [a recent interview](#), Brian Rosenberg, president of Macalester College, predicted that 10 to 15 years from now there will be even fewer institutions that look like traditional residential liberal arts colleges. Little by little, we may be losing an alternative model of undergraduate education that has challenged and inspired many other types of higher education institutions to take risks, experiment, and improve the quality of their educational programs.

The gradual, and almost invisible, transformation of many “liberal arts colleges” to more comprehensive institutions is similar to another gradual trend that has reshaped the composition and the work of the American academic profession. Over the past three decades, colleges and universities have replaced tenure-track faculty positions with part-time and full-time term-contract positions -- a phenomenon Jack Shuster and Martin Finkelstein referred to as the “silent revolution” in [their book](#) *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). This piecemeal process at most institutions was not the result of a careful review of academic staffing needs or a systematic effort to improve the quality of instruction and scholarship. Nor was it the outcome of a national debate on the nature of the academic profession in the 21st century.

Instead, as research on contingent faculty documents, most colleges and universities added part-time and term-contract faculty in response to immediate staffing needs or short-term budget constraints. The gradual but profound shift in the focus of many liberal arts colleges appears to follow a similar pragmatic but also very reactive pattern.

Change in higher education is inevitable and highly desirable. It is essential in order to craft a lean, efficient educational system capable of meeting the educational demands of an era defined by demographic diversity, economic uncertainty, rapid technological advances, and a global market place. The evolution we see in liberal arts colleges is symptomatic of a much larger evolutionary process underway throughout higher education. We recognize that liberal arts colleges and all of higher education must adapt to the demands of the times.

Our concern is not with change itself. Our concern is with the way change unfolds in our complex and loosely coordinated higher education system. Should evolution in higher education follow a Darwinian "survival of the fittest" course or should we intervene to preserve and update valued types of educational institutions because of the important roles they play in serving our pluralistic society?

The Value of Liberal Arts Colleges

The current saga of the U.S. auto industry may contain some useful lessons for higher education. Although the final chapter on this story has yet to be written, the news media has chronicled a national dialogue on the fate of the American manufacturing sector. Rather than letting U.S. automobile manufacturers disappear in the midst of a dramatic economic recession, we have decided as a nation to preserve GM and Chrysler but also to require them to retool and streamline their operations. This decision was driven by the belief that losing the backbone of our manufacturing sector would ultimately be harmful to our country.

It may be time for a similar dialogue on the shape of the U.S. higher education system and the place of liberal arts colleges within that system. For generations, small liberal arts colleges have demonstrated their educational value. As Thomas Cech noted in his article "[Science at Liberal Arts Colleges: A Better Education.](#)" they produce scientists and scholars at a higher per capita rate than other types of postsecondary institutions. Furthermore, many leaders in business, politics, education, and other fields received their education at liberal arts colleges, as noted in the Annapolis Group's report, "The Nation's Top Liberal Arts Colleges." In addition, liberal arts colleges have served as a valuable "test kitchen" for other more complex but less nimble higher education institutions.

According to the education historian Frederick Rudolph, numerous educational innovations, such as freshman seminars, single-course intensive study terms, honors programs, and senior theses emerged from liberal arts colleges before they spread to other types of colleges and universities. Likewise, many second and third-tier liberal arts colleges have demonstrated a special talent for serving first-generation college students. Essentially, these small colleges with nurturing environments have served as a portal to liberal education for many students whose families have never before participated in higher education.

In a 2005 report on the impact of liberal arts colleges, Ernest Pascarella and his co-authors observe that the liberal arts college is unique in its total dedication to undergraduate education. Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini in their comprehensive study of college outcomes concluded that the liberal arts college in its traditional form provides a supportive psychological environment that promotes institutional impact on students. Pascarella and his 2005 co-authors concluded the attributes that have made the liberal arts college a powerful learning environment include "a strong emphasis on teaching and student development, a common valuing of the life of the mind, small size, a shared intellectual experience, high academic expectations, and frequent interactions inside and outside the classroom between students and faculty."

Alexander Astin, professor emeritus of higher education at the University of California at Los Angeles, drawing upon extensive national research on higher education, reported that liberal arts college students expressed higher satisfaction with teaching and general education programs than students from other types of postsecondary institutions. Similarly, Indiana University researchers Shouping Hu and George Kuh found that students in liberal arts colleges, in general, are more engaged in their college experience than their counterparts in research universities and comprehensive colleges.

Many liberal arts colleges today are working to update their academic programs and better connect them with the outside world and career opportunities. Writing in a 2009 *Liberal Education* [article](#), Richard Freeland notes that these changes are driven by recognition that "a traditional liberal education may not, by itself, be a sufficient preparation for the adult world." Freeland further reports that colleges such as Bates and Wellesley have established programs to enhance civic engagement and develop skills needed for constructive citizenship.

Many liberal arts colleges are trying to make liberal education more relevant and practical by making internships, study abroad, service learning, and other forms of problem-based and experiential learning opportunities available to their students. The challenge for all liberal arts colleges is to adapt their educational programs in a turbulent environment without losing their educational souls and distinctive identity. Can they preserve their core values and mission that have made them particularly effective educational institutions throughout the history of American higher education while adapting to the challenging demands they confront in the early 21st century?

Given their powerful educational environments and important contributions to society, it would be unfortunate to see liberal arts colleges disappear or become so few in number that they lose their ability to influence and inspire other types of colleges and universities. Yet national data on liberal arts colleges suggest that their numbers are decreasing as many evolve into “professional colleges” or other types of higher education institutions.

Fundamentally, the future of the liberal arts college is uncertain. The traditional residential liberal arts college offering a coherent educational program based firmly in arts and science fields and offering a shared intellectual experience to all of its students may be dying out. Or the liberal arts college may gradually be evolving into a new, more up-to-date form. Are we witnessing a process of extinction of the traditional liberal arts college or a healthy process of adaptation and evolution? Whichever process is underway, it seems to be largely unplanned and incremental rather than strategic.

What to Do?

In a dynamic society, change is inevitable and, in most cases, desirable. However, how change occurs is important as well. Do we let change unfold without direction or do we guide change through a careful process of assessment, dialogue, and strategic initiative?

The American liberal arts college has reached an important crossroad. We believe that assertive and coordinated action is necessary to stem the gradual demise of the liberal arts college sector. For this reason, we urge private philanthropic foundations with a tradition of supporting liberal arts colleges (for example the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, the Teagle Foundation) to take the lead with two important steps:

1. Convene a series of meetings to discuss the future of the liberal arts college with the goal of recommending specific actions to update and strengthen these institutions. These meetings should include a diverse mix of liberal arts colleges, voluntary college consortia, other major education interest groups, and representatives of the public at large.
2. Establish a competitive funding program encouraging liberal arts colleges to design innovative and entrepreneurial educational programs that preserve the best aspects of the liberal arts college model while adapting the model to the demands of a rapidly changing world. This initiative should encourage creative proposals within the liberal arts college framework rather than the addition of new programs on the margins that dilute the mission and intellectual coherence of these colleges.

The future of a core component of the U.S. higher education system is at stake. It is time for bold action before the liberal arts college sector becomes too small to be relevant and influential. It would be shameful if we allow the liberal arts college model to dwindle to the scale of an educational boutique accessible only to the academic and socioeconomic elite. We do not advocate a GM-style bailout for liberal arts colleges. However, we hope that one or more private foundations that recognize the important contributions of liberal arts colleges will step up to the plate and assume the vital leadership role that is needed before many more of these esteemed colleges disappears.

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