

Why *Public* Liberal Arts Colleges?

by Bill Spellman, Director of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges

The stories and trend projections are by now familiar to most of us. The residential liberal arts college, cherished centerpiece of American higher education from the colonial period to the end of the Second World War, has for the past half-century suffered a slow but inexorable decline. Unable or unwilling to meet the demands of students with increasingly diverse and explicitly career-oriented interests, enrollments have faltered, fiscal resources have atrophied, and campus identity has been shaken. Especially in today's climate of economic uncertainty and public upset over the high cost of, and alleged lack of accountability within post-secondary education, the future seems fraught with peril for those small to medium-sized institutions, church related and non-sectarian alike, clinging to an educational model that seems increasingly outmoded.

There are, of course, crucial exceptions to every grand narrative, no matter how compelling the story seems at the outset. America's most selective private liberal arts colleges, for example, continue to enjoy strong applicant pools and consistently enroll talented and diverse freshman classes. And graduates of these institutions still manage to enjoy financial success and high levels of personal satisfaction in a wide variety of professional fields. Clearly, many prospective students and their families recognize the long-term value of the residential liberal arts experience. But for many lesser-known, tuition-driven liberal arts colleges with modest or meager endowments, the picture is distinctly less sanguine. At these institutions the narrative of decline is a worrisome reality.

In such an unpropitious demographic and fiscal environment, then, why has there been a move to cultivate a public liberal arts sector? Indeed with most states now facing sizeable budget shortfalls and painful funding choices, isn't it imprudent to support small to medium-sized campuses that champion liberal arts education? What can be the rationale behind legislative and system-wide governing board support for public liberal arts colleges and universities?

The answer, I believe, is rooted in a particular history and a rather atypical vision of what public education at the post-secondary level ought to look like. The initial formation of a public liberal arts sector predates the current economic downturn and the enrollment dilemma faced by so many private liberal arts colleges. More than two decades ago, a number of presidents from small-to medium-sized public universities gathered to align their campuses as a reference group for purposes of benchmarking and strategic planning. The unofficial group continued to meet on an annual basis for mutual support and sharing of best practices, until in 1992 it was decided that a formal consortium should be established, the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges or COPLAC. During the very decades when a number of private liberal arts colleges were losing students or worse still, closing their doors, the public liberal arts sector experienced quiet but sustained growth. Leaders of small to medium-sized state institutions with an emphasis in the

arts and sciences sought to position themselves within their respective state systems by making explicit their commitment to the residential liberal arts model. Today there are 26 member campuses of COPLAC, representing 24 states and one Canadian province.

The argument in favor of public liberal arts colleges was and remains simple and straightforward: In every great state university system at least one campus should embrace the vision of the residential liberal arts college to meet the needs of students whose academic potential is best realized in a smaller learning environment. Since the 1950s the growth imperative in the public sector, in terms of enrollment, program offerings, and campus size, was advanced to meet the educational goals of citizens in a more complicated and skills-driven workplace environment. The public option, to use a term recently at the center of another important policy debate, was designed in part to promote access and affordability, to further democratize post-secondary education.

As a result, state flagship campuses became very large and research-driven, while regional comprehensives expanded in alignment with the economic development needs of their service areas. State funding formulas for public institutions typically developed around the principle of student credit-hour generation; the larger the student body, the greater the fiscal resources for campuses to hire more faculty, build new facilities, and offer a more diverse array of specialized majors. All of this made sense, or at least there were plausible arguments in favor of the paradigm. In a society where the majority culture equated growth with innovation and material progress—a better quality of life—the fact that public university systems tracked wider social attitudes is hardly surprising.

But in the rush to boost enrollments, expand physical plant and grow programs, important questions of scale and the nature of academic communities were sometimes overlooked. The COPLAC presidents sought to engage these questions. In the words of David Brown, one of the founders of COPLAC during his tenure as Chancellor at UNC Asheville, “the massive expansion of higher education, almost exclusively in public funded institutions, threatened to leave the liberal arts college as a boutique accessible only to the wealthy. Suddenly we needed to correct for an unintended consequence.”

Like their counterparts in the private sector, public liberal arts colleges continue to find value in smaller learning environments, both in terms of class and overall campus size. Today, undergraduate enrollment at COPLAC member institutions ranges from a low of 800 students to a high of 7,500, with the average size of the student body in the neighborhood of 3,500. Again like their private peers, the public colleges focus on undergraduate teaching and advisement, and evidence that commitment in the way that resources are allocated and outcomes achieved. They encourage close working relationships between students and their professors, and endeavor to maintain low student-to-faculty ratios.

As part of the application process, prospective members of COPLAC must demonstrate a clear institutional mission to the liberal arts as a core activity beyond a strong general education program. Often this includes interdisciplinary coursework, a robust undergraduate research program, regular opportunities for community engagement and learning beyond the classroom, and study abroad experiences organized and led by experienced, full-time faculty members. At the core of the liberal arts mission, in both the private and public sectors, is an allegiance to a more personal learning style, one where campus size facilitates dialogue, where global awareness begins in small classes and seminars, and where residential proximity informs community and social action.

It all sounds great, but in fairness there are two main reservations about the public liberal arts college movement, and both are deserving of careful consideration. The first concerns the nature of the disciplinary offerings at many of these institutions, in particular the inclusion of majors in professional and applied fields like nursing, business, and education. For traditionalists, the liberal arts must be set apart from the unseemly marketplace, must be about learning and knowledge for their intrinsic, not their instrumental or utilitarian value. The subject matter deemed most appropriate to meet the non-quantifiable learning outcomes of the liberally educated person includes literature, philosophy, history and foreign languages. One might negotiate a few additions to the list from the natural and social sciences, but the inventory is finite. Any move to be more inclusive is interpreted by traditionalists as the thin wedge, the slippery slope into servile careerism.

Of course not everyone agrees with this immovable version of the liberal arts college. In a recent *Inside HigherEd* article on the subject, researchers Roger G. Baldwin of Michigan State University and Viki L. Baker of Albion College suggest that our current understanding and nomenclature may be changing, that through a healthy and adaptive process of reexamination “the liberal arts college may gradually be evolving into a new, more up-to date form” where professional programs are no longer viewed with suspicion. One of the signature initiatives of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, called “Liberal Education and America’s Promise” or LEAP, advances the notion that liberal learning can and ought to occur on campuses large and small, and seeks to encourage dialogue that will result in a new synthesis between liberal and practical education. Writing in *Liberal Arts Online*, AAC&U senior fellow David Paris has observed that the liberal arts “are best served by seeing continuities and connections between intellectual life and other pursuits, between and among areas of study, and as part of the larger project of liberal democracy.” Public liberal arts colleges and universities endorse this broader view of the liberally educated person.

The second reservation is related to the first but is more controversial. It focuses on the eclectic (as opposed to diverse) nature and personal obligations of students at the majority of public

liberal arts colleges. While some COPLAC campuses have highly selective admissions policies and strong retention rates, others share key characteristics with their larger public counterparts, with sizeable transfer populations, a significant minority of adult learners, part-time and commuting students, and students whose commitments include significant work and family responsibilities. These campuses matriculate women and men who are parents, veterans, and employees for whom college is but one quadrant on a more complicated life canvas. And it is these non-student commitments that compete with, or detract from, a full engagement with the residential liberal arts experience, the arena of reflection and deep intellectual engagement. In a phrase, the majority of COPLAC institutions can be categorized, at best, as aspiring liberal arts colleges.

Faculty and professional staff at some public liberal arts colleges do face considerable challenges in building and sustaining a community of learners whose members understand the long-term value of a strong core in the arts and sciences. Advising and mentoring are of greater import in an environment where a significant number of entering freshman are first-generation college students. Student affairs professionals must work creatively to engage commuters and part-time undergraduates in campus co-curricular life. Writing centers, math labs, peer tutoring, and career services must offer consistent, high quality support for students through every stage of their academic journey.

But with great challenges come even greater opportunities. The potential value-added of a liberal arts education at a small to medium-sized public institution can be enormous, especially for that tentative, first-generation college student who might not succeed in a much larger campus environment, but who cannot afford a private liberal arts college. There is the community-college transfer who finds her passion in undergraduate research, working one-on-one in the biology lab with a full professor who is also her academic advisor. There is the returning veteran who focuses his mind on the history and culture of countries where he served recently on active duty. And there is the mother who, having supported her own children through college, now has the chance to pursue her own life-long dream of a college degree. The public liberal arts college enlarges the range of learning formats for deserving students like these, affords them access to a model of college that for most of America's history was only available to a select few.

For faculty members at public liberal arts colleges, where teaching undergraduates comes before research, the reward comes when that introverted first-generation freshman is admitted to the law school of her choice, when that community college transfer wins a prestigious Fulbright and pursues an advanced degree in literature, or when that veteran becomes a primary school teacher, non-profit business manager, or hospice nurse who embodies the values of liberal learning in the workplace. It is graduates like these who repay the trust of fellow citizens, state legislators and governing boards that continue to support the public liberal arts option, even in these difficult economic times.