

Imagining a New Future For the Small Liberal Arts College



Written by Victor Brown

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Movie buffs will recall *The Perfect Storm*, based on the book of the same name, in which the fishing boat Andrea Gail fell victim to the convergence of three powerful forces – two unusually strong weather fronts, and a hurricane whose intensity they underestimated.

In my view, based on long experience in both business and academics, small liberal arts colleges are right now finding themselves in the middle of their own perfect storm.

To begin, one need only listen to some of what the presidential candidates are spouting in this election year, to understand that there is an almost complete lack of understanding between government policymakers and the business community. The conflicts are legion, and nobody seems to be able to bring the sides together.

Secondly, the recent antics of students and faculty on many campuses across the country have given higher education the appearance of comic irrelevance. Protesting and railing against perceived slights of all types shows the general public how much time (and money) these students have to waste on matters of little real relevance to the pressing issues facing society today.

Finally, add the third aspect to this perfect storm – the increasing difficulty that small liberal arts colleges are having to remain solvent. Declining enrollment populations, tuition increases running far above the rate of inflation, low graduation rates and the resulting increase in student loan defaults, are all putting pressure on the higher education community.

Unlike the *Andrea Gail*, however, the small liberal arts college is not necessarily doomed. Creative thinking, strong leadership, and a bold vision for what our country needs could yet allow many of these colleges to carve out a very specific market niche, and to thrive while contributing mightily to the public good.

Business today is about a lot of things, not least its focus on cost control and careful market segmentation.

Globalization, with all of its faults, has certainly succeeded in reducing consumer prices of almost everything over the last three decades. At the same time, companies carefully leverage these low-cost positions into making products that compete in defined, narrow market segments.

Make no mistake – the higher education industry is very much a business. As such, it has also been focusing on cost reduction and market segmentation – sort of. The move away from tenured faculty towards adjunct faculty is certainly an example of cost reduction. Unfortunately, though, administrative bloat and facilities cost increases have generally masked this, as tuition continues to climb at a rate about triple that of recent inflation.

Regarding market segmentation, it generally exists only at the very macro level – big universities appeal to students who favor large campus size, state-subsidized tuition, broad course offerings, big time sports, etc. Small liberal arts colleges focus on another student market segment – those who desire smaller class sizes, more faculty interaction, the general friendliness of small campus life, and who are content to engage in athletics at the Division III level.

But there is a problem here for many of these small colleges. Their relative lack of scale (1500-2500 students) results in high fixed costs per student, partly driven by the fact that they continue to emphasize broad course offerings. Students can often select from dozens of major and minor courses of study, while the requirement to supplement a major with courses from the broad “common core” tends to work to keep demand for minor programs higher than might otherwise be the case. Hence, it is difficult to eliminate many of them.

Reflecting on where the country and the college community find themselves, it seems to me that a truly visionary small college could aggressively control costs by developing an academic niche that would be highly

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attractive to students, provide a benefit to society as a whole, and help to ensure the future of the college itself.

To stimulate thinking and to put all of this into practical terms, may I suggest the formation of The College for Business and Policy Leadership?

This College would focus on offering an integrated course of study in (only) three carefully selected areas – economics, politics and international business.

Leaders in our society need a much better understanding of the interrelationships between policy and business, at all levels. Our new College would attract and educate students who are highly motivated, are able to synthesize information very well, and have the capacity to develop a deep understanding of the mutual effects of business practice and government policy making. As graduates, they can move comfortably between these sectors, and reach leadership positions in business or government.

Our College would be highly selective, attracting students who possess intelligence, engagement, and leadership traits. Our program would be decidedly non-ideological, and dedicated to the search for the common good, which always involves careful balancing of private enterprise with government policy.

In addition to course work, this program would depend upon strong partnerships, not only with graduate programs in policy and business, but also with a wide range of for-profit, not-for-profit and governmental organizations.

The College would have a highly engaged and balanced Board of Directors consisting of representatives from the corporate, government and non-profit sectors. These Board members would each commit to provide meaningful opportunities in their organizations for internships on a sequential and highly programmed basis. In addition, these partners would be willing to work with us to help craft and update our curriculum, provide experts to supplement our own faculty,

and expose our students to meaningful off-campus experiences in their own organizations. Since intellectual capital is the lifeblood of any organization, these activities would provide our partner organizations with an early identification of strong emerging talent.

The College would require students to spend a semester or summer abroad – not to frolic in Tuscany, but to be spent working on location in a partner multinational organization, getting to understand the world from a different point of view.

There would also be time spent in a “Washington semester”, working within a government agency that deals broadly with American and international business firms.

Students would conduct their honors research projects on specific business-governance topics that have real time impacts, drawing on what they have absorbed from all of their studies and work experiences.

There would be formal relationships with selected graduate schools, such as Georgetown or Harvard for graduate studies in government, or the University of South Carolina for graduate studies in international business, or the University of Maryland’s Center for Public-Private Enterprise. These partner universities would offer priority enrollment to the students who have excelled in the College’s programs, and wish to focus on one of these areas for advanced study.

Finally, the College would become known as the place to host conferences and workshops dealing with any number of public-private policy issues. Political debates among candidates at the local, state and national levels would fit right into this mission.

But what about sports, theater, music, art, and other such broadening opportunities? Not here. This College is for students with very specific interests who want to pursue this type of education. Moreover, they want to benefit from affordable tuition that reflects spending

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strictly related to instruction, room and board – with a minimum of administrative overhead.

Most professionals manage to broaden themselves through their deep engagement with their careers, supplemented by the plethora of educational resources so readily available in our digital world. Our graduates would do the same.

There could be many such colleges, each devoted to different areas of focus – science, medicine, etc. Almost all avenues of study can be accommodated – but it is for the visionary small college to select the single direction that fits them best, and to focus relentlessly on costs and segmentation. The College for Business and Policy Leadership can be just one of many.

The students who select our College would all need personal sense of direction, hard work, achievement, and contribution. Students who don't know what they want, or want to party or otherwise mark time for four years, need not apply. If we have learned anything recently, it is that there are already plenty of colleges and universities that fit them just fine.

[For more about the author, visit VictorBrown.net](http://VictorBrown.net)