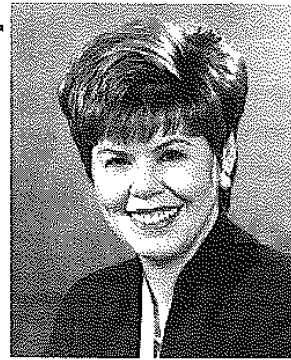


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A Legacy Rediscovered: Public Service at Private Colleges

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While it is now commonly accepted that public institutions of higher education have a responsibility to engage in outreach in addition to teaching and research, the service mission of our nation's private liberal arts colleges has been overlooked. The limited attention that has been given to the service mission of these institutions has focused on the moral and educational benefits of volunteerism to students, and on the impact of student service on "town/gown" relations. As a consequence, little is known about the past, present, and potential contributions of private colleges to the theory and practice of outreach.

Private liberal arts colleges provide the ideal environment for experimenting with an outreach mission. They have the freedom to orient life and curriculum around a philosophical or religious perspective that is inappropriate for a state institution. Private colleges also possess distinctive student characteristics, capital resources, and other assets that allow for a wide range of alternatives for practicing a service mission that are not available to public institutions. In short, the potential for creating dynamic and innovative outreach missions may be greater for private colleges than for public institutions of higher education.

The Service Legacy of the Liberal Arts

The people who founded many of our nation's private liberal arts colleges did so because they believed these institutions could provide a unique and valuable service to American society. In the nineteenth

century — the period when most private liberal arts colleges were established — the preparation of young people as citizens of a democracy was viewed by many as the service our nation most needed and that no other institution could furnish.

Ringenberg (1984) states that private institutions, especially church-related colleges, always have had a service ideal. McCoy believes that the early church-related, private colleges should more appropriately be labeled as "public Christian colleges," since "They were founded for the public interest as then conceived, to serve the common good, and to provide civic leaders capable of coping with the societal problems of the time." McCoy also says colleges of the colonial period "... were shaped by their utility for the community that founded them," and that they were "... founded for the public interest, served the common good of the larger community, and were involved with society and its problems" (1972, 24).

Research by Reeves et al. (1932) and Patton (1940) in the 1930s showed that the development of citizenship, social responsibility, and social and community leadership was consistently found in recruitment literature and in the statements of college presidents. Patton found that these aims were present in sixty-five percent of the private liberal arts colleges studied. Reeves and his colleagues found that training for citizenship and the development of social responsibility actually were ranked by college presidents ahead of the development of scholarly attitudes and habits. Hill, in the introduction to a 1984 issue of *Liberal Education* that was devoted to the social responsibilities of the liberal arts, writes, "The question of the social responsibilities of higher education is an enduring legacy of the liberal arts" (p. 90).

Reaching Out When Outreach Wasn't Fashionable

The recent resurgence of interest in outreach among public institutions is long overdue. And while most private colleges have yet to engage in the discussion in earnest, there are noteworthy examples of private colleges that maintained strong outreach missions during periods in the history of higher education when the attention of most institutions was turned elsewhere.

Brief, historical glimpses of four institutions — Earlham College in Richmond, Ind.; Wellesley College in Wellesley, Mass.; Kalamazoo College in Kalamazoo, Mich.; and Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, N.Y. — demonstrate not only the types of community-service activities in which private liberal arts colleges have engaged, but their motivations for doing so. A fifth, contemporary example — Olivet College in Olivet, Mich. — shows that outreach among private colleges is not simply an historical artifact. This small sampling of institutions is meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive. It simply demonstrates that the service mission can have multiple sources and justifications, and that private liberal arts colleges — past and present — have engaged in outreach.

Earlham: Service as Religious Conviction

Few private liberal arts colleges exemplify a community service mission based on religious conviction as well as does Earlham College, founded in 1847 in Richmond, Ind., by the Society of Friends. Kuh et al. claim that "To understand the Quaker tradition is to understand the mission of Earlham College; the Quaker ethos runs deep in the life of the college" (1991, 43). The principles that guide the institution include a strong sense of community, consensus decision making, simplicity, equality, nonviolence, and social justice. The college's statement of purpose claims that "In such a community, the teaching and learning roles are merged, and the curricular and experiential are combined. Earlham is both a sanctuary for reflection and a stimulus to practical action" (44). Earlham College is able to attract faculty who are willing to invest themselves in the institution's mission because the faculty reward system emphasizes involvement.

Wellesley: Service as Activism

In the early 1900s, Wellesley became synonymous with social reform and involvement in the local and surrounding communities, as well as in their missions throughout the United States and abroad. Wellesley faculty members were instrumental in the development of settlement houses and trade unions. In the 1920s, an offshoot of the Christian Association at Wellesley College evolved into the Intercollegiate Community Service Organization that eventually spread to eighteen Eastern women's colleges. In Millville, Wellesley College served the public through its clinic, school-meal program, and vegetable gardens. Wellesley College has a tradition not only of paying for physical improvements to schools around the world, it has paid Wellesley faculty to serve as visiting professors (Hawk 1975). Wellesley College founded the Wellesley Community Child Care Center, Inc., that continues to serve faculty and working mothers in the town (Taylor and Glasscock 1975).

Kalamazoo: Service in Times of Crisis

Kalamazoo College claims that its course offerings always have been geared to the needs of the Michigan community. However, the focus of much of the service in which Kalamazoo College has engaged appears to have originated during the Great Depression. In 1933, the head of the sociology department at Kalamazoo College assumed the position of Kalamazoo County Relief administrator in President Roosevelt's emergency relief program. In 1935, Kalamazoo College engaged in an analysis of the college's objectives that led to the creation of the Bureau of Municipal Research, an arm of the college that provided outreach to local units of government (Mulder

1958). The fundamental idea of the Bureau of Municipal Research was cooperation between the college and the community. In 1955, Kalamazoo College also established the Institute of Government. This institute was based on the idea that the world is a laboratory in which both the college and the community can work out their common problems.

Sarah Lawrence: Service as Education

Sarah Lawrence College was long considered a national leader in the use of field work for students. The college had little trouble finding areas in which to work since there were some areas of severe poverty within a five-mile radius of the campus (Lynd 1945). While field work formed the basis of the initial community service efforts of the college, the good relations that developed as a result of this early work paved the way for even greater college involvement in the community. Sarah Lawrence College helped communities to conduct housing surveys, and implement nursery school-teaching and adult-education programs.

Increasingly, the college began to think of these communities not merely as places for students to learn, but as groups of people wanting student and faculty services. Communities understood the special role the college could play, and as a result strategically targeted their requests toward those aspects of the college that possessed special resources. New York papers praised Sarah Lawrence College's involvement. The *Yonkers Herald Statesman* ran an editorial in the 1940s that states "The faculty at the college, trained in community problems, is performing a neighborly service in taking as its workshop Yonkers, Mount Vernon and Eastchester, all communities with large foreign elements. The outcome of the series should be of mutual gain both to the college and the residents of these communities who have been given a leading role at the series" (Lynd 1945, 80).

Olivet College: A Contemporary Innovator in Outreach

Olivet College has received national attention for its outreach to surrounding communities. Under the leadership of President Michael Bassis, "education for individual and social responsibility" has become the overarching characteristic of Olivet College (*Marshall Community Ad-Visor* 1997). Field experiences are provided for all students in order to develop their sense of responsibility to themselves and to others. Olivet College has earmarked a significant portion of its scholarships for high school students who demonstrate commitment to others rather than high academic performance. In addition to service by students and faculty, the college itself takes active leadership in activities that promote community development and racial understanding.

Conclusion

Despite evidence that many private liberal arts colleges have practiced a service mission, many scholars of private liberal arts colleges and the public service mission consider these colleges as teaching institutions whose purpose is to prepare young people for productive lives by providing them with a broad, classical education. This emphasis on teaching is a source of pride among private liberal arts colleges. It is also a characteristic that is touted in recruitment literature as something that distinguishes private liberal arts colleges from large private and public universities, and is a major reason why scholars and the institutions themselves have ignored their service traditions.

There are other reasons why private liberal arts colleges have been absent from the debate about the public service mission:

- Private liberal arts colleges often lack the financial and human resources with which to conduct community service or other innovative activities.
- Unlike state universities and community colleges that are chartered to serve defined, distinct, and known geographic areas, the geographic service area of private liberal arts colleges is self-determined.
- Growing secularization of private higher education and the quest for financial stability and prestige has been a limiting factor.
- Private liberal arts colleges lack institution-appropriate definitions of service.

The increased attention now being devoted to the public service mission should not be limited to public institutions. More than twenty-five years ago, Keeton argued that the burden of transforming American higher education cannot and should not be borne solely by public institutions (1971). How can private liberal arts colleges take advantage of their unique qualities and develop community-service strategies that are instructive for all of higher education? Perhaps by following the advice of Charles McCoy:

By choosing purposes and roles related to its constituencies and to the needs of society around it, a college may be distinguished from other colleges and may even become distinguished in its performance. This means not that it does what other colleges cannot do but that it does what other colleges are not doing. It means finding its own vocation, discovering an identity for itself (1972, 51).

Far from diminishing the quality of the private liberal arts college, practicing an appropriate community service mission may be the *best* way to develop both the full potential and the viability of this unique institution. Only by doing so can the private liberal arts college exercise the "active and intelligent leadership" American society will demand in the twenty-first century. ■

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