

# Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

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Volume 7 | Number 7

Article 9

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2007

## Old Main: Small Colleges in Twenty-First Century America

Mari H. Anzicek

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### Recommended Citation

Anzicek, Mari H. (2007) "Old Main: Small Colleges in Twenty-First Century America," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*. Vol. 7 : No. 7 , Article 9.

Available at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd\\_growth/vol7/iss7/9](https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol7/iss7/9)

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**Schuman, S. (2005). *Old Main: Small Colleges in Twenty-First Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press)**

Reviewed by Mari H. Anzicek

“In short, the day I decided to attend a small college was one of the best days of my life” (p.19). This quote epitomizes the essence of *Old Main: Small Colleges in Twenty-First Century America*. This book is about small colleges, their past and present, and the variety of missions and histories they bring to the landscape of American higher education. This book is not a history lesson or an exercise in nostalgia, but a critical exploration into the qualities of small colleges that make them valuable and fascinating places which cannot be lost in the consumerism and one size fits all mindset of 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Small colleges are “not better than large universities...they are different in kind...and for some undergraduates they are the best educational option” (p.2).

Schuman opens with an extensive introduction detailing why, how, for whom, and what he is writing about. This provides the foundation for the text and an understanding of how one might benefit from the reading. Described as institutions containing 500-3,000 full-time students, Schuman believes these small colleges are facing a crisis of collapse. They are being displaced by large multi-versities and expanding community colleges, the for-profit sector, and regional comprehensive universities, all with the ability to meet the many needs of today’s students. Schuman believes the four-year experience at a small college -- for most of our nation’s history, the established norm -- is close to disappearing. It is a “neighborhood American higher education can’t afford to lose” (p.6).

Following extensive research into the history of higher education, studies regarding post-secondary education, and an examination of published college materials (e.g., catalogs, self-studies, admissions materials and websites), Schuman supplemented his research with fieldwork. He chose 12 small colleges to visit; ask questions of students, faculty, and staff; and to critically examine their efforts to find a niche in the higher education community in America. The institutions selected represent a variety of characteristics including: (a) all four tiers of the Carnegie College classification; (b) locations ranging from both coasts, north to Lake Superior, and south to the Gulf of Mexico; (c) co-ed and single-sex institutions; (d) prestigious schools and others that continue to thrive in relative obscurity; (e) public and private institutions; and (f) religious and non-religious. In essence, he attempted to explore a broad sampling of small colleges across America to examine the critical role they play in higher education today. Additionally, Schuman identified a wide audience for this read, including those interested in or currently affiliated with small colleges, guidance counselors and parents of prospective students, alumni, educational policy makers, and the general reader.

Through Schuman's own research and statistics from both the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), he focuses on areas he believes distinguish small colleges from the greater higher education community. In chapters two through seven, Schuman surveys the history of American higher education from the perspective of a small college and examines how these institutions are distinctive from each other. An overview of students, faculty, and staff who live, study, and work at small colleges is also provided. In this section, one staff member at a small college commented, "Working at a small college is not a job; it is a lifestyle, even a passion" (p.79).

Additionally, Schuman discusses how small colleges have contributed to the higher education community through a unique commitment to educating students about community and integrity. This is not to say that larger universities are not successful in developing these characteristics in their students, but small colleges have a distinct ability due to their size. In addition, the blurred boundary between small colleges and large universities is discussed. There are many small colleges who have large university qualities and aspirations while large universities are attempting to appear smaller through learning communities and smaller colleges within the greater university community. The fear is that the efforts by large universities are drawing students away from the small college setting. Finally, Schuman provides a series fears and hope for the future along with strategies for continued growth and success.

Possibly the most helpful aspect of the book was the author's "intermezzo" at the end of each chapter. These short stories of a person whose life was impacted and changed by their experience working, studying, and living at a small college linked research with the human experiences of small college constituents. Schuman said this was an "emblem of what small colleges actually do – deal with real people, one at a time" (p.17). Personally, reading these intermezzos was more intriguing and exciting than the book itself. As a graduate of a small college, I immediately related to the experiences of the storytellers, and felt they communicated the real story behind attending and working at a small college. Their stories were poignant and heartfelt, and communicated a true devotion and understanding of the value of small colleges in a small anecdote which could not fully be captured by a whole book.

Overall, Schuman provided a solid contribution to the study of higher education and the role of small colleges. He carried out his argument well and initially indicated a wide audience, but continually came back to suggestions for faculty members and the role they play in student development on campus. One section focused on the staff at small colleges, but Schuman specifically focused on the role of the president because it is the position he knows best. Furthermore, this read sometimes felt like a rally cry for small colleges as if to say together, "We did it. We are doing great beyond our small budgets, limited resources, and less than satisfactory facilities." The reality is that many small colleges already know where they stand and how they are contributing to higher education by creating a unique niche for themselves. This is how they have survived many years and sustained the changing market of higher education.

Although this book reads more like a faculty handbook and was not written specifically for student development professionals working in Christian higher education, it does offer some suggestions for small colleges that span the boundaries of faculty, staff, or administration: 1) Small colleges must invent or discover their own pathway to survival and success through strategic thinking and clarifying the mission; 2) The core mission needs to be sustained and persistently followed; and 3) Small colleges need to continue to be sources of innovation for American higher education.

Small colleges may continue to wish for more resources to attract high quality faculty and students, but the final paragraph of the book captures the essence of small colleges that will hopefully never be lost in the desire to create a niche in higher education. “One attribute that all twelve colleges share, and which characterizes the overwhelming majority of America’s small colleges, is a passionate commitment and deep loyalty...their constituents view them as special places. What America’s small colleges may often lack today in visibility and in wealth they make up for with love” (p.243). I recommend this read as a solid addition to the discussion of the past and present of small colleges and how they can help continue to contribute to the landscape of American higher education.