

Old Main: Small Colleges in Twenty-First Century America

by Sam Schuman

Review by Madeline Ostrander

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With costs of education rising and funds shrinking, colleges and universities of every size are struggling to make stronger cases for themselves. The challenge may be greater for America's 900 or so small colleges—mostly private, liberal arts schools often with high tuitions, small facilities, and limited resources.

In *Old Main: Small Colleges in Twenty-First Century America*, Sam Schuman lays out a defense of small colleges. The argument goes something like this. Students at small colleges have greater involvement in campus life and a more integrated learning experience than at large institutions. They experience a greater sense of community. They receive more one-on-one attention from faculty and staff. They are more likely to graduate and to become civically engaged citizens afterwards.

Although this argument may sound quite a bit like a marketing pitch from a college recruiting brochure, Schuman does a good job of keeping it fresh and bringing it to life. His data reassure us that the rationale for the small college experience is largely true. For instance, on the National Survey of Student Engagement, students at baccalaureate, liberal arts colleges report more than average that they have asked questions in class, worked on research projects with faculty, and participated in independent study. Their level of satisfaction with the college experience is also slightly higher than average.

Schuman's countless stories and examples illustrate how small college life generates a sense of community. Staff, students, and faculty tend to feel more accountable to the college's shared mission. At Southwestern University, for example, housekeepers know student schedules and prod them to go to class. Students at small colleges are often on a first name basis with administrators. A Warren Wilson student reports to Schuman, "I do love that I know Doug [Orr, the president] and ... that I can call Louise (our dean of students) around midnight and be invited to her home for a chat."

Small colleges are subject to tremendous idiosyncrasy, and this is a strength, Schuman says. Each campus meets a particular need. Westmont College, an evangelical school in California, argues that it provides "academic freedom" for faculty and students to integrate religion into their studies—something that might not be encouraged at a non-sectarian campus. Northland College in Wisconsin focuses on environmental studies. Oglala-Lakota College in South Dakota serves American Indians and teaches Lakota culture. Gallaudet in Washington, DC provides the only independent, liberal arts college for the deaf.

Schuman reflects on the threats facing small campuses, including perpetual lack of funding, and more recently, difficulty in recruiting high-quality faculty. Small colleges, on the losing end of "economies of scale," also struggle to pay for high-tech facilities and computing resources. But if you're looking for a concrete how-to on fixing your small campus's problems, you won't find it here. Schuman's answer to the nagging questions that face university administrators is, *it depends*. Each campus warrants a different approach—although Schuman does suggest that participating in networks or consortia might help small institutions pool resources and share costs.

By the end of the book, Schuman has constructed not merely a pitch for small colleges, but a philosophy of small-scale institutions in general. Drawing from a body of literature on the benefits

of smallness—primarily from Wendell Berry, Theodore Roszak's *Small Is Beautiful*, and Sarah Susanka's *The Not So Big House*—Schuman suggests that small colleges, like small towns and small houses, have “preserved a unique reservoir of values and relationships that remained precious within the large, impersonal world of urban mass culture.” In other words, small colleges give students a face instead of number, and by fostering closer and more personal interactions and greater participation in campus life, small colleges have a better chance of reinforcing basic human decency and integrity than larger institutions.

The author does note that large institutions have their strengths, and in several places he insists apologetically that small institutions are not better than large ones—just different. He also discusses how both have tried to capture the strengths of the other. Large institutions, for instance, have established on-campus, integrated honors programs, aimed at creating a sense of community. However, Schuman says such endeavors have limitations. In the end, a large college cannot capture the “smallness” of a small college.

Overall, the book may not chart any clear course for a small college administrator, but it does help illuminate the role and mission of small colleges in American culture for anyone concerned about the future of higher education.