

Introduction



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Higher education is, these days, in the news. Much of that news is grim. The price of tuition is increasing at a phenomenal rate. Student loan debt is at an all-time high. Many universities are overfilled, and students cannot enroll in the courses they need to graduate. The fast pace of technological change makes many degrees seem almost immediately obsolete. Graduates have trouble finding jobs.

In response, all sorts of debates have been raging about the future of higher education in America, in particular the future of the liberal arts in the country's colleges and universities. Virtually everyone in the chattering classes has had his or her say on the matter; those who have proposed sweeping reforms to higher education include government officials, CEOs, politicians, think-tank researchers, journalists, media pundits, and university administrators, as well as parents and students and some prominent professors.

But drowned out in all this noisy punditry are the people we may need to hear most: those persons who actually teach the liberal arts exclusively to undergraduates—namely, the faculty who teach in the nation's small liberal arts colleges. As the voices of those who teach in such colleges are left out of public debate, so, too, are America's small liberal arts colleges themselves discounted, or essentially forgotten, in the clamor over the nation's educational future.

We think it is hard to overstate the massive error of this neglect. Small liberal arts colleges should be at the heart of any discussion about American higher education rather than relegated to the sidelines or overlooked

altogether. Small liberal arts colleges deserve such pointed consideration, we propose, because they are the best things going in American higher education and probably the best things going in higher education around the globe. No small claim, that.

Drawing attention to these small liberal arts colleges is what this book is all about. We know that having a discussion about American higher education that doesn't include small college classroom teachers is like having a discussion about the future of American agriculture without consulting family farmers (or even making any reference to family farms). It is also similar to having a discussion about the future of American health care without engaging the doctors who see patients daily or having a discussion about the future of baseball without talking to anyone who has ever stepped on a pitcher's mound. In other words, the current conversation about American higher education leaves out the perspectives of the people who might be best positioned to think broadly, thoughtfully, and critically about the subject, the people who have the wisdom of hands-on and hard-won experience.

This book brings those insiders into the discussion. Only professors at small liberal arts colleges have been included in this volume. We are undergraduate teachers, first and foremost and full-time. There are no professional administrators—deans, chancellors, presidents¹—among us, though many of us at some time or another, as part of our institutional duties, have attended to administrative tasks, such as chairing departments or supervising programs. And while our academic activities are not limited to the classroom—we also all conduct scholarly research and publish our findings in professional venues—teaching is our main focus and top priority. Most of us have won awards and honors for our teaching, and because the teaching of undergraduates is the focus of our careers and our colleges, we have each given intense and serious thought to what it means to teach and to learn well.

By no means do we claim that *The Best Kind of College* has all the answers to the many woes afflicting American higher education today—in fact, we asked our contributors merely to reflect on their particular experiences at these schools, without necessarily expanding those experiences into policy proposals or general lessons—although we do think that this book offers more than simply a collection of provincial narratives. All told, by insisting on the importance of individual voices and particular perspectives, we think the book adds up to more than the sum of its parts, put here as an overall proposition: The best approach to education requires face-to-face discussions, quirky explorations, classroom and laboratory risk-taking, relational learning, and singular rather than standardized approaches to pedagogy. In short, the best approach to education is the small liberal arts college approach to education, and this is a truth that our nation's movers and shakers, and citizens at large, would do well to heed. We know what

works. We are speaking on behalf of a kind of institution that has a long and abiding history, a time-tested record of success. We think it is important for the rest of the country to hear us sing the virtues and offbeat ways of the SLAC (Small Liberal Arts College) model of teaching, learning, and living.

What's the Big Deal about Small Liberal Arts Colleges?

Few Americans seem to know much about small liberal arts colleges, probably in large part because, at present, such colleges educate only about 1 percent (if that)² of the nation's undergraduates.

But even if you've never set foot on the campus of a small liberal arts college, doing just a little research reveals why they should be recognized, and regarded widely, as the gold standard in American higher education.

Against the impersonal, lecture-hall, multiple-choice-exam, and teaching-assistant-aided system that dominates our nation's most famous universities, small liberal arts colleges are places where professors teach undergraduates directly and exclusively. Taking undergraduate teaching—and taking undergraduates themselves—so seriously tends to affect students, so that they begin to take their own learning seriously. Small liberal arts colleges are places where the kind of close teacher-student relationships that you see portrayed in films like *Dead Poets Society* or *Good Will Hunting* actually exist—and are the rule rather than the exception.³ These are schools with small classes, usually face-to-face seminar discussions, where students are known by name and not by ID number, where students are missed if they miss class, where students are encouraged and advised and counseled to develop their individual abilities and to think about how those abilities might be used in service to others.

At small liberal arts colleges, professors and students get to know one another outside official class meetings—doing research together in labs, engaging in artistic and creative production, and going to each other's sports games and concerts and lectures and debates. Where we teach, at Pomona College, we (and our colleagues) regularly see and spend time with our students at local coffee shops, on the campus quads, at the city farmer's market, and even in our homes.

This romantic-sounding educational experience can be the daily reality at liberal arts colleges because of their smallness. Not only are classes small, but also the schools and campuses as a whole are small—smaller, in many cases, than the high schools our students attended before matriculating. That intimate size almost demands that professors and students get to know each other, both inside and outside the classroom, as real persons, that is, as living, breathing, thinking, feeling, fully rounded, undigitized human beings.

This proximity means that our students are learning even when they don't fully realize that they are learning; education at a small liberal arts college exceeds the formal classroom, and everyone at these schools eventually figures out that the true idea—the spirit or ethos—of the liberal arts goes beyond book learning. Small liberal arts colleges are places where we try to live the truth that each person matters, every day, and thus such students learn, by implication and example, what it means to matter to and within a community of people.

The residential nature of small liberal arts college reinforces that lesson. At most small liberal arts colleges, students are expected to live on campus, with each other, for at least part of the term of their formal education—an experience that provides its own education in individual and social responsibility. The notion of a classroom extends to the sports field, where students pursue intervarsity, intramural, and recreational competition; to stages and auditoria, where students perform in plays and musical concerts; to dorms and dining halls, where academic and nonacademic discussions dovetail into one another; to biological field stations, and organic farms, and green spaces, and the outdoor skies, where geologists and astronomers and other student-scientists conduct their critical lab work and experiments; to surrounding towns and cities, where students do internships, field trips, community service, work, and outreach. And these campuses typically feature beautiful landscaping and dedicated architecture, creating some overall feel of otherworldly oases, if short of paradise. (“College is our American pastoral,” writes Andrew Delbanco.)⁴ They thus provide three-dimensional spaces and three-dimensional experiences, which cannot be and will never be replaced by two-dimensional, on-screen, campus-less surrogates. These spaces house various temporal communities, which eventually become generational communities: a member of the first-year class becomes a fellow pilgrim on a four-year journey with other classmates, and she and her classmates start to realize, in those close confines, that they are and have been experiencing life under similar terms and under similar circumstances, unique to their age cohort. They come to share friendships, loves, memories, all bound to a place where thinking and learning matter.

What outsiders may not realize is that a SLAC provides and initiates one into not just a curriculum, certainly not just an “educational outcome,” but rather a distinctive community and even an entire way of life. Call it a liberal arts way of life, a way of life so encompassing that you might not want to leave, as depicted in the arrested development that informed the plot of the 2012 movie *Liberal Arts*. Even if, after graduation, one never again performs in a band, one still has that music, from that period, in the back of one's head. Campus architecture, installed as a backdrop in one's mental apparatus, continues to inform one's future construction projects. Conversa-

tions continue to reverberate from past seminar and dining hall discussions. Formative memories from extracurricular activities continue, years later, to inspire. As a devoted alum, you look back fondly on your small college days (these colleges tend to induce fondness, as opposed to pride) not because of the college “brand,” or the college reputation, but because of the particular people you encountered, and encountered so intensely, in those classrooms, sports fields, laboratories, and dining halls.

Small liberal arts colleges were designed with the expansive purpose of teaching individuals how to live lives that are strong, thoughtful, responsible, and free. In fact, the “liberal arts” were so described, starting in the Middle Ages, to distinguish that form of education by which a freeman might learn the arts of liberty from that which would train him merely for a life of servitude. One learns at a small liberal arts college not simply how to write or calculate well, not just how to demonstrate a disciplinary expertise. One learns at a small liberal arts college not only how to face difficulties and think rigorously and prepare for a challenging career. One learns all those things. But more: One learns how to move through the world.

That particular combination of worldliness and idealism is, perhaps, a big part of the reason why the small liberal arts college has been called a “distinctively American” educational institution by Steven Koblík, the former president of Reed College.⁵ The small liberal arts college has a history and mission tied up with that of our republic, which has not always depended solely on having skilled workers but also on having inventive, independent, and intelligent people as its members—people who not only know a set of facts but also know how to function well as participants in diverse and often rancorous communities.

At Pomona College, one of our recent seniors summed up the experience of going to a small liberal arts college by saying that by the time you leave, you can look around at any campus gathering and think: “I know something about everyone in this room that they do not know that I know.” Of course, that also means that the converse is true. The graduating senior could also look around any campus gathering and realize: “Everyone in this room knows something about me that I do not know that they know.” That realization is discomfiting, in some senses, but it’s also the mark of being in a functioning community where each individual counts.

Simply by placing our students in small and close-knit communities where they do matter, not just as seat-fillers but as in-the-flesh persons, small liberal arts colleges encourage individuals to learn how to live well in a world where their lives are intertwined with those of so many other people. We who teach in such small residential colleges think this broad missionary purview helps students develop habits of acting with dignity, integrity, faith, and purpose, both in and out of class. The hopeful idea, then, is that

when our students go out into the big and often bad world, they will likely refuse to relinquish the kind of resolve and engagement they have already experienced in college, that sense of mattering. Once you have up-front and firsthand experience of mattering to other persons, beyond your kith and kin, it's not something you easily relinquish.

If you think about college as a holistic, residential, 3-D, full-Tech-nicolor, full-analogue experience conducted in real-time, an introduction into an entire way of life and of a liberal arts curriculum consistent with that receptive, broad-minded, idea-seeking outlook, then you might not find it surprising that, although small liberal arts college graduates account for only 2 percent (over time) of all the college graduates in this country, small liberal arts college graduates account for 20 percent of all US presidents, 20 percent of Pulitzer Prize winners, and 20 percent of the scientists elected in recent years to the National Academy of Scientists. Liberal arts colleges produce disproportionate numbers of Peace Corps volunteers, Fulbright scholars, Mellon fellows, and PhDs. Moreover, about one in twelve of the nation's wealthiest CEOs is a small liberal arts college graduate.⁶

If you think about it that way, it's also no wonder that the people who choose to teach at small liberal arts colleges have to care about teaching in a deep, rigorous, and thoroughgoing way. Barry O'Connell, a longtime professor of English at Amherst College, summed up the liberal arts college teaching ethos this way: "Teachers teach subjects, but they also teach people." The professors who are drawn to work at small liberal arts colleges are professors who want to put the education of young people—as people—first.

As mentioned, small liberal arts colleges are themselves devoted to undergraduate education and undergraduate teaching. At a small liberal arts college, there are no teaching assistants standing in for professors, and there are no graduate students competing for time and attention. But there is yet another crucial reason why the smallness of the SLAC provides cover for another kind of educational experience altogether, as compared especially with our nation's research universities.

When a student enrolls at a SLAC, he or she is stepping out of time, just a bit, and stepping off the great treadmill of the modern economy, just a bit—and knows it. That is part of the bargain. When you choose to come to a SLAC, you've chosen not to attend a big glitzy university with instant national name recognition, a prominent school that courts corporations for stadium-naming rights and enjoys an expensive television contract for broadcasting its Division I football games. You've chosen instead to fly under the radar, to enter what our own students call existence in a "bubble." That kind of self-selection tends to assemble students who are more likely to attend to their books and discussions and educational pursuits for, as it were, the intrinsic, rather than extrinsic or ulterior, benefits of such activities. You

tend to attract students who are more willing to suspend, for a four-year stretch, their pressing utilitarian concerns about why, exactly, they are poring over the pages of long novels, debating abstruse ideas around a table, throwing clay on a wheel, or studying the geology of the ground beneath them. Perhaps overt economic incentives, as a way of structuring curricula and careers, motivate some salutary forms of learning. But instrumentalizing education thus, or too much, also tends to curtail undergraduate bouts of brooding, talking, reading, fellowship, and unscripted solitude. SLACs are national sanctuaries wherein a good number of students can still find an educational environment in which they are allowed the luxury, the freedom, to learn according to their not-necessarily-for-profit aspirations toward truth, beauty, justice, friendship, and personal reverie. (The untold story, by the way, is that more often than not, those students who de-instrumentalize their undergraduate years of education, pursuing truth for the sake of truth, attending faithfully to their curiosities, exploring vigorously their intellectual passions and commitments, find later on that such dedication is eventually rewarded handsomely in the hard-to-predict modern economy.)

Small Liberal Arts Colleges versus the “Competition”

Contrast the aforementioned SLAC vision with the R-1 (research university) model, and you'll probably come to the conclusion that the way the country's research universities treat undergraduates constitutes nothing less than a national scandal. Such schools receive all the attention when it comes to public discussions about undergraduate education. But at those institutions, Ivy League and state school alike, few participants, if any, believe that teaching undergraduates is the first priority. At best it is a secondary concern, ranked at some distance behind either graduate education or specialized research. (Actually, our own experience at research universities has convinced us that at most of these schools, undergraduate education comes in a distant third to both graduate teaching and research. As one of our colleagues was told when he took a job at a prestigious university, professors are expected to do excellent research, but, for teaching, they are held to a mere standard of “well, don't suck.”) True, research universities do have their abundant virtues and decided advantages. But as far as the education of undergraduates goes, the R-1 organizational plan depends on channeling a large number of students through large lecture-hall experiences, with hundreds and sometimes thousands of students enrolled in a single course. Students have breakout sessions with underpaid teaching assistants who proctor the exams, read all the papers, and do all the grading. Often, these teaching assistants are themselves loaded down with hundreds of students a semester, even as they are trying to finish their own graduate

degrees. At American research universities, undergraduate students are often paying exorbitant sums of money to be treated, in the halls of their own institution, as second- or third-class citizens. Businesses in the commercial marketplace usually treat their customers with greater attention and respect.

To be fair, some research universities have made strides at prioritizing some measure of undergraduate education within their behemoth structures. A number of big universities now feature demarcated “honors college” programs in the liberal arts, embedded and largely segregated from the rest of the undergraduate curriculum, and some try to offer their students the chance to take occasional small-seminar classes. Having those programs is better than not having them, to be sure. But they are gestures at the true liberal arts experience rather than a full embrace of that experience—not to mention that the existence of such programs is tacit acknowledgment of the superiority of the small liberal arts college way of doing things.

It is worth noticing that many of the loudest complaints heard regularly about higher education—professors who don’t teach, crowded lecture-hall classrooms, and academic hyper-specialization—apply only to the research university model. It is also worth noticing that many of the things that lately have been proposed to “improve” American higher education would be improvements only on the current research university experience. They wouldn’t, though, constitute educational improvements on the small liberal arts college experience.

Take, for instance, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The idea of MOOCs, open-access courses offered on the Internet, took off around the year 2010, with the bright promise that such courses would be a less expensive and more accessible way of offering college-level learning on scales never before imagined. Although they began as little more than collections of videotaped lectures, MOOCs have evolved to include features such as online discussion sections and “crowd-sourced” interaction. It’s not hard to imagine how MOOCs, especially as the technology behind them improves, might offer certain advantages over the large canned-lecture delivery system that characterizes the research-university classroom. But it is hard to imagine how MOOCs can have any kind of pedagogical advantage over the small liberal arts college experience, where the standard class session is based on dialogue rather than monologue, and each student gets extensive and scrupulous attention across multiple courses and outside of the classroom as well, and all are embedded in the thick relational ties of a distinct, intentional, flesh-and-blood place.⁷

A curiosity surrounding many of the recent initiatives for improving higher education is that such proposals are often billed as trying to bring certain qualities and features to the American academy that are already in existence, in spades, at small liberal arts colleges. Yale University claims to

be able to provide visionary guidance and experience in founding a new small liberal arts college in Singapore. The start-up for-profit Minerva Project is trying to bring MOOCs into small (albeit online) classroom venues. Abroad, numerous countries have been turning to the US SLAC model, even founding self-standing, American-style SLACs, as a way of reforming their own higher educational systems. But note: All of these initiatives are attempts to emulate and import the SLACs. Intuitively, reformers seem to know that the SLAC model is the gold standard on which their approximations are parasitic. But most of these reformers fail to give full credit where credit is due and often end up compromising the SLAC model rather than living up to it.⁸

The Money Issue

Some will cry at the foregoing: Yes, of course, small classes with dedicated professors on beautiful campuses would be great, but it all comes down to cost. The SLAC model may be ideal, but at what price, and who's going to pay that price? Small classes for undergraduates, with attentive professors, are costly undertakings because they are so labor-intensive and inefficiently scaled. The research university model, and now the MOOC model, offer greater access at lower prices. Those models may not be ideal, but they're more affordable (usually). Besides, many SLACs are struggling financially. Those now flourishing, and those that will survive, are (and will be) the wealthy ones. SLAC education will abide in America, but the remaining colleges will increasingly become precious enclaves, reserved for an elite or lucky few.

We don't deny that in the short term, educating people costs money. Despite the claims that various entrepreneurial types regularly offer up to venture capitalists, you definitely can't *make* money by educating people well; no one has ever made profits merely by offering quality education to students. As Robert McChesney observes, for-profit education companies "seize public funds and make their money by *not* teaching."⁹ Education is a public good, and like most public goods, it requires long-term financial investment that doesn't lead to immediate monetary returns. Any form of education is going to involve some expense. There's no way around that.

And small liberal arts colleges do remain expensive propositions, especially given the alternatives that are and will soon be out there. It is more expensive to educate a student with a top-notch, tenured faculty, as part of a distinct and dedicated community, in a real brick-and-mortar place than it is to offer prefab classes taught by a short-term contracted employee to a student over the Internet. That's why we worry that the MOOCs (or some latter-day successor to them) will turn American higher education into a

truly two-tiered system: Rich SLACs and rich universities, populated by rich students and funded by rich alumni, will survive; everyone else will be taking out big loans or else going to “college” by watching video after video on Khan Academy, or the like. Although lots of people will have college degrees on paper, few people will have the benefit of a really serious, engaged, and embedded college education. Even Andrew Delbanco, the author of *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, seems to accede to the inevitability of such a two-track educational system: “It is a pipe dream,” he writes, “to imagine that every student can have the sort of experience that our richest colleges, at their best, provide.”¹⁰

But we want to question whether this two-tiering of American education must necessarily take place, whether we must shrug our shoulders and give in to the idea that truly great education can be the purview of only a lucky few (which is also giving in to the idea that we should aspire to educational mediocrity for the masses). For one thing, small liberal arts college education does not have to be so expensive as to be out of reach of all but the elite. Colleges, if they get their number-one priority straight—classroom teaching—can cut a lot of fat. That fat is usually administrative overload and bureaucratic bloat. In most schools, you could cut back significantly on employees with fancy titles who don’t teach, plain and simple. They are usually dispensable and merely ancillary, not essential, to the mission of teaching. It’s also nice to have well-appointed campuses, but some colleges are flourishing under modest or spare conditions. (One of our own colleagues is fond of reminding us that Pomona was a good school before it was a rich school; the goodness of the college does not depend on the fanciest accoutrements of our present existence.) Berea College, for example, is a model of the kind of frugality that other schools could embrace: Berea does not have a football team or fancy dorms, and all students are required to hold part-time jobs on campus, but in exchange for eschewing certain luxuries, Berea students receive full-tuition scholarships and a stellar education.

We also think it’s worth putting the expense of SLACs into perspective, more generally speaking. So let’s crunch some numbers and consider some possibilities. Pomona College is currently ranked as the second richest college (or university) in the country in terms of endowment per pupil. Pomona trustees, alums, administrators, and faculty have steered that material advantage decidedly toward certain values: a broad-based liberal arts education available to those qualified, regardless of need. Pomona has held firm to a “need-blind” admissions process, with the understanding that sufficient financial aid will be forthcoming to all those admitted, with the financial aid package including no loans. In theory, and largely in practice, no one who is graduated from Pomona College should be in debt. We don’t see

our entering students as “elites”—for example, about 20 percent of them are the first in their families to attend college; we see them as do-gooders and underdogs. Indeed, we wish our good fortune could be extended to others, the educational model democratized and somehow, someday made available to many throughout the country, and beyond. But how could that happen?

Perhaps needless to say, we don’t believe Pomona itself could get much bigger without compromising the smallness that, as we have argued, is constitutive of the true liberal arts education. To bring a Pomona-quality experience to more students, we have to imagine how we could fund the creation of more small liberal arts colleges like it.

We could first consider private funding. Bill Gates’s personal worth is reportedly \$72 billion; the Gates Foundation’s endowment is around \$36 billion. Warren Buffett’s net worth is around \$54 billion (and he will be bequeathing a good portion of that to the Gates Foundation). Right there, two philanthropic-minded individuals who care about education command \$162 billion. That sum could found and endow—overnight—108 Pomona Colleges (for present purposes we are modestly estimating Pomona’s endowment at \$1.5 billion for 1,500 students), providing a top-of-the-line, debt-free liberal arts education to forty thousand graduates year after year after year, if only Gates could get his educational priorities straight (learning from Buffett’s investments in Grinnell College) and move away from whiz-bang technological gimmicks.

There are public resources that could be brought to bear on this project as well. You ask about the public sector with its depleted coffers? The public cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars is estimated to have been around \$4 trillion. Had that one-time discretionary expenditure been allocated instead into founding new Pomona Colleges with \$1.5 billion dollar endowments each, we in this country would now be able to provide four million of our eighteen million undergraduates with a Rolls-Royce caliber liberal arts education, completely debt-free for those on financial aid, year after year after year, an investment that would keep on providing individual and national dividends well into the future. Such a program would also have the advantage of keeping federal student aid funds out of the grip of those for-profit universities that have proven so good at failing to do their job yet take federal funds and leave a huge percentage of their one-time students in debt—and without a degree.

Simplistic, you say? Surely, but this is one of those cases where a simple analysis helps us to think about a more important, and very realistic, point: that this is a society—one of the wealthiest societies in the history of human civilization—that can afford to spend money in the pursuit of what it deems to be long-term public goods, or call it long-term R & D, an investment in ourselves, our future. All we have to do, to enable high-quality higher

education to flourish rather than flounder in this country, is recognize that education is a true public good.

We submit that calling a vision like this a “pipe dream” is an alibi, a cover for grossly misplaced priorities, a failure of vision and will. We believe that the “distinctively American” approach to higher education should be and could be made available to many more Americans. Once we identify the best and clarify our priorities, we the people can indeed decide to do what can and ought to be done.

This Book

One of the reasons, perhaps, that there hasn’t been a cultural declamation of the sort outlined here, or more recognition that a democratization of this gold-standard form of higher education is possible, is because those of us at small liberal arts colleges have not gathered together to sing the praises of the places where we teach.

That’s where this book comes in, and that’s why we think concerned readers should encounter a group of essays penned by SLAC professors. We do think this book has much to contribute to the national debate on higher education, and yet, as a group, we largely have been ignored. One reason we haven’t been heard from, limned earlier, is that SLACs are small and out of the way and thus overlooked.

But another reason for this silence is that, since SLAC professors are so involved with teaching students, we haven’t prioritized high-profile advocacy initiatives and PR campaigns on our own behalf. Small liberal arts college professors are not, as a rule, seeking celebrity or “star” status. We are first and foremost teachers who tend to relish and safeguard the space of the classroom, to treat that space with a kind of sanctity. We tend to keep it away from cameras and reporters and advertisers. We don’t aim to be pundits or celebrities or profiteers. We didn’t go into teaching for fame or fortune. (If we wanted to be performers on a large stage, we would have gone to places with large stages.) We don’t tend to seek the attention of public fame, probably because the classroom is so intense and so rewarding on its own.

Moreover, in comparison with our colleagues at research universities, we spend a lot more of our time in the classroom. Those aware of the academy know that SLAC professors teach more classes than do research university professors. But even the moderately informed may be shocked to know that at many high-profile research universities, professors are expected to teach only one undergraduate course a year—and it is understood that “teaching,” in this context, means delivering a set of lectures to a hall of nameless undergrads. (It is not unusual to hear of the research university

professor who “teaches” in, say, Cambridge but lives in New York, flying out and back once a week to read his prepared lecture notes.) By contrast, at small liberal arts colleges, professors usually are expected to teach at least two courses (and as many as four or five) a semester, focusing the bulk of their energies during the academic year on the enterprise of teaching. And in the SLAC context, teaching means teaching. It means leading discussions. It means grading. It means meeting with students outside of class. It means being readily available to those students, in person and by phone and over email, throughout each week. It means writing numerous letters of recommendation. It means spending hours and hours advising, about the present and the future. The upshot is that even if we wanted to do so, SLAC professors don’t have a lot of leisure time to cultivate relationships with reporters or appear on talk shows or cultivate personal “brands.”

Thus this book, encompassing our coordinated acts of stepping forward and outward, is unusual. We are compiling it because we believe strongly in the SLAC form of education. And although many of us teach at institutions that are likely to weather whatever the next trend in educational reform is (as such colleges have weathered such trends in the past), we are worried that much of the current talk of transformation is misguided, and American higher education risks deteriorating in the name of innovating.

These are testimonials, and they present various points of view and don’t all square with one another. We editors solicited and invited essays from various persons from assorted disciplines across many small liberal arts colleges, but we weren’t seeking complete disciplinary or geographical coverage. The essays that follow are thus illustrative rather than exhaustive.

We also want to emphasize that each institution represented here is unique, as to some degree each small liberal arts college is unique. There is no cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all SLAC model, a Platonic ideal that animates all of the on-the-ground instances. But we think these testimonials matter, nevertheless, on general grounds. We want to recover and dwell upon the importance of *this* professor’s particular approach to a subject, and the importance of *this* particular group of students in *this* particular seminar in *this* particular year, at *this* particular institution, with *these* particular priorities and traditions.

Those particularities—and the extrapolated importance of such particularity, personality, and localism—cannot be aggregated into measurable “data” and commensurable outcomes. These essays have to be read and pondered, not flattened and tallied on spreadsheets. If some generalizable notion of “best practices” emerges from this volume, it will be one that goes very much against the national tendency to assume that numerical data provide the best empirical information on which to base policy judgments. We assert, instead, that qualitative norms and exceptional experiences, not

merely quantified and quantifiable mass behavior, should be given their due in guiding our future. Just because the kind of evidence we offer is localized, anecdotal, and personal does not mean that it is not evidence. It is, rather, evidence of the importance of taking the local, the anecdotal, and the personal seriously.

When it comes down to it, education, especially at its highest levels, is not about feeding standardized data into the brains of an undifferentiated mass. Taken beyond a fairly basic level, standardization precludes rather than paves the way for high-quality education, which is why standardizing approaches to higher education totally miss the point.

High-quality education is about acknowledging and respecting the differences among particular people, cultivating the kind of careful relationships that allow for serious dialogue, creative inspiration, and independent thought. Just as Helen Keller's genius couldn't emerge until a particular teacher took her particular challenges and strengths seriously and worked with her over a long period of time, no student can achieve his or her full potential if treated like another cog in the wheel or another avatar in the intersphere or another dollar in the pocket. Education is relational, and human relationships are particular. They are also small scale, which is a truth that the nation's small liberal arts colleges, in so many different ways, embody.

Without presuming to interpret the essays for our readers before they read them, or preempting the actual reading of them, we have divided *The Best Kind of College* into five sections: The Classroom, The Career, The Curriculum, The Community, and The College. As editors, we think these categories might be helpful in a very preliminary way as guideposts to readers when they crack the book for the first time. A reader might be drawn to one cluster and then read a few pieces within that cluster. But quickly we want to concede that these are loose and porous categories, and we're not pretending that the essays build upon one another into a cumulatively coherent narrative structure. Several essays could fit into one or more of the categories, and finally these organizational rubrics may be prove to be more Procrustean than illuminating. We understand the usual conventions of editing academic collections, and yet we are hesitant at this point in this introduction of ours to offer the typical thumbnail encapsulations of each essay, which are supposed to explain why each essay belongs in the book squarely where it has been put and how it contributes to the whole. By admitting this design failing, we are trying to call attention to what we think is unusual, and distinctive, about this book, a genre-bender of sorts, and are inviting readers to pop in and pop out of the book, reading selectively, as they see fit. We could have arranged these essays according to geography, or discipline, or contributor age, or college SAT scores, or

perhaps *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. Instead, we've proposed these very general categories; yet within them, we've conspicuously included each author's extended biography at the outset of each essay. That editorial innovation is meant to underscore the particularity of each teacher's approach, perspective, and priorities in teaching. We often advise students to choose classes, first and foremost, if they can, on the basis of the particular professors involved (as opposed to considerations about subject matter, requirements, grades, the major, educational outcome, skills, or jobs). For our readers, in the pages that follow, we want to re-create something of that "person-centric" approach to negotiating college.

A final note: The late David Foster Wallace, who was our friend and colleague, haunts and inspires many of these pages to come. Several of our contributors explicitly mention his influence. We want to openly confront his liberal arts legacy here. He was, it could be argued, the latter-day, cross-country exemplar and iconic spokesperson for American SLAC-ness, from Amherst College undergraduate to Pomona College professor to Kenyon College commencement speaker. Indeed, the movie *Liberal Arts* portrays the careful reading of his books, for better and for worse, as the quintessence of small college liberal artsy-ness in the present day. In that movie the character Jesse, in lonely fits of postgraduate nostalgia for his small liberal arts college days, entertains a compensatory fantasy in which attentive, brainy, and soul-searching readers might populate the world outside the ivory tower, a David Foster Wallace Republic. On his return to his alma mater, Jesse identifies with a fellow DFW reader, an "aggressively unhappy" and over-intellectualizing undergraduate named Dean; and the two of them seem to bond over the proposition that reading long DFW-like books both combats and exacerbates social isolation and loneliness. Later in the movie, after Dean attempts suicide, Jesse recommends that Dean stop reading DFW's books—because DFW himself committed suicide. Maybe such liberal artsy-ness is, after all, misbegotten and debilitating, even dangerous. And yet Jesse answers Dean's question about why Jesse would care at all about Dean by saying that he, Jesse, appreciates good readers; in fact, then, their common appreciation of DFW is what saves Dean's very life.

The movie on the whole presents an insider's critique of the liberal arts way of life, now depicted, in shorthand, as DFW bookishness. Such a life provides (the movie's setup goes) an intense and capacious orientation to the world that seems to promise some kind of salubrious recuperation for the world at large, if only we pay greater attention to everything around us, as if we were perpetually in college, ever curious and alert. Yet such raised hopes and intensified expectations (as Jesse says in the movie, "One of the things I loved the most about being here was the feeling that anything was possible") can lead, it seems, to depression. Zibby, Jesse's love interest in

the movie, asks him whether things in the world outside of college “suck” and whether she should prepare herself “for suckiness.” Jesse smirks as he replies, “No, a liberal arts education solves all your problems.”

Taking that sarcasm as our cue, we in *The Best Kind of College* don’t want to overpromise what the following essays can deliver. The small liberal arts colleges won’t solve all of our country’s educational problems (not to mention that intellectual inquiry is risky, holds no guarantees, and can incite its own vexations), but these colleges are, we think, the best places in which to ask the best questions and to seek the best answers, all the while offering the best self-critique, too. (“Why does everyone here always speak in superlatives?” asks Dean.)

Notes

1. College presidents know a lot about administrative matters but not necessarily much about classroom teaching, even on their own campuses. Of the top one hundred SLACs (Small Liberal Arts Colleges), as ranked by *U.S. News & World Report*, only 30 percent of current small liberal arts college presidents had prior teaching experience in a SLAC before heading one up. Fifty-two percent of SLAC presidents today—a majority—never stepped in a SLAC classroom, either as a student or a professor, before heading one up.

2. It’s hard to say with any precision what percentage of students attend or have attended SLACs, if only because the term “liberal arts”—already a contestable signifier—keeps evolving, and colleges nominally operating under that rubric also evolve and/or alter their missions. Moreover, there’s never been a definitive list of *small* liberal arts colleges. Ranking services today, such as *U.S. News & World Report* or *Washington Monthly*, typically list around 250 colleges as “Liberal Arts Colleges,” but these ranking services make few distinctions based on size. Several of the institutions on those lists have undergraduate student enrollments of over four thousand students, up to a few with seven thousand plus students. http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/college_guide/rankings_2013/liberal_arts_rank.php. David Breneman, in a 1990–1991 study based on the Carnegie Foundation Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, named 212 colleges that met his criteria for designating an institution as a liberal arts institution, and most of those institutions were quite small, but a few had enrollments reaching four thousand students. See David W. Breneman, “Are We Losing Our Liberal Arts Colleges?” *AAHE Bulletin* 43.2 (1990): 3–6; David W. Breneman, *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994). Vicki L. Baker and her coauthors published a study in 2012, based on 2009–2010 IPEDS data (<http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>) that re-tallied the number of institutions that met Breneman’s earlier criteria for designating an institution as a liberal arts college; and Baker et al. concluded that only 130 institutions had, in 2010, met those 1990 criteria (but Baker didn’t publish the names of those 130 colleges). See Vicki L. Baker, Roger G. Baldwin, and Sumedha Makker, “Where Are They Now? Revisiting Breneman’s Study of

Liberal Arts Colleges,” *Liberal Education* 98.3 (Summer 2012): 48–53. In 2000 the Carnegie Foundation dropped its distinction between “Liberal Arts I” and “Liberal Arts II” institutions and started distinguishing between “Baccalaureate Colleges—Liberal Arts” and “Baccalaureate Colleges—General” (http://classifications.carnegie-foundation.org/downloads/2000_edition_data_printable.pdf). The current Carnegie classification system makes no attempt to designate liberal arts institutions as such, contending thus: “A high concentration of majors in the arts and sciences is not the same as a liberal arts education, and we do not view any particular location on this continuum as the special province of liberal education. Examples of high-quality liberal education exist across the spectrum” (http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/descriptions/ugrad_program.php). Never have these classificatory listings included tribal colleges (<http://www.aihec.org/colleges/>), nor have they included “honors colleges” embedded within large universities. Bruce Kimball now counts four hundred such embedded honors colleges. See Bruce A. Kimball, “Revising the Declension Narrative: Liberal Arts Colleges, Universities, and Honors Programs, 1870s–2010s,” *Harvard Educational Review* 84.2 (Summer 2014): 243–264. (For our part, we editors of *The Best Kind of College* have deliberately refrained in this volume from defining a one-size-fits-all template for all SLACs across the country, thinking it best to keep that designation self-identified, localized, and aspirational.)

3. We are aware that the close teacher-student relationships portrayed in these two films take place in institutions other than a small liberal arts college, namely, a prep school in *Dead Poets Society*, and MIT and a community college in *Good Will Hunting*. Also, we mention *Dead Poets Society* as an example of teacher-student closeness but not as an example of good humanities teaching. See Kevin Dettmar, “*Dead Poets Society* Is a Terrible Defense of the Humanities,” *The Atlantic* online, February 19, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/02/em-dead-poets-society-em-is-a-terrible-defense-of-the-humanities/283853/>.

4. Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 11.

5. Steven Koblak and Stephen R. Graubard, eds., *Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2000).

6. See also: “The Value and Impact of the College Experience: A Comparative Study,” Research by Hardwick Day, Commissioned by the Annapolis Group, November 2011, http://collegenews.org/_wp/wp-content/uploads/Annapolis-Group-study-results.pdf

7. Alexander W. Astin, “To MOOC or Not to MOOC the Liberal Arts: Why Not Consult the Evidence,” 2014 paper, http://www.westmont.edu/institute/conversations/2014_program/documents/AstinFullPaper.pdf

8. See Janet D. Stemwedel, “Why I Can No Longer Donate to Wellesley College,” <http://scientopia.org/blogs/ethicsandscience/2014/06/01/why-i-can-no-longer-donate-to-wellesley-college/>.

9. Robert McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism Is Turning the Internet against Democracy* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 194.

10. Delbanco, *College*, 7.