

Education

Maryland's small colleges saw the future, and it was bleak. Now, they're selling liberal arts with a twist.

By Liz Bowie

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At Goucher College, students no longer need to take a broad range of introductory classes outside their major to graduate. For non-science majors, Introduction to Biology has been replaced by Disease and Discrimination, a course that crosses disciplines to explore the inequalities in access to health care. Introduction to Philosophy was dropped for Society in the Age of Intelligent Machines. Math has become Integrative Data Analytics.

Responding to a growing national debate over the relevance of a traditional liberal arts education, Goucher and other small, private liberal arts colleges in Maryland are adapting quickly. They have adjusted course offerings, lowered tuition, added graduate classes that lead to employment and developed other strategies to attract students. The colleges aren't just responding to their students thirst for marketable skills, they are changing to survive a future that will include intense competition for students amid accelerating closures of small colleges in recent years.

"Small liberal arts colleges are having to grapple with the assertion that it is too expensive, too difficult to access and it doesn't teach people 21st-century skills," said Lynn Pasquerella, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Goucher President José Bowen began confronting this reality several years ago while keeping an eye on a demographic cloud in the horizon. The number of children born after the recession dropped.

"There is a massive cliff coming in 2025," he said.

Goucher decided to reformulate the liberal arts — an educational concept that dates to ancient times and requires students to receive a broad education across disciplines that would prepare them for citizenship.

"I can tell parents we are going to prepare their children for the job market," by giving students the skills needed to be a good employee, Bowen said. That's meant focusing less on the content and more on the process of learning.

"We had to deliver on the promise to teach critical thinking," he said.

The long-held academic requirements to take a broad range of courses in a variety of disciplines have been replaced with multidisciplinary courses called "complex problem explorations." Instead of introductory classes, students take courses that might be taught by a biology professor but use a variety of disciplines to look at a contemporary issue.

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“It is an amazing way to stay true to the liberal arts but incorporate modern relevancy,” said Robin Herlands Cresiski, director of the Center for the Advancement of Scholarship and Teaching and an associate professor of biology at Goucher.

Because employers seek workers who can operate in teams, the college requires students to work collaboratively at times.

In Bowen’s mind, the college has not left behind its commitment to the liberal arts, only made its curriculum more engaging and relevant to students such as Olivia Baud, a senior international relations and Spanish major. She took the beginning Integrative Data Analytics class and said she appreciated learning math that could be useful in her future.

“Learning how to properly analyze information and working with data in a real-world context has been important,” she said.

Not all of the changes have gone well. Senior Julian Fernandez said some students from his year were in the middle of college when a new set of criteria for graduation were introduced. That made it confusing for students trying to figure out which courses were needed to complete the diploma. Today’s seniors had the choice of sticking with the former graduation requirements or moving to the new ones.

St. John’s College in Annapolis, a tiny institution with two campuses, wasn’t going to change its curriculum, which is dedicated to teaching the classics. So it took another bold approach, dropping its tuition from \$52,000 a year to \$35,000.

“We just took a look at what the future was going to look like. Things had gotten out of control, and we had to do something about it,” said Carol Carpenter, vice president for communications. “We don’t believe American families can pay the sticker price.”

St. John’s leadership believes that small colleges can no longer rely on tuition dollars to keep them afloat. Instead, colleges will have to rely on philanthropy, Carpenter said. St. John’s has used its tuition drop to launch a capital campaign that has so far raised \$200 million toward its goal of \$300 million.

A year after cutting tuition costs, applications are up 13 percent and the percentage of admitted students who are committed to attending has risen as well.

St. John’s decision came, Carpenter said, after college leaders saw the results of a survey published in the Chronicle of Higher Education that showed that 60 percent of parents were unaware that most four-year private colleges discount their published price so that incoming freshmen pay far less.

Some families — particularly those with children who would be first-generation college students — have less experiences and resources to help their children navigate the college application process and get the best financial deal. According to the National Association of College and University Business Officers, the average discount for freshman students who have not attended college before was half the advertised cost.

Public and private colleges and universities, big and small, face the same demographic trends, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest. However, Ivy League and highly selective colleges have amassed big endowments — Harvard University has \$38 billion and Wesleyan University, a small, highly selective college in Connecticut, has \$1 billion — that can be used to provide generous financial aid.

All financial aid is based on need, and a student's family pays on a sliding scale that factors in their income and often does not require lower-income students to take on debt.

But colleges with smaller endowments, such as Goucher or McDaniel College in Westminster, are more limited in the financial aid they can provide. Goucher has a \$209 million endowment, while Loyola University Maryland has \$229 million. They depend more on tuition dollars to balance the books.

Still most colleges can reduce the price for students through a combination of financial aid, grants and loans.

While St. John's is trying to buck the trend by beefing up its endowment, McDaniel took another approach, deciding years ago to begin diversifying to get new streams of revenue. The college expanded its graduate offerings and now has as many graduate students as undergraduates, President Roger Casey said.

The college also started a for-profit arm that does real estate development. McDaniel now owns and manages a shopping center and residential properties.

The college also reached out to the CollegeBound Foundation, a Baltimore-based nonprofit that helps the city's public school students apply to college. Because some city students have succeeded at McDaniel, there's a new pipeline of students.

The college also scaled back some programs, dumping majors in art history, religious studies, French, German and music, while keeping courses in those departments. At the same time, it invested in new programs, such as criminal justice and health sciences majors, as well as adding applied math.

And beginning this fall, McDaniel will offer a new engineering track that allows students to earn a bachelor's degree in physics with a specialization in engineering.

"I think there is no doubt that coming out of the 2008 recession, there has been a gradual and significant shift in the kinds of programs traditional students want," Casey said. "They are extraordinarily pragmatic."

Despite its ancient roots, a liberal arts education has been evolving for centuries and is very different today than it was when Latin, Greek and penmanship were required, Casey said.

"It is the speed by which it is going through [this change] that has caused . . . anxiety," he said.

After a decade of declines, the humanities' share of all new bachelor's degrees fell below 12 percent in 2015 for the first time since 1987, while degrees in the sciences grew, according to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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Some in higher education argue that liberal arts should not be abandoned for more vocational training. Pasquerella said a liberal arts education is more important than ever at a time of rapid change — and that the best education gives students the ability to be adaptable in the face of this change.

The movement away from the notion that a well-rounded, liberal arts education is a public good has been replaced with the idea that students want a return on their investment in the form of a job, she said.

But Pasquerella wants students to be prepared not just for their first job but for their last job as well, trained to “engage with the most fundamental questions of human existence.”

Goucher’s leadership believes it can do that just as well with its more relevant curriculum. In one of the most heralded changes, the introductory math class has been replaced by Data Analytics, which allows students to do less math theory and more math analysis.

“There aren’t many students who come in and say, ‘I want to solve math problems for the rest of my life,’ ” said Phong Le, a math professor at the Towson school.

He acknowledged the switch has been hard but exciting for professors.

“It is always a challenge when you bring in something that is deeply contextual,” he said, adding that he now must draw from the expertise of other faculty to teach.

While he said he could answer nearly any math question a student had, he now must ask fellow faculty members to weigh in when students take their data analysis into another discipline with which he isn’t familiar.

This year, he said, students are studying the water contamination in Flint, Mich. Because data from homes was crowdsourced, students have access to myriad data points and ways to approach their analysis, he said.

Overall, Goucher student leaders see the curriculum changes as positive, if not smoothly implemented.

“The student perspective on the new curriculum has been mixed,” said Sam Anderson, a sophomore and student government co-president who chose the college because of the new curriculum. “In reality, the kinks are still being worked out and students are the people who feel the brunt of that.”

But Baud, the senior international relations and Spanish major, said she believes the core of what Goucher offers — small classes and the chance to get to know professors — is what will keep students coming as much as a different curriculum.

And Jeff Noel, whose son will enter the college in the fall, believes the school will offer instruction in the skills he will need as he pursues becoming a writer. His advice to his son was, “Don’t sweat the future. Opportunities are going to present themselves. You want to have critical thinking. You want to work well with a diverse group of people. You want to follow your passions.”

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