

If it sounds like Fischman is advocating for doubling down on the liberal arts, that is certainly one way to interpret her argument. And in some respects, her advocacy for restoring the primacy of intellectual development above other concerns doesn't clash with the direction that many small liberal-arts colleges are heading in embracing a wider variety of fields. If you were a student who's interested in engineering, what better kind of engineer could you get than one trained in the methods of the liberal arts, says Robyn E. Hannigan, president of Ursinus, "where they develop the thinking skills and the habits of discernment to navigate the work that they are doing and how that will impact society?"

NEW PROGRAMS

Some institutions may feel they can't afford to make a big bet on the liberal arts — or traditional-age students or any other tried-and-true staple of small colleges — to determine their fates in the years to come. Unadulterated college models may become something of a luxury themselves. "The high-flying liberal-arts colleges can pretty much continue their residential model, and because of their brand, it works," says Lawrence M. Schall, the head of the New England accreditation body. "But the majority of other institutions may have to appeal not just to its traditional-age population, but adults, and not just one modality, but several modalities, and not just undergrad, but graduate, and not just undergrad and graduate, but certificates."

It's vital that, whatever they do, institutions add programs and program types based on solid data about what new students are available, what they want, and where they'd be coming from, says Robert G. Atkins, the consultant. Atkins says he sometimes sees colleges add programs based on vague data regarding regional labor markets. Maybe 50 students will show up for the new program, but "those students are generally already on campus," he adds. "That just means you're going to move

students from one program to another. You really want to get out the students who didn't come and see if the new program would attract them." That requires examining online search volumes, enrollment trends, international-student interest, and other data more likely to give a fuller picture of demand. The resulting solutions will be individual to each institution.

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With increasing competition for traditional-age students, "the future for many of us has to be diversifying our portfolio," says S. Georgia Nugent, the Illinois Wesleyan president. The institution has cut or reduced several academic programs in recent years (see "The Budget-Cut Commandments," on Page 10), and "we've tried to be very evidence-based in developing programs," she adds. Stability for the institution "has to mean not only cutting things but adding things."

Illinois Wesleyan has added several academic programs that fall outside the traditional liberal-arts core, including entrepreneurship and financially based investing, and is developing others, including a criminology major and a new school of nursing and health sciences built on existing majors plus some additions. "There are places where we're placing some bets, frankly," Nugent says. "We're trying to make those as evidence-based as we can, but there will be risk, and we'll have to see how they turn out."

Sometimes reassessing academic offerings in hopes of sprucing up a college's appeal for 21st-century students may not be as simple as pruning or building and



WWU

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adding on a few strong programs. When Jeremy L. Moreland took over in 2021 as president of William Woods University, a private institution of about 1,700 students in tiny Fulton, Mo., he knew undergraduate enrollment had been declining for several years. When he got a closer look at the data, he says, “I didn’t see the bottom fall out of one or two or three programs in particular; overall enrollment was down almost proportionally in every program.” Moreland decided that the common practice of program evaluation — weighing academic programs for their various financial and mission-oriented contributions to the college — didn’t make sense for William Woods as a first move, though he is now “looking at programs and seeing where we can leverage people and other resources more effectively.”

So what was among his first moves? One way small colleges try to boost enrollment with new academic programs is by offering graduate degrees. It allows institutions to add new students, and new revenues, often building on existing programs and faculty

expertise, without overhauling the undergraduate curriculum. And William Woods had an edge there.

Unlike many smaller colleges, William Woods has offered classes online since the 1990s, and it now runs 17 graduate programs mostly remotely. More than 45 percent of the university’s students are enrolled in graduate programs. “Many of our traditional students here on campus are often surprised to learn that they’re outnumbered by our master’s-in-education specialists and our [doctor of education] students out there, often online,” Moreland says. The university plans to add its first Ph.D., in leadership, in the fall of 2023.

The rise of online education as an accepted and increasingly popular modality for graduate education has been a boon for smaller colleges in many respects. Online graduate programs give small colleges the ability to reach students they might never have been able to enroll and the bandwidth to scale programs they might never have been able to offer if they had to rely on in-person enrollment to fill them. “I think we’re rapidly headed toward a day,” Moreland says, “where very, very few graduate students will be attending on-the-ground programs.”

But offering an M.B.A. online also puts Small College A in competition with the online mega-universities, such as Southern New Hampshire University, that outspend them on marketing by orders of magnitude, or more prestigious institutions that may also be offering their graduate degrees online, albeit possibly at a higher price.

Another area where colleges can start new programs is athletics — where competition with similar programs at other institutions is actually a plus. Intercollegiate sports teams can be an invaluable tool for recruiting traditional-age students who want to extend their high-school athletic careers and, even better, perhaps actually get some playing time. While some small colleges have trimmed teams in recent years because of budget cuts, others are piling them on.

How many teams are some colleges starting? William Woods has added seven varsity sports teams to its roster since Moreland was appointed its president, in September of 2021, including men's and women's bowling and outdoor-life sports, such as shooting and archery. The university plans to suit up a football team to begin playing in the fall of 2024.

Moreland says he has done his best to head off any concerns from faculty and staff members regarding the costs of such programs by sharing the financial projections behind the deluge of teams. "We've gotten to an important 'aha!' when we share this," he says, thanks to the "realization that, gosh, the model for growing a sport at the institution looks an awful lot like the model for growing an academic program."

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Coaching and training personnel is a key cost for most teams, and some require more equipment and facilities costs than others, but ultimately, there's a point of return on each investment based on a specific number of students projected to enroll and the tuition revenue they'll bring in. "We have some people around here that are just out-of-their minds excited about the fact that we're adding football," he adds, "but we wouldn't be adding football if it were not a clear, effective driver for program and perhaps services revenue at the university." Half of new undergraduates at the university are athletes.

Adrian College, a private institution in rural Michigan, has had similar success with adding athletic teams. When Jeffrey R. Docking became president, in 2005, the college was down to about 850 students from a previous peak of about 1,200, it was in bad financial shape, and "there were a lot of dandelions and leaky roofs everywhere," he says. "We were going down." Under Docking, the college grew from 16 sports teams to 52, including bass fishing, cornhole, and three synchronized ice-skating teams. By 2010, enrollment had climbed to 1,645.

Sports can also broaden a college's recruiting reach. Alvernia University, a small private Roman Catholic-affiliated institution located in Reading, Pa., added women's wrestling and hockey in recent years, and the new sports have been attracting a larger and a more diverse group of students from Colorado, Alaska, and other regions beyond the college's immediate recruiting area, says Glynis Fitzgerald, the president. While adding sports has its limits as a long-term strategy for a college, it can provide good short-term results. As Docking puts it, "you start hockey and you're just flooded with Canadians."

Even adding a marching band can make a difference for a small college's bottom line. "You don't need super-talented musicians or expensive facilities or one-on-one instruction to run a band," says Atkins, the consultant, who has clients who have had success with adding marching bands and bringing in students who might not otherwise come.

William Woods plans to add a marching band once its football program is up and running. "You can imagine people like me that were in marching band [in high school] and want to keep playing when they come to university will find a way to participate," Moreland says. "And it's not just football. You know the difference between a basketball game with a band and without that band, right?"

There is perhaps one addition or investment that trumps all others, and ties

into the concept of making a college distinctive, says Jim Hundrieser, of Nacubo. If a college has a boutique program that benefits some of its students but not all of them — maybe a unique honors program or study abroad — perhaps it can, and should, be scaled up. “What about the rest?” Hundrieser asks. “Students and families have figured out that those boutique programs are really boutique. So what about their son or daughter?” The thing that helps make a college stand out from its peers might be lying latent at the institution already.

The important thing for college leaders to keep in mind is that their new programs must begin to generate new revenue for the institution and have the potential to keep generating revenue for years to come. “The trick is to invest in something that starts a flywheel spinning,” says Atkins. “It doesn’t always take very much money to get that wheel going, and then it generates the money you need to do some other things.” A one-time bump of money, even a large one, may get you through the next fiscal year, but you’ll be right back where you started once it’s gone, as some colleges are finding out now that the federal Covid-19 relief aid has run out.

And with demographic conditions deteriorating and economic conditions uncertain, colleges should not wait to invest now in their futures, Atkins stresses. “The longer you wait to take action, the worse your choices get — you have fewer of them, and they get worse,” he says. “The sooner you act, the more degrees of freedom you have both to do things you can’t afford to do later, and to take risks that you can’t afford to take later.”

Some new programs may take a year or so to get underway, and then another to start generating revenue. For some colleges, that may no longer be an option. “Suddenly, you can’t make an investment in a three-year option, no matter how good it is, because you don’t have three years,” he adds. “It’s like, ‘Well, I can make 50 percent on my money there.’ No, because

you’d be dead before you got there. I literally have seen that picture.”

SHARED PROGRAMS

Small colleges cut academic programs and add academic programs, but the thing that could really save many of them money is sharing academic programs. Yet that’s one thing that most colleges seem reluctant to do, even in the most adverse of financial straits. That may be changing.

Sharing academic resources is a solution that may be hiding in plain sight. When states merge public colleges, leaders often state that one of the goals is to increase efficiency and save money. But once the institutions have gotten rid of the handful of redundant administrators that a merger creates, they’re still left with multiple campuses to run and multiple student bodies to house, feed, advise, counsel, and instruct. When the University System of Georgia merged 18 of its public colleges into nine new institutions in the 2010s, it saved the system only about \$30 million a year — a little over 1 percent of its \$2.3-billion annual operating budget at the time. That’s because the institutions continued to employ most of their existing staff, including thousands of faculty members, who make up the largest single cost at any college.

If colleges, public or private, shared academic resources — a prospect made ever easier by the maturing of online education and other internet-based education tech — they could offer more, and more varied, courses and programs with less money invested in faculty at each individual campus. But that prospect has only recently shown signs of taking root among some college leaders. Academic-resource sharing is “the wave of the future,” says Hundrieser. “But I think probably 2 percent [of college leaders] have really started to think about it. Maybe one person has really started to think about how they might do that.”

There have been attempts to spread the gospel of resource sharing. In 2018 the



ADRIAN COLLEGE

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Council of Independent Colleges created an online course-sharing consortium. It now has more than 300 members but has not been used as a major source of bulk course material or cost savings for its members, says Marjorie Hass, president of CIC. “The institutions that are members use it in one form or another for individual student solutions,” she says. Sometimes a college will need to replace a course because a professor is on sabbatical or maternity leave, or maybe a student missed a particular section of a course in their major because of Covid but needs it soon to graduate on time. “What you see now,” Hass says, “are more surgical interventions, if you will,” than regular use.

But the potential is there for member colleges to use the consortium to build out new majors or minors using courses from other colleges, says Jo Ellen Parker, the former senior vice president at CIC during the building of the consortium and a former president of Sweet Briar College. Course sharing spiked during the pandemic as membership in the consortium soared from 116 institutions in January 2020 to 309 institutions in January 2023. “We’re at a moment where we’re seeing some pivoting from people who got into this activity for very practical problem-solving reasons,” she says, “and are now beginning to see the strategic potential that it offers them.”

One company is betting that small

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colleges will see the wisdom in building and running academic programs with the help of shared resources. Adrian College had rebuilt its slumping enrollment in the mid-2000s by adding a raft of sports teams. But Docking, the president, knew that enrollment gains from sports weren't enough to ensure the college's long-term stability. A chance meeting on an airplane with a couple of Google executives led to an idea for a course-sharing network. "I called this guy two weeks after this conversation," Docking says, "and I said, 'You might think I have a campus of 1,800 kids, but I actually have a campus of 1.6 million, because that's how many kids go to small private colleges.'"

Further conversations, development, and investment led to a course-sharing company called Rize, which now counts 135 colleges as members. (Docking is a shareholder of the company but says that it and he have yet to see any profit. A spokesperson said Docking would receive payment for his "very small minority equity interest" only in the event of an eventual sale.) Through Rize, Adrian has been able to start 24 new majors, Docking says, at "a fraction of what it would cost to do it the traditional way."

For example, take supply-chain management. One of the many challenges small colleges face in adding such in-demand career-track majors is that faculty members in such fields can be notoriously difficult and expensive to hire: They are already in such high demand in industry. Hiring the instructors, writing the curriculum, and recruiting the students can take a year or two and hundreds of thousands of dollars. Adrian was able to start a supply-chain-management major in 2020 for relatively low cost by combining courses from its existing business major with five classes delivered remotely by Lasell University, in Massachusetts.

"I can tell kids when they're in high school, 'If you come to Adrian, you can major in supply-chain management — oh, and by the way, you'll make \$80,000 a year,

a year or two out of college,'" Docking says. "I was always losing those kids before." Eleven students enrolled at Adrian in the fall of 2020 specifically intending to major in supply-chain management. In the fall of 2023, that number is expected to rise to 36.

Docking acknowledges that the faculty at Adrian was leery of course sharing but that all new majors go through faculty governance and are approved by accreditors. All

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the shared courses maintain small class sizes rather than the super-sized scaling up more common in online education. And while the percentage of students nationwide who were enrolled in college solely online declined by 15 percent between 2020 and 2021, according to a *Chronicle* analysis of U.S. Department of Education data, demand for online courses grew. A survey conducted by Educause, a nonprofit organization for information technology in higher education, found that college students' preference for courses taught mostly or completely online had more than tripled, to 29 percent of respondents in 2021, from 9 percent of respondents in 2020, before the pandemic.

Docking also believes that being able to add hot new academic programs with relatively little expense is one way to preserve the traditional liberal arts. "I'm bringing in almost zero kids for several of these majors — history, English, philosophy, religion, theater — with several tenured professors," he says. "I have to start offering majors that the kids want. I don't control the market."