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SPECIAL REPORT THE NEW LIBERAL ARTS

2 Colleges in Vermont, 2 Paths That Defy Tradition

BY DAVID GLENN

BENNINGTON, VT.
IF YOU WANTED to make a movie at a location that would signify “liberal-arts college,” you might easily choose one of the two private colleges on the edges of this aging mill town. Southern Vermont College, on the west side, and Bennington College, on the north, have secluded hillside campuses that feel far removed from the everyday world of politics and commerce.

But the ambitious leaders of these two very different institutions might not be pleased to hear their colleges described as isolated or as stereotypical emblems of the liberal arts. Both colleges are strenuously trying to increase their students’ engagement with the outside world. And neither Bennington nor Southern Vermont has ever aspired to have a traditional humanities-and-sciences curriculum in the vein of, say, Williams College (which lies 20 miles south of here, on U.S. Route 7) or Middlebury College (80 miles north).

In fact, both Bennington and Southern Vermont are in the middle of major changes that will take them even further from the classical liberal-arts framework. Bennington is building a curriculum organized around “public problems” that students will explore in highly interdisciplinary courses. Southern Vermont is deepening its longstanding commitment to serving nonaffluent first-generation students—many of whom want career-oriented majors in fields like criminal justice and nursing.

The colleges’ presidents say they are proud to call their institutions liberal-arts colleges. But they insist that many of their peers’ notions of the liberal arts are stale and unsustainable. Every private college should think deeply about its own purpose, they say, rather than try to mimic the brand names.

“We all have to think about what we can do differently, and we have to build new kinds of partnerships,” says Karen Gross, president of Southern Vermont. “If small colleges turn inward as opposed to outward, they’re doomed.”

Bennington’s president, Elizabeth Coleman, says liberal-arts colleges “don’t need any help thinking that we’re more wonderful than we are. We could all use a lot less complacency.”

In a speech last year, Ms. Coleman argued that the insularity and sterility of contemporary academic disciplines have come close to

killing the liberal arts. “If we assume that the liberal arts are at a minimum defined by their focus on developing a student’s broadest intellectual and deepest ethical potential, then I think it’s fair to say such an education has disappeared,” she said. “We have professionalized liberal arts to the point where they no longer provide the intellectual range and heightened capacity for civic engagement that is their signature.”

Ms. Coleman’s and Ms. Gross’s experiments are not unique, of course. Dozens of colleges are exploring interdisciplinary curricula, like

Bennington, and many others are trying to blend career preparation with the humanities, like Southern Vermont. But these two colleges are changing their blueprints at an unusually intense pace, which makes them interesting places to ponder the meaning of the liberal arts. If you think that the essence of a liberal-arts education is a small, close-knit institution where students are attentively trained by faculty mentors, you’ll find that here. But if you think that a liberal-arts college is a place where every student is steeped in literature, history, and the sciences, you might wonder whether these campuses fit the bill.

‘FOCUS ON THE BEST ELEMENTS’

One of Southern Vermont College’s recent investments is a state-of-the-art simulation lab for nursing students. On a recent morning, four students were being trained to a respond to a robot-mannequin “infant” in respiratory crisis.

The equipment and the instruction are impressive. But what are these students getting here that they couldn’t have gotten for less money in a nursing program at a large public institution?

One answer you’ll hear is that students at risk of academic failure are much less likely to slip through the cracks here. Sixty-one percent of Southern Vermont’s 489 students are the first in their families to attend college, and 47 percent are eligible for federal Pell Grants.

Stefano Donati, a counselor at the academic-support center, says he hears from faculty members almost immediately

when students start to run into academic trouble. (The college’s first- to second-semester retention rate was 91 percent in 2009, up from 80 percent in 2006.)

“At one point I almost decided to transfer to Western Connecticut State,” says Spencer O’Doy, a senior majoring in creative writing.



CALEB KENNA FOR THE CHRONICLE

Karen Gross, president of Southern Vermont College: “We have to build new kinds of partnerships. If small colleges turn inward as opposed to outward, they’re doomed.”

SOUTHERN VERMONT COLLEGE

Undergraduate students: 489

Tuition, room & board: \$27,520 per year

Top 5 majors: Nursing, psychology, radiologic technology, business administration, criminal justice



CALEB KENNA FOR THE CHRONICLE

Nursing students at Southern Vermont learn in a new simulation lab. The college is determined to serve first-generation students, many of whom have very limited financial resources and want career-oriented majors.

“But then I realized that the professors would not be nearly as involved, and that the classes were much more like lecture halls. I want to study with someone who will actually know me.”

Southern Vermont tries to support students and nurture a sense of community by requiring a first-year “quest for success” class, which offers both civic activities and coaching in study skills.

By 2012, the plan is for almost every course to involve project-based learning. The college has signed agreements with local hospitals and businesses, including a pharmaceutical company that will allow students to conduct research on memory in a local clinic for Alzheimer’s patients.

“We’re trying to focus on the best elements of the liberal arts and sciences,” says Albert C. DeCiccio, the provost. “We’re looking for ways to frame the education that takes place to launch careers in nursing or radiation technology or criminal justice or business.”

There is no question that Southern Vermont is small and close-knit, and no question that Mr. DeCiccio and his colleagues think passionately about the quality of their instruction. But whatever Southern Vermont’s virtues are, is it actually a liberal-arts college? You can graduate without ever being assigned a single work of fiction, and the college offers no major in philosophy or classics. Every science course is framed as part of a preprofessional program in nursing, psychology, or radiation technology.

Ms. Gross, the president, insists that Southern Vermont is authentically a liberal-arts college, if one with a hybrid model.

“There is a notion that the only way to do this right is with the Western-civ core, that that’s the only way you build skills in critical thinking and civic engagement,” she says. “But in the 1960s and 1970s, even most elite institutions dropped that model. Not only are Southern Vermont and Bennington not doing it, but a whole lot of quote-unquote elite institutions aren’t, either.”

“To be perfectly candid,” she says, “I think there’s something elitist in the idea that the only way that you develop quality thinking and problem-solving skills and to become an educated person is through that circumscribed Western-civ approach.”

AN EDUCATION FROM THE WORLD

Four miles across town, three buildings are being erected on the campus of Bennington College—the first major construction there in more than 30 years. The half-completed buildings, which this winter are draped in plastic sheeting, Christo-style, are the fruit of a \$20-million gift the college received from two alumni in 2007.

The buildings will house a new institute called the Center for the Advancement of Public Action. The idea is to create a venue for interdisciplinary studies of international development, environmental degradation, and other policy challenges, says Ms. Coleman, Bennington’s president. “We want our curriculum to emerge from the world rather than from the academic disciplines as we know them. That’s especially important as the disciplines have become so insular and self-perpetuating.”

That posture is not new for Bennington. Like other colleges that were shaped by admirers of John Dewey—think Bard, Hamilton, Sarah Lawrence—Bennington has long required its students to develop their own educational pathways, and that has often meant self-created majors that cross disciplinary lines.

The Deweyan colleges intensely embody certain elements of a liberal-arts education: Intense bonding with faculty mentors, long periods of individual reflection. But at the same time, these colleges have often seen themselves as rebuking more-traditional colleges, which they view as cut off from the practical problems of the real world.

“Given the collapse of liberal learning in the bastions of education presumably committed to its ideals,” Ms. Coleman said in her speech last year, “it is no surprise that the purposes of education in almost every arena have narrowed drastically, and connections between the public good and education everywhere have all but disappeared.”

Bennington College and Southern Vermont College are making changes that will take them further from the classical liberal-arts framework.

The shape of Bennington’s new center, scheduled to open in 2011, is still emerging; Ms. Coleman expects to hire a director this year. But the college has already begun to experiment with two new types of courses.

In one model, known as modular courses, students meet for only six sessions over a three-week period. “The model allows faculty members to go deeply into one topic without feeling encumbered,” Ms. Coleman says. “These classes are very taut. There’s no slack. Every minute counts.”

Andrew McIntyre, a faculty member in mathematics, developed a modular course last year, “Orders of Magnitude,” to give students a vivid introduction to quantitative concepts that can be applied across the curriculum.

“These modular courses are meant to be introductions to a way of thinking within a discipline,” Mr. McIntyre says. “But we’ve tried to resist the temptation to make them like a first chapter: ‘What is political science?’”

The second type of emerging course at Bennington is the “design lab,” a semester-long team-taught course, generally aimed at first-year students, that combines research skills with civic projects, such as conflict resolution in local schools.

The evolution of Bennington and Southern Vermont is carrying them ever further away from the kind of core curriculum that many people associate with the liberal arts. But the colleges’ presidents say they are confident in the paths they have chosen.

“Liz Coleman and I are friends because we both actually have ideas about higher education,” Ms. Gross says. “They’re different ideas, but we have the same passion for an idea about how to create a liberal-arts institution. So our conversations are very rich.”