

Foreword

THE WESTERN UNIVERSITY TRADITION began in the medieval learning centers of Europe. The American university tradition began with the founding of the first residential liberal arts colleges of Harvard in 1636 and William and Mary in 1693. As the country expanded, similar institutions sprang up in nearly every state. Designed to serve religious, intellectual, personal, local, and practical needs, these institutions were the pioneers of American higher education.

By the late nineteenth century, new forms of higher education, especially the land-grant colleges, technical schools, and research universities, had developed. While most of the residential liberal arts colleges chose to remain small and committed to undergraduate education, a few of the most prominent—Harvard, Yale, Princeton—elected to become research universities while retaining an undergraduate liberal arts college or program at their core. The spectacular growth of American higher education after World War II—in terms of both total student enrollment and new schools—occurred primarily at large public institutions. This expansion was driven by public policy, which saw new investments in higher education as crucial to the future of the country. The residential liberal arts colleges became an increasingly smaller part of the educational scene. Today only 4 percent of all American baccalaureate degrees are awarded at these institutions.

Yet these colleges remain remarkably prominent in and vital to American education. They remain the best models of under-

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graduate education in the country. Educators at the large public schools create “honors colleges” or “residential colleges” to try to emulate their values. Whole new institutions, such as the University of California, Santa Cruz, were created in their spirit in a university setting. The small schools continue to produce disproportionate shares of the country’s leaders—doctors, lawyers, teachers and professors, politicians and civil servants, and businessmen.

For most Americans, the residential liberal arts colleges lack visibility. They have neither famous athletic programs nor large numbers of alumni. The media tend to ignore them. The colleges themselves have been buffeted by the main cross-currents of American higher education: the dominance of the large public and private universities; increased specialization of the professoriate; the creation of a highly competitive national market for higher education; the economics of the education sector; and a growing public demand for training and certification rather than the preparation of our youth for lives that will be satisfying, professionally and intellectually. Today, small residential liberal arts colleges, even the strongest of them, face an uncertain future.

This issue of *Dædalus* seeks to examine the residential liberal arts colleges—where they have come from, their current condition, and their future prospects. The reader needs to appreciate that the 212 remaining residential liberal arts colleges represent an amazing diversity of institutions: sectarian/nonsectarian, coeducational/single sex/historically black, highly selective/open admissions, local-regional/national, and strongly theoretical/practical. These differences do not undermine their common characteristics: residential, small (five hundred to three thousand students), educationally comprehensive, close interaction between student and teacher, and totally dedicated to undergraduate education. They are distinctively American; no other country has schools committed so clearly to the highest quality of undergraduate education.