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One small college's death and rebirth offers lessons for the rest

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Eric Bates talks with other alumni between sessions at the Antioch College reunion weekend in Yellow Springs, Ohio Saturday, July 15, 2017. Bates graduated from Antioch College in 1983 and is currently the editor of the “New Republic.”

YELLOW SPRINGS, Ohio — The summer gathering of alumni at Antioch College was not your conventional reunion.

Sure, there was the enthusiasm of returning classmates and the babble of nostalgic conversation over dinner in a big white tent erected on the campus quad.

Then the president convened a town hall-style meeting to discuss the state of the college.

At a typical reunion, “What you’d usually hear now is a rundown of statistics that underscore all the wonderful accomplishments we’ve made,” the president, Tom Manley, began.

But very little about Antioch is typical.

Instead, Manley proceeded to share the news that the college was short of its enrollment goals. It was too heavily dependent on alumni contributions for its operating budget. It had borrowed against its endowment to refurbish the campus.

Antioch is, in fact, doing surprisingly well just by still being open, considering it was revived by these alumni after being shut down in 2008 under a previous board of trustees that had diverted many of its assets into a chain of satellite graduate campuses.

Now its near-death experience has become a textbook case for the many other small colleges that are following it into similar financial and enrollment straits.

“When you look at folks who are alumni, the good works they have done, what this college is doing — who doesn’t want to save that?” -Craig Johnson, Antioch Class of ’91

Antioch provides a cautionary tale about the risks of chasing new sources of income too hastily. It attests to the importance for these colleges in a crowded marketplace of emphasizing what makes them unique. It proves the value of building loyalty among alumni.

And it shows that being frank about problems — as Manley was at the reunion — can help forestall them before they've grown too big to fix.

In fact, many financially shaky small colleges are doing the opposite of these things.

Antioch's decline and rebirth make it more willing to do something else that has historically come hard to higher education: be entrepreneurial and take risks. Founded in 1850, it likes to call its reinvented self a 167-year-old startup.

For example, Manley said, sharing bad news and not just good "is easier for us because we've already been closed. What are we afraid of?"

There's been a lot of bad news for many small, private colleges like Antioch. More than half reported that their number of students last year stayed flat or fell, [according to a survey by the National Association of College and University Business Officers](#), or NACUBO.



Angel Nalubega, senior at Antioch College, and Jeanne Kay, alumni relations coordinator, organize registration cards for at the Antioch College reunion weekend in Yellow Springs, Ohio Saturday, July 15, 2017.

More than 70 percent have tried new strategies to counteract this — including by giving discounts and financial aid that sucked up 51 cents of every dollar they took in last year in tuition from freshmen. That means their revenues didn't even keep up with inflation.

And more than 40 percent of chief business officers told NACUBO that discounting is financially unsustainable. The bond-rating firm Moody's predicts that small colleges' cash flows will continue to weaken.

Some of those other schools, too, are closing. The number of private, nonprofit colleges eligible to award federal financial aid [declined](#) last year by 33, [according to the U.S. Department of Education](#).

Saint Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana, suspended operations in May. Mills College in Oakland, California, declared a financial emergency and announced in June that it would lay off some faculty and restructure. Federal data show that Sweet Briar College in Virginia, which was also famously threatened with closing two years ago but stayed open, has seen its enrollment shrink by more than half. (The people who led the charge to save Antioch say Sweet Briar alumni called them for advice.)

"This is a very challenging environment for all colleges and universities," said Manley, former president of a small college of art in Oregon and administrator at the Claremont Colleges in California.

Antioch, whose first president was the education reformer Horace Mann, got into trouble ahead of the rest, thanks to a tiny enrollment and endowment and a zealous expansion that spun off more than 30 graduate campuses under the name Antioch University.

"When you cease to exist, you have to have some tough conversations about who you are and how you want to be seen." Vicki Baker, a professor of economics and management at Albion College who has studied the Antioch story

Running short of cash, trustees embarked on an ambitious fundraising effort, but fell short. The college stayed shut for three years until angry alumni came up with enough money to buy and reopen it. (All but five of those satellite campuses, now legally separate but still known collectively as Antioch University, have closed.)

For much of its history, Antioch was ahead of its counterparts in more enviable ways, including its legacy of promoting social justice. "A hippie school," its own students, alumni and faculty call it fondly. At the reunion, many of the alumni sported Birkenstocks and tie-dye, the men with their gray hair worn long. Even the surrounding community of Yellow Springs gives off a hippie vibe, with a sign at the town entrance that reads, "Find Yourself Here," and a banner over the main street that says, simply, "Kindness."

Coretta Scott King went here. So did Rod Serling, Eleanor Holmes Norton and Stephen Jay Gould. Antioch publishes the prestigious literary magazine The Antioch Review. Its campus is planted with wildflowers, and it grows some of its own food on a farm. The college motto: "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity."

There were student strikes over civil rights and other social issues well before unrest arose on other campuses. A policy requiring that both parties verbally consent to sexual acts as a means of curbing sexual offenses, mocked on "Saturday Night Live," has since been widely emulated.

"Antioch has always been a bit of a canary in the coal mine," said Eric Bates, who graduated from here in 1983 and has been among the alumni leaders who stepped in to keep the college afloat.

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Barbara Slaner Winslow poses for a portrait at Antioch College, during the reunion weekend in Yellow Springs, Ohio Saturday, July 15, 2017. She graduated from Antioch College in 1968.

“But we were also a canary in the mine when it came to our mistakes,” said Bates, editor of The New Republic. “And one of our mistakes was we reached outside our core and got too big for ourselves.”

The satellite campuses, at first intended to spread Antioch’s unique form of education to inner cities, soon became a principal focus, and the original campus grew neglected.

“You can’t just burn off your seed corn. We jumped in way too fast, too far, and didn’t have the business principles in place,” said Catherine Jordan, a former nonprofit executive and another Antioch alumna (class of ’72).

There’s a parallel in this to other colleges’ leaps into online higher education, touted as a cheap way to deliver instruction and a new means of income. Yet, [according to the Babson Survey Research Group](#), while an impressive 6 million students took at least one online course in fall 2015, the most recent period for which the figure is available, almost half were served by only about 5 percent of colleges and universities. Other institutions have seen little growth in this area.

Antioch’s detour into those graduate campuses was “a lesson 30 or 40 years ahead of its time for how disastrous those mistakes can be if you don’t pay attention to what it is you do and what it is you do well,” Bates said.

This is not to say that Antioch, [like other colleges](#), isn’t still looking for other new streams of revenue. It has to, dependent as it is on contributions from supporters for a disproportionate 71 percent of its operating budget. Only about 11 percent comes from tuition and fees, the college reports. That’s almost exactly the opposite ratio of other higher education institutions, and an amount Antioch supporters are concerned cannot continue.

It’s planning to build the first 34 of an eventual 300 homes on land it owns; residents will be able to take courses and use the recreation, library and dining facilities. It’s considering hosting yoga retreats, the college says. It wants to sell produce to the public from its farm.

Although Antioch reports having raised more than \$13 million in the year just ended, from more than 3,000 donors — including \$260,000 at the reunion alone — alumni can’t supply the bulk of the budget forever, Manley said. “We do need to get some balance.”

More than half of colleges report that their enrollment is flat or down.

It has also drastically cut costs. The number of faculty is down to 37, and there are 96 other employees, a spokesman said, including at the campus-affiliated public radio station and an adjacent 1,000-acre nature preserve over which Antioch has jurisdiction. Job vacancies have gone unfilled, and in January high-level staffers took pay cuts. Alumni not only contribute

money; they help do paperwork, wax floors, paint walls and plant gardens using tools they store in their own designated workshop in a former fire station.

Along with addressing the need to financially diversify, economies like these offer yet another lesson other colleges are gradually coming to understand, said Vicki Baker, a professor of economics and management at Albion College who has studied Antioch: “More and more institutions are realizing and appreciating — particularly small colleges — that we are a business.”

In that respect, said Baker, Antioch’s struggles alone provide a critical lesson. “It’s an important gut check for us that, oh, look, higher education institutions aren’t immune” from existential fiscal pressures.

Like any business, colleges need to sell themselves — in their case to a shrinking supply of prospective students. The number of American 18-year-olds is down, and an improving economy has drawn older students back into the workforce. On top of all their other problems, colleges are competing for [2.4 million fewer students](#) than there were five years ago. (Antioch enrolled only 45 new students last fall, compared to a goal of 80; its total enrollment now is 115, down from a 1960s peak of 2,000 and a post-reopening high of 266 in 2015.)



Tom Manley, president of Antioch College, answers questions from alumni, after delivering the State of the College address in the South Gym at the Antioch College reunion weekend in Yellow Springs, Ohio Saturday, July 15, 2017.

Many schools are adding academic offerings they think will attract applicants. Thirty-seven percent of colleges have added or changed their academic programs to boost enrollment, that NACUBO survey found.

Observers contend that this has blurred what makes each college special or distinctive.

“At the same time you’re saying, ‘Look at how unique we are,’ you’re saying, ‘Notice how we’re as good as they are,’” said Michael McPherson, former president of Macalester College and an economist who studies the economics of education. “‘We match them point for point, and we’re really different.’ What’s your message here?”

The strongest moral of the Antioch story? Standing out trumps blending in.

“It’s all about differentiating your brand,” said Baker. “If I’m looking at a college with the same curriculum at a higher price, why would I want to pay for it?” Yet “institutions in search of survival are kind of doing the opposite. They’re trying to be all things to all people.”

Even Antioch did this, said McPherson. “They confused the hell out of their brand when they created Antioch University and all of these separate identities.”

But it recovered, and refocused on its singular identity. “They’ve done that brilliantly,” said Baker. “They’re playing it perfectly.” That’s because, “When you cease to exist, you have to have some tough conversations about who you are and how you want to be seen.”

Bates characterized Antioch’s distinctiveness with an anecdote from his own time here.

When a professor from an Ivy League school came to teach at the college, “He had his first class and told the students what he was going to be teaching them, and when he got done he asked if there were questions. And a woman in the back of the class who had her feet up on the desk and was a bit of a hippie raised her hand, and he called on her, and she said, ‘What qualifies you to teach this course?’”

The story speaks to Antioch’s long legacy of involving students in their own educations and encouraging them to challenge authority.

“When you’re in a crowded and competitive market the question always is, from a business standpoint, how do you stand out? What is the value proposition?” Bates said.

“We don’t tend to talk about higher education in those terms,” he said. “But that’s the reality. You’re running a business and you’re asking people to spend a whole lot of money, and you’re asking parents to spend a whole lot of money. What [other] small liberal arts colleges can learn is to find your core and to focus on your core identity.”

“Antioch has always been a bit of a canary in the coal mine.” -Eric Bates

Instead, said Baker, other colleges “have been a little too comfortable in thinking that the right students will find them, and they haven’t been thoughtful enough about their branding and how they differentiate themselves.”

Even those that try may not succeed. As a college president, McPherson said, he learned that “everybody thinks the key is to be unique. And that’s definitely right — if you have an honestly defensible distinction. It’s not very hard to come up with a press release. The question is, are you walking the talk?”

Antioch walks the talk, McPherson said. It “can cash the check on this.”

And cashing checks, it does. That’s because alumni value the legitimacy of Antioch’s uniqueness, they said, and are willing to invest in it.

“Just make sure you have dedicated, rich alumni,” Barbara Slaner Winslow, a historian, 1968 Antioch grad and chair of the board of trustees, said, only half joking.

“When you look at folks who are alumni, the good works they have done, what this college is doing — who doesn’t want to save that?” said Craig Johnson, a member of the Class of ’91 who has worked at two universities since graduating from Antioch in 1991. What other colleges could learn, he said, “is that goodwill goes a long way.”

Yet alumni loyalty is being tested elsewhere by high costs and by the fact that more than half of students who earn bachelor’s degrees today transfer at least once, attending more than one institution over the course of their educations, [according to the National Student Learninghouse Research Center](#).

“It’s hard to expect the same level of loyalty. It’s a big challenge,” said McPherson, who also co-authored the book “Lesson Plan: An Agenda for Change in American Higher Education.”

Only 20 percent of alumni feel strongly emotionally attached to the universities or colleges they attended, [a Gallup poll found](#). Only one in five has given money in the last 12 months.



Alana Guth, senior at Antioch College, talks to volunteers at the Antioch College reunion weekend in Yellow Springs, Ohio, while wearing Antioch earrings Saturday, July 15, 2017.

“If you didn’t have a supported, highly engaged student experience, you don’t become an engaged alum later,” said Brandon Busteded, Gallup’s executive director for education polling. “There is no such thing as alumni engagement, only student engagement that lasts a lifetime.”

The most devoted alumni in the Gallup survey said they had professors who cared about them as people and “encouraged [their] hopes and dreams.”

You can’t impose that on a campus culture, or hire a consultant to create it, said Angel Nalubega, a senior from New Jersey, who at other colleges saw large lecture classes and less interaction between students and faculty than she said she found at Antioch.

“Students want to go to a college where they can feel heard, where they can grow into themselves,” Nalubega said. “Colleges can say, ‘Oh, we have shiny new buildings,’ but if they don’t have professors who will text you when you’re not in class, then they’re at a deficit and their students are at a deficit.”

That’s what sold Antioch student Marcell Vanarsdale on the college, too. “The relationship [with faculty] doesn’t end in the classrooms. It’s in the coffee shops, it’s passing them on the bike paths,” said Vanarsdale, a senior from Chicago. “Who we are, what is our identity — it’s nothing you can force. It has to be real.”

All of these things interconnect, said Baker. Being unique attracts students and transforms them into committed alumni. Being honest keeps them faithful.

But, for other colleges, addressing their challenges “doesn’t involve copying Antioch,” said Manley. “It involves considering who you are and what you bring to the world.”

That may have come easier here.

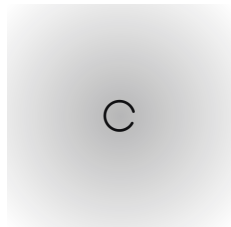
Colleges and universities in general “tend not to be built for that, when you have layers of culture and hundreds of years of tradition behind you,” Manley said.

At Antioch, said Alana Guth, a senior psychology major from Michigan, “We’ve already closed. So what do we have to lose?”

This story was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education, in collaboration with the [Educate](#) podcast.

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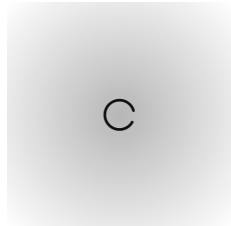
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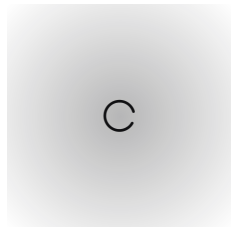
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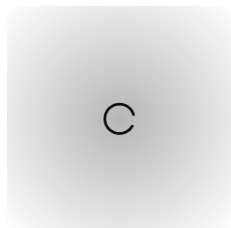
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