

How Antioch Closed

by Rowan Kaiser

About the Author

Rowan Kaiser graduated from Antioch College in 2005, majoring in History, as well as editing the *Record* in Spring 2003. When the closure of the school was announced in 2007, he worked avidly in the campaign to keep it open in both Chicago and Yellow Springs, as well as being a founding member of such groups as the Former Community Managers group that organized at the first Reunion, and the Antioch College Action Network. He was one of the final Community Managers chosen by the Community Council of the open Antioch College.

Most of his work was done in communication and helping the diverse members of the sprawling Save Antioch movement know what was going on. This website may be the final manifestation of that goal.

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Introduction

Welcome to “How Antioch Closed,” a history of how the 150+ year-old Antioch College had its doors shut in 2008. The impetus for writing this article and creating this website was a constant series of conversations, with both alumni and curious friends, about what caused the college close, and the immediate reaction of “Well, there’s not a simple reason....”

Answering that question required a constant balance between accuracy and brevity. Accomplishing both of those goals while making the story interesting required telling the story achronologically. I have included a timeline as the second-to-last page for reference.

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1. Suspension

On June 12th, 2007, the Antioch University Board of Trustees announced that it had voted to suspend operations at historic Antioch College, effective after the upcoming school year. The news made national headlines, and shocked many of the school's alumni and allies who had no idea the situation was so dire. How had such an old, well-known institution been forced to shut its doors? Attempting to answer that question leads to a story of institutional failure and betrayal, an object lesson in how not to run an organization, and a microcosm of the issues facing higher education.

Almost immediately after the announcement, an alumni movement sprang up to prevent the closure.¹ This too, prompted questions: Why did people care so much about this one, tiny liberal arts college in the cornfields of Ohio? What made the Antioch story so compelling?

2. Antiochians



Antioch Hall: Main Building

Antioch College's history defines it both internally and externally. It opened in 1853, with education reformer Horace Mann, father of American public schooling, as its first president. At the first Commencement, Mann gave the college its motto: "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." It's a straightforward manifestation of the college's activist spirit, something that would remain consistent through the school's history: Antiochians felt compelled to try to make the world a better place. For a 19th-century college, Antioch followed through as well—it was one of the first colleges to admit men and women, for example.

Having a calling didn't always mean having money, though, and the college struggled to stay open, closing on multiple occasions. During one of those financially difficult periods immediately following World War I, Antioch trustees appointed Arthur Morgan its president. Morgan immediately set about implementing a "co-operative education" program, "co-op" for short, under which students would attend classes for a term, then work at a paid job (usually organized by the college) for a term, giving the students both practical education and money for tuition and living expenses.

Morgan departed for the Tennessee Valley Authority and national recognition in 1933, and was succeeded as president by Algo Henderson, a less nationally known figure, but one who was equally important in defining Antioch College through the 20th century. Alongside active students, Henderson helped implement "community governance" as an organizational ideal at Antioch. Explicit about not being "student government," Community Government was a combination of students, staff, faculty, and administrators, working under the assumption that the people who would be most affected by decisions should be part of the decision-making process.

By the middle of the 20th century, these ideas had all become ensconced in Antiochian culture,

¹ Although Antioch University framed the decision as a "suspension of operations," the large four-year timespan and lack of specific planning for reopening made the claim debatable at best. "Closure" is as, or more, accurate.

and the college was flourishing. Enrollment grew steadily after World War II and into the 1960s, and famous alumni like Rod Serling, Coretta Scott King, and Stephen Jay Gould gave it a positive reputation. Antioch College was a unique educational experience, and a bastion of progressive politics. And while not every student embraced each aspect at the same level, most had some combination of the activism of the motto, the practicality of the co-op program, and the engagement with the community, making the alumni's active rejection of the closure announcement more inevitable than surprising.

3. Brinksmanship

Antioch University's immediate post-closure press release offered only passive detail and light explanations for the closure: "low enrollment," "small endowment," and a series of failed budget balancing measures that "eroded the confidence students and parents have in the College...."² While the press release confused cause and effect and avoided responsibility, its vague language rendered it technically accurate. Those things were involved in the closing of the college, sure. But the fact that the problems had been so bad, without yet prompting a mass call to alumni to prevent this most drastic of measures, rankled many alumni. Something had obviously gone wrong at an organizational level. Yet how had things reached this crisis point?

Enrollment was the critical measurement of Antioch College's success, both in a direct financial sense and in terms how strong the school was viewed as by alumni and outsiders. A comparatively small endowment for the size of the student body, totaling only \$20 million-\$30 million, meant that the college's budget was highly tuition-dependent, and tuition numbers showed an apparently steady decline between the "Golden Age" of the 1950s through the early '70s, and the school's announcement of closure in 2007. There were 2,000-plus students at its peak, and a mere 200 when the college reopened for its final year.

If the two before-and-after enrollment numbers alone are plotted on a graph, the situation looks like a steady decline, creating a comfortable, too-easy narrative of the college's inexorable demise. As ever, the truth is more complicated.

In 1973, a student strike triggered by President Nixon's changes to financial aid and combined with complicated on-campus tensions ended the good times in dramatic fashion. Enrollment plummeted between '73 and '79, when a financial and social crisis in 1979 led to many college workers taking "Payless Paydays" and working for promises and unemployment money. While Antioch was by no means in the clear, by the mid 1980s, the number of students had generally stabilized around 500-600. There would be a few deviations over the next 30 years, but this was still roughly the case in the early 2000s.³

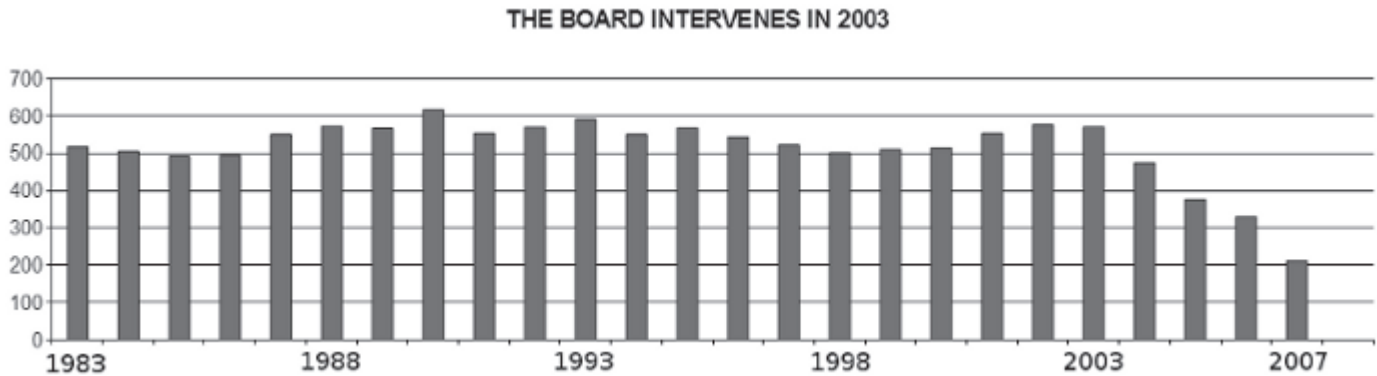
Six hundred students doesn't sound like a huge amount for most colleges, and it's not much

² "Over the past several years, Antioch College has experienced a continuing decline in its student enrollment. Given its small endowment and heavy dependence on tuition revenue, this low enrollment has threatened the College's survival. Efforts to balance the College's budget over the years through faculty and staff reductions, programmatic changes and deferred maintenance of the physical plant have eroded the confidence students and parents have in the College's academic program." - Antioch University press release, June 12, 2007

³ Note on enrollment figures: I am indebted to former Antioch professor and current Antioch staff member Eric Miller for these numbers, acquired from the college registrar before the closure. The methodology has a few important effects. First, the registrar and Miller attempted to have the most comparable set of numbers across decades, which is key, as administrators have often used different methods of counting numbers. Second, these numbers are much more conservative than many estimates. Due to the co-op program and occasionally intense environment, students often took hiatuses, dropped out, took half-time classes, or dropped back in. Those students could be difficult to count, and many estimates include them more than Miller's numbers seem to. The trendlines end up looking similar in both cases.

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compared to the four-digit numbers of the 1960s. But looking at Antioch's full, 150-plus-year history, this was significantly more than the pre-Morgan era, and not much different from the 1920s-1940s era. With enough student tuition revenue, Antioch had the chance to be self-sustaining; with too little, it relied increasingly on donations. An average enrollment of 500-700 students put it on the unstable border.



Courtesy of Eric Miller

The history of the college was not one of fiscal certainty. As a student arriving in 2001, I quickly became acclimated to the idea that some dorms were livable while others were near-condemned, and saw fellow students attending very serious meetings about finances. In the late 1990s, Bob Devine, the college president in that time, instigated a "Strategic Plan" to strengthen the college. Although focused on things like improving support for a diverse student body and upgrading the physical plant. An attached marketing slogan, of "800 by 2000!" summed up the enrollment goal for the college. Although unsuccessful at achieving that particular goal-though it met many others-enrollment did stabilize, then rose in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The fall 2001 semester had an entering class of nearly 200 students, which, combined with the few dozen spring/summer entrants and the often-longer-than-four-years student degree plans, projected to stable enrollment in the future if it could have been maintained.

2001 is a critical juncture in Antioch College history: It was the last year in which more students entered than had the previous year, and it was the high point of enrollment in the 2000s. The campus was in better shape than it had been in decades, with every major building at least open for use, which wasn't the case a decade before.⁴

The National Survey of Student Engagement study conducted that year also showed Antioch as one of the most engaging schools in the country.⁵ Antioch College in 2001 gave many indications of being a school on the right track, as long as it could maintain its momentum.

It couldn't. Major administrative turnover in 2001 destabilized both Antioch College and Antioch University. A slight decline in overall enrollment over the next few years at the college combined with the national recession and Antioch-specific issues to make it clear that that the college's financial situation was in decline. This turned into a massive decline in 2005-06, when a dramatic, board-mandated change in the college's curriculum went awry. It was called the "Renewal Plan," and it was supposed to save Antioch College.

⁴ The lone exception was the oddly titled G. Stanley Hall Hall, a tiny, essentially irrelevant building in a remote section of campus.

⁵ "Somewhat surprisingly, Antioch College had the highest score among the 276 participating institutions and set the benchmark score in [Level of Academic Challenge]." - President Bob Devine in *The Antiochian*, Spring 2001

4. Renewal

The Renewal Plan, implemented in 2005, was marketed to alumni and donors as a third great remaking of Antioch College, after Mann and Morgan, preparing Antioch College for the challenges of the 21st century. But that was only part of the story: It was also a last-ditch effort by the Antioch University Board of Trustees to fix the growing fiscal problems at the college. Thus this was the desperate cry for help from the Antioch University administration, but it was never publicly portrayed as such in official Antioch releases. Certainly there was an internal understanding of the necessity for change at some level, however, as well as an understanding of the danger that an aggressive turnaround attempt would pose. For example, then vice-chair of the university board, Art Zucker, told a college faculty meeting that the Renewal would be funded by the board for five years in order to assuage their concerns about the Plan's ambition.⁶ Two years into the Renewal Plan, Zucker chaired the board that voted to close the college two years later.

The Renewal Plan was initially described as a multi-part project, with each of its parts intended to fix or improve the college's financial situation. Only the first component, a curricular overhaul, was ever implemented—and a promised overhaul of the institution's governance structure never came to fruition.

The core of the Renewal Plan was a reshaping of the college's educational model to be focused on "Learning Communities." Instead of the discrete classes of one-class, one-professor (the most common form of college education), learning communities involve multiple professors teaching larger numbers of students in a variety of different disciplines build around a single theme. Learning Communities in American higher education were uncommon but not unheard of—many schools offered them in part, and Evergreen State College in Washington (often considered a peer of Antioch's) has built its entire curriculum on the concept of multiple professors teaching classes on general themes—indeed, an Evergreen administrator served on the Renewal Commission. One Antioch example was the "Revolution" learning community which involved professors of political science, media, and philosophy, while "Water" included a poet, a chemist, and a biologist.

In theory, the learning communities would allow Antioch to maintain its academic credibility while also making the student-teacher ratio more sustainable financially—Antioch was about 7:1 when the Renewal was announced, and it had the express goal of a 15:1 ratio, with 45 students in a three-professor community. That was an important potential financial advantage.

The educational advantages of learning communities were also exciting to some: They allowed professors the chance to work with respected colleagues and gave them the chance to make implicit connections between classes more explicit. And while relatively rare, learning communities were hardly unknown. The fact that many colleges, especially Evergreen, used learning communities gave Antioch a decent amount of data from other sources during implementation. And, theoretically, this would bridge a divide on the Board of Trustees between the academically-oriented and those more interested in finance.

Despite those apparent positives, the Renewal Plan was a disaster. Enrollment fell by 200 students between 2003–04 and 2005–06, thanks largely to a tiny entering class of 60 in fall 2005. Many of those students weren't even aware that they were guinea pigs in testing Antioch's new educational form, and quickly left. This was in large part because they weren't supposed to be the first Renewal class—the plan was initially scheduled for the next year, but it was launched twelve months early. Fewer than 20 of the

⁶ As this was a closed meeting, there's no official documentation, but multiple faculty members made regular mention of it publicly and to me.

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60 remained by the college's final year; this "lost class" was widely cited as a primary reason that the board of trustees closed the college.

Even if one accepts that the developers of the Renewal Plan had the best of intentions, the process by which the Plan was created and implemented made it a dubious proposition. The key issue: The Renewal Commission was detached from the college community. The people whose decisions it most impacted were largely disconnected from it, a stark contrast to the college's history of the community being involved at all levels of governance.

The Renewal Commission was announced to the college community in the summer of 2003, after that term's Board of Trustees meeting. College President Joan Straumanis reported its creation to the community after the meeting, but she didn't announce its importance. In a Record report on her description, she described the search for a new Dean of Admissions as "of most importance." The article is written as a summary of her speech, apparently in the order she gave it, and the Renewal is buried toward the end. There are a few ominous quotes from Straumanis—she says the Commission was appointed because the board was "scared, and because they care." And then she continues to discuss accreditation and fundraising (the latter of which she describes as in a "pre-emergency state.")

News like this could have been somewhat worrisome for the campus community, but worrisome news from administrators was common in 2003, as was committee creation. (Straumanis created six total in both of her two convocation speeches across the first year of her presidency.) The idea that this committee was reshaping the entire institution was a shock to the general campus community when the plan was unveiled in 2004. The Renewal Commission's meetings had been largely secret, and often took place away from campus. Its membership contained a few token college community members, but was largely administrators and outsiders.⁷ And it received its charge to alter the college from the Antioch University Board, instead of the college's primary power structures: the college faculty, the community-elected Administrative Council, or the president.

Once announced in the spring of 2004, the Renewal Plan was greeted with almost uniform dismay by the campus community. Massive changes were being forced upon the college, dramatically altering a system that, educationally, was working.⁸ Yet despite the negative reaction, despite the long history of the ideal of community involvement in decision-making, the college community had very little recourse to counter the Renewal. The Antioch College community, it turned out, had no power to prevent the Antioch University administration's actions against it.

But what was Antioch University? How had it come to dominate Antioch College's decision-making process? It wasn't the college which was founded 150 years prior, nor was it the college which had the reputation the Antioch name was attached to. It was the corporate owner of Antioch College, and over the course of the previous four decades, its interests had come to diverge from those of the college.

5. Expansion

The student body wasn't the only thing to expand dramatically during the '60s and early '70s. Antioch College also expanded geographically. In 1964, the acquisition of a graduate center renamed Antioch-Putney, currently Antioch New England, triggered a series of acquisitions and developments

⁷ The membership included: the Antioch University Chancellor, four university trustees, President Straumanis, the president of Antioch New England, two college faculty members, the college registrar, the college's Community Manager (a recent graduate and the closest thing to a student), the former president of Evergreen State College, an "educational and financial consultant," and Al Guskin, President Emeritus of the college and the first chancellor of the university.

⁸ The most recent accreditation visit had found major problems with the administration and infrastructure of Antioch College, but no major issue with the quality of education itself.

all over the United States, known as “the Network.” It’s difficult to define the Network, as it has always been amorphous. It’s unclear, even to historians and those who lived it, how many Antiochs there even were—dozens, certainly. Part of the reason is that there was an astounding variety of different “campuses,” from an Antioch College science professor teaching students for a term in Hawaii to Antioch Columbia, a full four-year residential college in Maryland which started in 1969 and was shuttered in 1973.

The student strike in 1973 ended Antioch College’s expansion phase, with unstable campuses shutting down or spinning off from the Antioch name, and temporary Antiochs not being replaced. The Antioch College Board of Trustees reincorporated the college and the Network as Antioch University in ’77, with the change taking effect in 1978. By the mid-1980s there remained four schools in New England, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, and Seattle which were aimed at older, commuting students; one adult learning school that shared the college campus called Antioch McGregor; and Antioch College itself. The last part of the university closed was the Antioch School of Law, located in Washington D.C. It, like the college, did not go quietly.



The sign once said “Antioch College.” Antioch University trumped it at some point.

Initially, the creation of Antioch University to replace “the Network” was a rebranding. Antioch College was still central to the university, as it had been to the Network. The college’s president was the most powerful administrator, and maintaining the college was paramount. In 1985, Alan Guskin became the college president, a position he held for nine years and from which he dominated this period of Antioch history. Guskin’s heavy-handedness—he had presided over the closure of Antioch Law in 1986—made him a divisive figure. But his success in fundraising, combined with the length of his tenure, helped ensure some level of stability.

Bizarrely, the method by which Guskin ended his reign as president shattered that stability. He decided to create the position of Antioch University Chancellor, with himself in that role, in 1993 (critics would claim that the entire position was his “golden parachute”).

All of the campus presidents—who became the “University Leadership Council” in a contemporary restructuring—reported to the chancellor. This proved to be a critical point in the college’s relationship with the university. Before the chancellorship, the head of the college was the university’s highest-ranking administrator. Afterward, the notion of the college being central to the university was primarily a social conceit—and one which the other branches of the university eventually learned they could ignore. Meanwhile, on the college’s campus, Guskin’s successor as president, Jim Crowfoot, proved unsuccessful, and the Antioch University board removed him in 1996.

The Antioch University Leadership Council and its entrenched bureaucracy grew more powerful over time. Antioch University set its headquarters across the street from the main college campus in Yellow Springs. This would, eventually, become a powerful visual metaphor: The street between the college and university symbolized an increasingly wide gulf of power, financial standing, and worldview. The concept of the university CFO trotting across the street once a year to deliver bad news and worse ultimatums became a dominant image of the college/university relationship.

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Descriptions of the apparent chaos of the June, 2007 board meeting at which the college was closed illustrate the power of the University Leadership Council over other parts of the decision-making structure by 2007. For example, the board was under the impression that they were continuing business as usual to the extent that they were granting tenure to college professors the day before. It's also unclear if the board was presented any alternative to the suspension of college operations.⁹

Antioch University's other branches generally held more in common with one another than with the college, which helps explain the differing cultures. Beyond the differences in history and reputation, the college was a residential four year liberal arts education provided by tenured faculty on a traditional pastoral campus. The university campuses were commuter, non-residential schools. These tended to have smaller campuses (even single buildings) in urban areas, in the case of Seattle, L.A., and Santa Barbara. The university campuses also generally used tenured faculty less than the college did.

The cultural conflict could then be framed as such: The university campuses had moved toward a fiscally-efficient model of education, while the college used a proven academically successful model. Both could be successful depending on goals and resources, yes, but the differences between them created inevitable tension. One of these things was very much unlike the others, and those other campuses were natural allies in any internal division. The tension wasn't helped by the fact that the university campuses paid some subsidies to the college—a just price for their creation and leasing of Antioch's name and reputation according to some; a millstone preventing proper expansion and investment according to others.

Indeed, the existence of "Antioch University" proved controversial to the college from its beginning. In 1980, the long-serving and highly respected philosophy professor Al Denman published an op-ed in the college newspaper calling for college independence. In 1996, the ouster of Antioch College President Jim Crowfoot at the hands of the university board ruffled feathers, and acted as one of the triggers for the creation of the Antioch Independence Fund (AIF), a group of disgruntled alumni who raised \$1 million to put toward the college breaking away from the university. Anecdotally, there were also reams of evidence from college fundraisers, who found that alumni may have loved the college, but they mistrusted and refused to donate to the corporate entity named Antioch University.

6. Toxicity

One of the biggest problems facing writers who wish to describe the fall of Antioch College is the lack of a straightforward narrative. The lurid and overly simple idea that, essentially, anarchists and hippie students and teachers ruined the college with their "toxic culture" has proven immensely popular. For example, one of the earliest theoretical frameworks was provided by alumnus Michael Goldfarb, author of a *New York Times* op-ed about the decision to close the college in which he blamed the college's excessive liberalness. That piece, of course, went national. In a follow-up a few months later, he told *The Antioch Record* that "the reason why the college ultimately closed is because this idiotic university," and that he had been a member of the Antioch Independence Fund. That interview stayed local—this was not the story that the *New York Times* wanted to convey.

Attempts to find a moral cause for the college's collapse have become a common sight. Goldfarb's more publicized theory, that the left-wing politics associated with the college pushed it over the edge, has proven seductive. Antioch College makes a fairly easy target, to be fair. Its nickname was not the "Antioch Huskies" or "Antioch Tigers" but rather the "Antioch Radicals." It had a history of civil

⁹ Unconfirmable sources suggested that college president Steve Lawry wanted to present a plan to keep the college open via merger with Antioch McGregor and was not allowed. The merger idea, is briefly mentioned then dismissed in the Gateway consulting documents used to sway the board, rendering those reports at least plausible.

rights and anti-war activism beyond even what's normal for college campuses. And Antioch, after the 1970s, was most well-known for its "Sexual Offense Prevention Policy," or SOPP. The national media discovered the policy in 1993, and turned into an object of debate and ridicule (including a *Saturday Night Live* sketch¹⁰). The policy, known primarily for a clause expecting students engaging in sex to ask for and receive verbal approval for each new level of intimacy, did represent a certain form of feminism and left-wing politics. It also became a model for similar policies in colleges across the country. The toxic culture theory is ideological on the surface, but moral just below – the students behaved unethically, while the faculty and administration lacked the moral fiber to stop the students' sex/graffiti orgies.

Conservative columnist George Will, building on Goldfarb's piece of a few weeks earlier, cited Antioch's downfall as a story of moral decline, focusing on the SOPP. Many pre-1990s alumni cited the SOPP and other on-campus controversies as examples of how Antioch had declined from their time, and couldn't be salvaged. "Toxic culture" even dominated discourse at the college before the closure. President Steve Lawry, appointed in 2005, arrived with a mandate to crack down on overly left-wing college culture. It was an easy narrative, with out-of-control students and non-centrist politics destroying a once-proud institution. Media loved it.¹¹



This photo is an effective metaphor for the enforced financial problems of the college.

There is just one minor problem with the "toxic culture" narrative: it doesn't connect with to the financial collapse of Antioch College. Any student—myself certainly included—will have memories and stories of on-campus controversies. They're virtually guaranteed given the small number of students, the high amount of stress and turnover from the co-op program, and the school's tendency toward activism embodied in the "Be Ashamed" motto. These controversies stick in the mind because they fall outside expected political behavior—Antioch's "bad" public student behavior, like tense community meetings about institutional racism, seem bizarre and toxic—nothing like normal public misbehavior, like disorder after big football games, which is just "kids being kids."

Three simple facts demonstrate the flaws in the "toxic culture" narrative. First, there are dozens of left-leaning schools across the country, like Reed, Oberlin, Hampshire, and Evergreen, which have avoided total collapse despite their politics. Second, the data doesn't support the idea that students left at such a high rate that this caused the college to close: Even making the assumption that students who

10 The sketch has been difficult to find, as SNL hasn't released it on other media. An Antioch alum recently put it and other SOPP media online, however. With Phil Hartman, Chris Farley, and Shannon Doherty, it may be the most 1993 thing in existence.

11 *The New York Times* description of the "State of the College" address which followed the closure announcement focused four paragraphs on Lawry's "toxic culture" anecdotes. I attended the meeting, which took over three hours, and I totally missed these anecdotes in the few minutes I spent grabbing some breakfast from the foyer.

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left were paying full tuition¹² of around \$40,000¹³ per year, 25 students would have to leave in order to reach \$1 million worth of lost revenue. Meanwhile, depreciation, an expense transferred to the college's budget in 2001–02, knocked the college back \$1.5 million–\$2 million every year (more on this later).

Beyond anecdotes, the “toxic culture” reading simply doesn't hold up looking at raw data. Enrollment during and after controversial terms tended to remain steady. Eric Miller, the former college professor who provided his research into enrollment numbers, noted that the school years between 1983–84 and 2003–04 saw an average of 545 students, which held true across both the 21-year span and virtually any five-year grouping within those years. Neither the implementation of the SOPP in 1990–91 nor its media firestorm in 1993 correlate with a mass student exodus – numbers drop slightly, but quickly rebound.

On the other hand, there's much more correlation between enrollment drops and significant administrative upheaval, especially long-lasting upheaval. The tumultuous 1970s, following the strike until stabilization in the 1980s, saw the sharpest decline in numbers, with students dropping at a rate of 150 per year until 1983–1984. And the two biggest falls in enrollment numbers toward the end of the school's existence occurred during the most dramatic changes in the school's structure: the 2005 Renewal Plan and the announcement of Antioch's closure in 2007 each coincided with enrollment drops of roughly a hundred students. The 475 students in 2004–05 became 212 in the final year of 2007–08.

Yet the 475 number itself was a drop of almost a hundred students from the year before. There was no specific, easily-timelined board-level decision that directly accounts for that. What threatened Antioch College so much in the early 2000s?

7. Consolidation

The 2001–2002 school and fiscal year would prove to be a critical one for Antioch. The decisions made in this year pushed the college's finances from precarious to a state of near-constant crisis for the rest of the school's life. There wasn't a single, dramatic decision like the Renewal Plan, but instead a set of interconnected problems, policies, and social shifts crippled Antioch College.

Two events precipitated the 2001–2002 changes. The September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks triggered a general economic downturn and stock market decline, making Antioch's financial situation even less stable. The attacks also pushed national politics in a more conservative direction, making Antioch's general left-leaning politics seem slightly more abnormal, and rendering the college an easy target, especially among an increasingly conservative Board of Trustees

Second, both Antioch College and Antioch University underwent major leadership shifts. Both college president Bob Devine and university chancellor Jim Hall had been in office since 1996, and both planned to resign during the year. This sudden instability in leadership triggered a response at the board level. In 2008, filmmaker and journalist Brian Springer published an in-depth examination of the university's politics in that year as “Antioch Confidential,” a piece that's critical for understanding the decision-making process while also being fairly difficult to read, thanks to its density and intense focus on the politics and people of the era.¹⁴

12 A big assumption, given Antioch's commitment to giving needy students financial aid. When I was a student, admissions staff talked about giving the most aid of any college in its peer group of the Great Lakes College Association .

13 This would be a late tuition model; Antioch's tuition rose dramatically from a mid-range private school to a more expensive tier over its last decade, unsurprising given its fiscal woes.

14 Springer's companion video for “Antioch Confidential,” on the other hand, is an accessible, beautiful, necessarily simplified metaphorical piece about the causes and effects of the decision to close the college.

“Antioch Confidential” depicts an institution responding to turmoil by narrowing its circles of power and investing two men with increasing authority. The Antioch University board formed an oddly titled “Ad Hoc Committee” in June 2001, university trustee Bruce Bedford, an executive of defense contractor GlobeSecNine, was invested with the powers of chancellorship, while Antioch University Chief Financial Officer Glenn Watts was added to the University Leadership Council. Neither Watts nor Bedford were Antioch alumni, nor had either worked with small residential liberal arts colleges before. Antioch College was built on democratic processes and decision-making where the people affected by decisions were involved in making them, but Antioch University’s process had devolved into secrecy and consolidation of power.

It was not a more efficient process. “Antioch Confidential” noted that the locked-away resolutions of the Ad Hoc committee were so confusing that their seal had to be broken for the board to understand its own decisions. The board’s secrecy had rendered it unable to effectively communicate even with itself! Secrecy would remain a defining trait of the Antioch University administration over the next several years, with results that speak for themselves.

Antioch University’s Board of Trustees was now micromanaging its finances, a very strange occurrence in the world of nonprofit trusteeship—normally trustees donate money more than they manage it. But the Antioch University board in this era was remarkably bad at this seemingly core concept.¹⁵ The ideology that educational or nonprofit institutions should be run “more like a business” was clearly at play here, with disastrous results.

Long-time college Dean of Students Steve Schwerner had a saying that became known as Schwerner’s Law: “If it is an asset, it belongs to the University; if it is a liability, it belongs to the College.” Bedford and Watts set about shifting the financial balance of the Antioch University system, with the result that Schwerner’s Law became codified.

This was accomplished via a few different tactics over the course of 2001–2002. Two of the non-residential campuses were heading toward default on their loans, which was fixed by allowing Antioch University to shift revenue from the endowment—which was primarily earmarked for Antioch College—to the university as a whole. That revenue, combined with the usual subsidies to the parent campus, would have covered the college’s deficit that year. Instead, the deficit allowed Antioch University to demand the college slash its budget.

The shift of revenue away and expenses toward the college’s budget was not a one-time event. As part of the Financial Stabilization and Consolidation Plan implemented in 2001–2002, the paper expense of depreciation was pushed onto the college’s budget from the university’s. In theory, deferred maintenance costs should be planned for. As the college had the largest campus of any in the university, with dozens of buildings, it seems fair for it to pay more. But in practice, it was a body blow to the college’s finances from which it would never recover. Every following year, there was a deficit. In a budget of roughly \$20 million per year, annual depreciation of around \$1.5 million was usually the difference between health and cuts. It was a devastating blow at a vulnerable time.

Glenn Watts became the deliveryman of the mandated austerity planning. Antioch University demanded across-the-board cuts in the budget in 2001–2002. In a letter to the college’s CFO, Barb Stewart, dated October 26, 2001, he laid out budget requirements and recommendations. These included the elimination of summer classes (a virtual necessity at Antioch thanks to its co-op system); the elimination of 20 positions, preferably by not filling open or soon-to-be open positions but by layoffs if necessary; and in the most revealing and symbolic demand, the closing of the Kettering Building’s Greenhouse

¹⁵ At the very least the proof is in the pudding for this one: the college closed on their watch. Sources close to the board also confirm a general lack of giving from board members.

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due to energy inefficiency even though, as Watts acknowledges, the college wasn't actually paying for heat or electricity in the building. In a directly related act dripping with symbolic meaning, Barb Stewart would resign her position just weeks later; the college would not have its own CFO for another five years. Its finances were almost completely dominated by the university.

The austerity plan hurt the college's infrastructure in the near term, but it had massive negative long-term effects. The positions eliminated included both admissions and development jobs, which are necessary for the growth of any college. They also included many support jobs, such as the college's own IT department, academic department staff, and the Director of Multicultural Affairs. (Alongside that, the cuts also disproportionately affected women and people of color, all of which made Antioch College's lack of effective institutional response to racially charged student controversies in 2003 and 2004 understandable in retrospect.) Another round of layoffs occurred two years later, further hurting Antioch's growth potential. The Renewal Plan was announced a few years later in part as an attempt to break this cycle.

One of the slower and most damaging aspects of the Financial Stabilization plan was the early retirement offered to college faculty. Over the next few years, many of the longest-serving faculty left the college. At a small school like Antioch, these faculty were often the entirety of their department, and the student-centered educational model¹⁶ meant that mentorship was crucial. The biggest cause of students transferring out of Antioch was not being able to study what they wanted, which was obviously exacerbated when faculty advisors departed. To make matters worse, many of these teachers weren't replaced. The budget crisis in 2002–2003 didn't include any layoffs, but of the 11 planned faculty hires, largely intended to replace the retiring professors, only five were allowed. It's no wonder the college bled students even before the Renewal Plan's full implementation—many of them couldn't complete their majors without teachers.

These measures were not unopposed by the college community. The Financial Stabilization plan itself was voted on in the Administrative Council, where only the tiebreaking vote of the acting president—outgoing Antioch University Chancellor Jim Hall—passed it. The elected Community Managers also piled into a car and drove all night to make a case for the college at a board meeting in the fall of 2001. The response to the next board meeting was more intentional: a representative group of students, staff, faculty, and a community manager went to the board meeting there to plead for the college. And finally, an amorphous student “Tent City” protest on the college's Main Lawn protested many components of the university plan, including layoffs, attempts to privatize the cafeteria to an anti-union corporation, and the college's lack of power within the university.

This is how Antioch University stunted the enrollment growth of the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as laying the groundwork for both a high future student attrition rate and a lack of admissions and giving. Yet the board didn't rectify the problem by building educational infrastructure. As alum Dan Shoemaker noted when addressing the Antioch University Board and chancellor at the reunion where the suspension was explained, the board seemed uninterested in the nitty-gritty problems of developing a successful college, preferring instead grandiose schemes like the Renewal Plan which were supposed to fix everything in one fell swoop. In Shoemaker's most astute observation, the bizarre manifestation of this trend toward grandiosity was the board's apparent belief that they could solve the problem of “not having enough students” by *closing the college*.

16 For example, all students had to complete a Senior Project, which typically took the form of a 50-plus page research paper, although the form would change depending on the students' major and individual project, like a theater major directing or starring in a play.

8. Division

The final years of Antioch College are a textbook example of institutional confusion, with its multiple different tracks operating not so much in parallel as splitting off perpendicularly. On one hand, there was notable evidence of stability at the college. The major administrative turnover of 2001–2005, with four different presidents in that timespan, appeared to come to an end with the hiring of Steve Lawry in that role.¹⁷ Tall and charismatic—patrician, even—Lawry certainly looked the part of a president of a stable institution. There were other indicators. Lawry managed to hire a chief financial officer for the college for the first time since 2001, while renovations for the Renewal Plan were filling some of the most embarrassing holes in the campus’ physical infrastructure, such as lack of Internet and phone service in many dorm rooms. A new “Coretta Scott King Center” opened. And with the Renewal Plan, of course, there at least seemed to be a plan with the goal of putting Antioch College on the right track again.



College President Steve Lawry speaks to the mobilizing alumni at the 2007 Reunion.

Yet forces within Antioch University continued to work against the college. Around the same time that Lawry took office at Antioch College, Antioch University hired a new chancellor. Tullisse “Toni” Murdock would become the college’s antagonist, introducing the resolution to close the college, and later leading the university’s rejections of alumni offers that would have kept the college open.

Murdock was hired from the presidency at Antioch Seattle, and seemed to embody the cultural difference between the college and the university branches. In her first board meeting as chancellor, for example, she distributed copies of Thomas

Friedman’s *The World Is Flat* to the assembled trustees as an ideological model. It’s hard to imagine someone more antithetical to Antioch College than Friedman. In simple political terms, Antioch College tended to oppose globalization and the Iraq War, both of which Friedman’s writing provided strong, public, “liberal” support for. At a deeper level, Friedman’s cheerleading for correcting market inefficiencies with outsourcing and technology stands in stark contrast to the liberal arts education built on “inefficient”-but-effective local, specific, occasionally idiosyncratic teaching methods.

The separation between Antioch College and Antioch University grew even more literal in the mid-2000s. Barbara Danley, President of Antioch McGregor (the adult-oriented Yellow Springs branch of the university) had consistently worked to separate her school from the college where its classes took place, which she succeeded at with the building of “Campus West” on the other side of town. For example, she built relationships with the Dayton-area military business community¹⁸—Danley was the person who initially connected powerful trustee Bruce Bedford of the Ad Hoc Committee with Antioch University. This was directly implied in initial press about the new building: ““This is

¹⁷ In addition to the five presidents, there were also three deans of faculty, four deans of students, three Antioch University chancellors, and an estimated 700 deans of Admissions & Financial Aid.

¹⁸ The Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, one of the largest and most important military bases in the United States, is just 15 minutes away from Antioch.

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a much larger issue than merely adding another building; it is about driving significant economic development that will benefit the entire Dayton region,” said Danley. The new building makes a certain kind of sense—while the Antioch College campus may have had certain charms, it was difficult to advertise as state-of-the-art. And for an ambitious school president like Danley, creating the physical distinction between the college and McGregor is understandable.

Yet it’s difficult to convey the physical facts of Campus West via mere words, as compared to the feeling of seeing it when driving into Yellow Springs. The village of a few thousand people is filled with small houses and charming buildings; Campus West looks like a squat yet sprawling mall. It has “Classrooms of The Future,” a label that might have been ambitious when it opened in 2007 but which is just embarrassing now. The facility’s windows don’t open, and a ditch outside gives the appearance of a moat, as if the building needed any more demonstration of its separation. That separation is important: The spatial division between it and the college campus, as well as the level of investment required to build Campus West, severed Antioch McGregor from Antioch College in dramatic fashion. At many colleges, offering night classes is an effective strategy for increasing revenue. For Antioch College, that option was gone, and the chance to merge with McGregor became monumentally less viable when it built its own fortress on the other side of town.



Antioch McGregor's (now Antioch Midwest) "Campus West," an ugly, isolated building. here protested by college supporters.

And most importantly, the ticking time bomb that was the fall 2005 entering class was in place. With a mere 60 students, it was already well below previous recruitment efforts. Moreover, the first-years were segregated from the other Antioch students, with classes only for them and even special classrooms only they could use, as well as a general administrative push to let the renewed college community flower while getting the embarrassing, “toxic” older students out of the way as quickly as possible.

There was just one tiny problem: The college wasn’t ready to implement the Renewal Plan financially, culturally, or in admissions, although the community certainly made the attempt. When it was announced in spring 2004, the college community was told that it would have two years to put the Renewal together. It was organized into roughly a dozen different working groups, with a few Learning Communities developed to test the process. But after a board meeting toward the end of 2004, this changed, and the plan only had one year for implementation. (The precise mechanics of how the one year turned to two will likely remain a mystery.¹⁹) Stuningly, many of the first-years recruited for the Renewal weren’t even aware that they were entering into a new curriculum. The massive attrition

¹⁹ The main point of contention is whether members of the board or the interim college president suggested accelerating the Renewal Plan. That president, Rick Jurasek, was fairly new to Antioch: he had been hired as dean of faculty for the 2003–2004 school year, after which he was installed as interim president when the search committee for Joan Straumanis’ replacement failed to hire anyone. He left when Steve Lawry was hired. The meeting where the decision was made was a closed session with the Board Of Trustees, so no documentation of whose idea it was is public.

rate—roughly a dozen remained by the end of their third year—led directly to the financial issues that closed the college, which shouldn’t have been any kind of surprise.

Yet Lawry entered his presidency seemingly focused on the “toxic,” left-wing, student culture. One of his first and most notable actions was to expel four students for selling marijuana, an authoritarian, zero-tolerance move at odds with Antioch’s traditional community decision-making processes, not to mention its relatively lax view toward drug use. He also took on the student-run community newspaper, the *Antioch Record*, for off-color “personal ads.”

But the financial matters, and lack of autonomy within the university system in order to deal with money issues, continued to put pressure on the college. By early 2007, another round of major layoffs came, which included even the college’s dean of students. Especially embarrassing: when the new college CFO took the job, he discovered that the university had made a \$5 million accounting error, and not a helpful one at that. Meanwhile, Antioch University administrators, led by Toni Murdock were working on their plan to close the college. They hired a consulting firm, Gateway, to analyze this decision. In the “Gateway Report,” three options were presented, with the first two being summarily rejected: an aggressive turnaround for the college, or a merger with Antioch McGregor. It also noted “a third option, and the one preferred at this time by the university’s management team, is to suspend the College’s operation....” This deliberately shallow document²⁰ was nonetheless cited as justification by trustees who voted to suspend operations.



Chancellor Toni Murdock, left, and Chairman of the Board Art Zucker, in 2007.

9. Resistance

And yet this did not go unchallenged. Steve Lawry, for instance, after two years of dealing with the Antioch University governance structure, had come to understand the lack of viability for the college within it. Immediately after the closure announcement, he publicly went on the record saying that the college would never survive without its own board of trustees. He also started working with the alumni effort to prevent the closure, up until Chancellor Murdock suddenly and unceremoniously removed him from his position.

Meanwhile, 200 students, more than half of the number expected to attend prior to the closure announcement, showed up on campus for the last year. One hundred of those were first-years who made the decision that one year at Antioch was worth it. A mass alumni and community movement to save the college began as well, raising millions of dollars in cash and pledges.

Antioch University’s behavior over the course of the next year is the clearest demonstration that it was the villain in the story of how Antioch College closed. Three distinct alumni proposals to keep the

²⁰ “We have not been able to do, nor do we believe it is part of our assignment, an independent audit of the financial data that has been presented to us. Thus we rely solely on the information provided by the University’s management in presenting to you the following assessment.”

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college open were considered by the Antioch University Board of Trustees, even accepted temporarily, but eventually discarded or rejected. Along the way, the Antioch University administration and board acted as the antagonists throughout these talks. For non-Antiochians, the question of “Why wouldn’t the people in charge do whatever they could to keep the college open?” was a confusing one, but in the end, the answer was quite simple: The leaders and structures of Antioch University had committed themselves to the belief that they were better off with Antioch College closed.²¹

In the final reckoning, the question of “Who killed Antioch College?” becomes quite easy to answer. It was killed by a governance structure that took away its autonomy, killed by a structure that imposed austerity yet demanded growth, killed by the imposition of a grandiose and damaging Renewal Plan, killed by the university’s short-sighted decision to let the flagship college close to try to strengthen its other parts.

The question of whether these policies were intentionally damaging or the result of difficult choices is endlessly debatable. But the results are much less so: Antioch College died as a result of consistently poor decision-making by its corporate owners at Antioch University.

Yet the closure of the college at the end of the 2007–2008 school term was not the end of the story. A fourth alumni push to gain control of the college succeeded, although this one could not keep the doors open. After months of negotiations, a group of wealthy and influential alumni succeeded in purchasing the school, and reopened it in fall 2011. Although many alumni and supporters of the closed Antioch have embraced the new school, tension exists between it and its past. As a non-successor institution, it has rejected job and admission applications from former faculty and students, and the lack of transparency from its Board of Trustees is worryingly similar to that same trait of Antioch University’s board. It remains to be seen just how much of the best and how much of the worst of Antioch has been inherited by the new Antioch College.

²¹ The reasons that Antioch University didn’t hand over the college to alumni who wanted to make it independent are slightly more complicated. The brand itself has worth, and a reopening that failed would reflect poorly on the university, for one. Also, the college campus and land were still valuable. Perhaps most important of all, the university’s accreditation was supported by components of the college, specifically its (excellent) library collection. Without codified access to that, Antioch University would collapse as well.

Timeline

- 1853** – Antioch College opens with Horace Mann hired as its first president
- 1919** – Arthur Morgan becomes president, institutes co-operative education policy
- 1933** – Morgan leaves for the TVA, Algo Henderson becomes president, helps usher in Community Government
- 1946** – Antioch rapidly expands in both prestige and enrollment, including famous alumni like Rod Serling, Coretta Scott King, and Clifford Geertz
- 1964** – In the midst of the “Golden Age,” the college begins geographical expansion, purchasing what would become Antioch University New England as the first piece of “the Network.”
- 1973** – A student strike triggered by cuts to financial aid starts a massive decline in enrollment from a peak of over 2,000 students.
- 1978** – Antioch College and the Network reincorporate as Antioch University
- 1980** – The post-strike era hits its nadir as staff and faculty work without pay for weeks. Many branches of the university are closed and enrollment drops below 1,000.
- 1985** – Al Guskin hired as president. College enrollment stabilizes between 500-700 students for the next two decades.
- 1986** – Antioch University closes the Antioch Law School in D.C., leaving New England, Seattle, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, and McGregor (housed in Yellow Springs) and the college itself as the branches of the university.
- 1993** – The Sexual Offence Prevention Policy, instituted in 1991, is discovered by the media and becomes a national controversy.
- 1994** – Guskin reorganizes the university structure, creating the position of Chancellor as well as the University Leadership Council consisting of the campus presidents, reporting to him. Jim Crowfoot named as college president.
- 1996** – Crowfoot is removed as President by the Board of Trustees and replaced by Bob Devine.
- 1997** – Guskin retires as Chancellor, replaced by Jim Hall
- 2001** – With Devine and Hall both resigning, the Board of Trustees creates the Ad Hoc Committee to plan the future of the institution. Power is shifted away from the college and toward the university administration.
- 2002** – The Financial Stabilization And Consolidation plan implemented, includes shift of expense of millions of dollars annually in depreciation from university to college budget, putting college in the red. Joan Straumanis hired as college president, Jim Craiglow hired as university chancellor.
- 2004** – “Renewal Plan” announced by Antioch University board, will dramatically reshape curriculum with goal of preventing further financial crises. Rick Jurasek, recently-hired Dean Of Faculty, named as Interim President.
- 2005** – Renewal Plan implemented at Antioch College. Enrollment plummets, due largely to a tiny entering class of 63? instead of hundreds. Vice-chair of the board Art Zucker promises the faculty five years of funding. Steve Lawry named as college president, Toni Murdock named chancellor.
- 2007** – Enrollment continues to drop in the aftermath of the Renewal Plan. Chancellor Murdock and Antioch University Board Chair Art Zucker announce the suspension of college operations at the end of the school year. Alumni and community members mobilize to save the school.
- 2008** – Antioch College suspends operations after multiple attempts to keep the college open are rejected by the Antioch University board.
- 2009** – A collection of wealthy alums purchase the name and campus from Antioch University to create a new Antioch College.
- 2011** – The new Antioch College opens.

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