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A View from Melrose

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Liberal arts are alive and well



About a decade ago, we began seeing stories about the obsolescence of private liberal arts colleges. First we were going to be replaced by the for-profit online education factories; then came the great MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) panic of 2012. As we all now know, those predictions never materialized. The number of small colleges going out of business actually declined between 2008 and 2013; some for-profit colleges have now declared bankruptcy; and MOOCs have failed to educate many people so far.

That doesn't mean that everything is rosy in our sector by any means – small colleges are feeling the political and financial pressures like everyone else. But there are reasons that traditional colleges and universities have endured longer than most businesses and corporations. For one thing, we have been able to adapt to changing needs and times. People forget that there was no such thing as an economics or business major at the beginning of the 20th century; they sometimes fail to realize that our professors are doing the cutting-edge research that leads to breakthroughs in medicine, technology, and commerce. Higher education is often leading change, even as it seems to defy it.

That's because we hold certain things sacred – intellectual rigor, clarity of thought, reason and discourse. But it's also because of the relationships that are formed in a residential academic community.

That community is shaped and expressed in dozens of ways at Linfield College. Foremost are the relationships our students have with their professors, who not only pursue excellence and remain current in their academic fields but also dedicate themselves to the transformation of students. This occurs in many ways and places; certainly within the classroom, but also outside it.

When Linfield faculty lead January Term study programs in Russia, Peru, or Vietnam, as they did this year, they are adding tremendous value to the learning experience of our students. You just can't learn the same things with an automated MOOC online course. Professors and students experience and discover together, they form a special community, and their lives are transformed.

Similarly, when a professor directs a choir, she is building a special communal bond with her students. At different moments she cajoles, challenges, scolds, encourages, reassures, or inspires. But she's always teaching. Young people learn they can accomplish things collectively that could never be performed individually. They learn about cooperation and partnership; they are led by their director, and eventually they become leaders themselves.

Our student-athletes have similar lessons. In team sports, the principles are the same: sharing responsibility and, at times, sacrifice; working together to accomplish a greater good; competing with friends and foes alike; learning from losing and overcoming adversity. For all student-athletes, self-discipline is key, and it leads to self-knowledge. And Linfield's coaches focus, first and foremost, on building character.

Residential liberal arts colleges continue to hold a precious place in American society because they provide such rich, varied experiences for our students. Those experiences are not, nor should they be, devoid of difficulty or challenge. But when we do it right – which is most of the time – our students graduate from Linfield as responsible, young adults, possessing integrity and self-knowledge that have been formed within and outside the classroom. Therein lies the power of a small college. 🌿

– Thomas L. Hellie, President