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### Best Use For A Small University

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# Just Like "Good Ol' Charlie Brown" U.

By Nicholas S. Thompson

During the 1980s, America's small colleges and universities will be under vigorous psychological and financial pressure. The pressure will arise from the decline in the number of college age Americans to which institutions of higher education now cater; and it will push tertiary education in the same direction that similar pressures already have pushed secondary and primary education — toward the centralization of facilities; toward the closing of smaller, more localized institutions; and toward the concentration of resources on the largest institutions and on those with the most reliable financial base.

But, should such pressure be allowed to determine the future of higher education? Should we let small institutions fail on the ground that they are inefficient, or should we defend them on the ground that they have a special competence, which American society can ill afford to surrender? And if they do have a special competence, how can we enhance it to minimize the vulnerability of small institutions during the difficult times ahead?

Scientific evidence suggests that — even though large institutions are more efficient at many tasks — small institutions, whether they be small factories or small high schools or small colleges, have a unique competence. That special competence seems to be relevant to the mission of educational institutions.

Evidence of this competence arises from the research program of Kansas psychologist Roger Barker. For more than thirty years, Barker has

carefully investigated the different social properties of small and large Kansas communities, concentrating on the differences between small and large schools. His research suggests that small size in an organization has a very specific effect upon the type of relations that go on among the members of the organization.

To illustrate these effects and how they arise, Barker offers Charlie Brown's baseball team as the archetype of the small organization. Charlie Brown's team bears a schematic resemblance to the little league baseball team; it has nine players. Its players play on something of a diamond, pitch from something of a mound at something like a home plate. They have gloves, bats, balls, and some fragments of uniforms. They have players in most of the positions, and they have a manager.

Here, however, the resemblance stops. Unlike the manager of an urban little league team, Charlie Brown doesn't have unlimited children of a single age group to draw on in organizing his team. So desperate is he for players that he must call on girls, toddlers, and beagles to fill out his roster. He, himself, must play both the role of manager and/or pitcher. Since each member of the team is needed in order to make the team possible, the organization is chaotically democratic. Even a low status member of the team can bring the game to a stop by sulking or stomping off. Charlie Brown must nurture and cater to the individuality of each of his players if he is to have any team at all.

These characteristics of Charlie Brown's baseball team have a number of important consequences. First of all, by urban standards the team is not very good. A better group of baseball technicians would be constructed by bringing together a team of monomaniacal male nine-year-olds, rather than scouring the playpens and doghouses of the village for players. Second, the functioning of the team

works to the advantage of the individual. Because individuals are crucial to the competition of the team, the individual has a constant sense of his own value. He or she (or it) is *needed*. Third, the team encourages its members to be generalists. Even though, at a given moment, Schroeder would rather play Beethoven than play first base, he must — if he is ever to play with Charlie Brown — meet Charlie Brown on his home ground — the baseball diamond. When Schroeder forms a chamber group, he will urge Charlie Brown to play the violin; thus, Charlie will be induced by the social demands of the situation to learn a skill he might never have thought of trying on his own.

Fourth, the team's characteristics encourage a sense of solidarity among people of very different backgrounds, goals, levels, even species. It is much more difficult for Charlie Brown to develop unreasonable stereotypes about piano players, girls, or beagles, or babies — if these individuals also are members of Charlie's team. Thus, the team builds strong social connections and sympathies between people of very different kinds.

Charlie Brown's baseball team also can help us to see how the characteristics of small institutions come about. Barker studies "settings." A setting is a societally recognized format in which a group of people commonly gets together. A little league baseball game is a setting. So is a bank board meeting, or a country fair, or a 4-H club meeting. Settings have a common structure across broad reaches of our society. These structural similarities may arise because structural norms are defined by the society. Thus, a meeting of a club's officers demands a president, a vice president, a secretary, and a treasurer; and a baseball team should have nine players. Structural similarities may also arise because of basic limitations of human nature. It's hard to have a

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group discussion with more than a dozen individuals at once, and unrewarding to perform a play before fewer than twenty. Thus, Barker argues that for a very broad range of group sizes, the structural elements of the group remain constant. These constraints dictate that the people who fill settings in a small community must be a much more varied lot than in a large community. The same constraints dictate that individuals in a small community fill many more varied roles. Whereas in large communities people struggle for leadership positions, in small communities the leadership positions are thrust on people who are often required to play several roles just to keep the setting in operation.

Small size affects colleges and universities as it does Charlie Brown's baseball team. To understand why, it is necessary to know in detail how colleges work.

The operation of educational institutions is governed by a conventional academic economy. A bachelor's degree program consists in a number of courses, say thirty-two, which are pursued by a student over a number of years, say four. In an

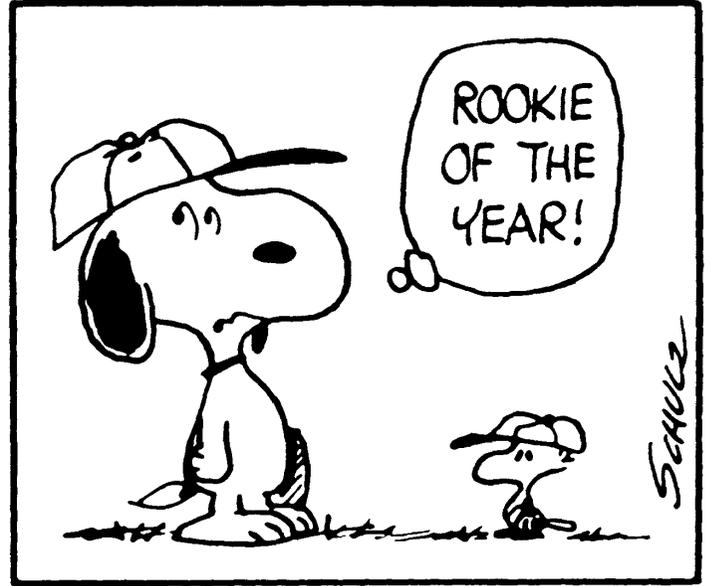
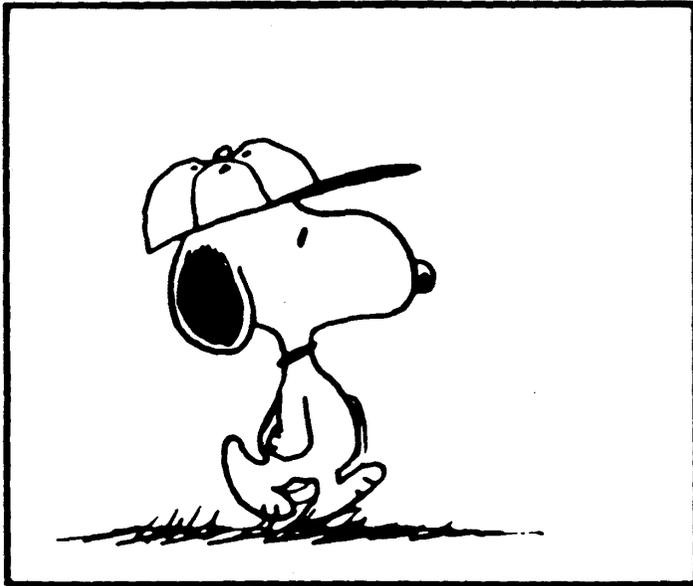
institution, the normal course load of an average student in an average year is eight. In an institution with 1,000 students, therefore, there will be 8,000 student enrollments in a year; in an institution with 10,000 students, there will be 80,000 enrollments. The number of enrollments increases as a direct function of the number of students.

The calculations on the faculty side are similar. When a faculty member is hired, he or she agrees to teach a number of courses during the year. This number is known as the faculty course load. If the course load is five courses a year per faculty member (say, two in one semester, three in the other), then the number of courses offered by an institution is close to five times the number of its faculty members. Thus a faculty of 100 members can offer a maximum of 500 courses; a faculty of 1,000 members, 5,000 courses; and so forth. Like the enrollment demands of a student body, the capacity of a faculty to meet those demands with courses is a direct function of its size.

No relationship necessarily exists between the size of an institution and the size of its classes. If for example, there are ten times as many students

as faculty members, and if an average student takes twice as many courses as the average faculty member gives, then the average class size *must* be twenty, no matter how large or how small the institution. Thus, on first consideration, the availability of faculty members for close contact with students should have absolutely nothing to do with the absolute size of the institution. So far as the academic economics of courses and course loads, a large institution should be just as capable of providing small classes as a small institution.

What I have said so far suggests that institutional structure is *not* related to size. But here in the argument ecological psychology takes over. Like the number of positions in a baseball team, the number of courses in a college curriculum tends to be dictated by norms derived from the society. These norms arise from our experience with well known, usually moderately large colleges or universities. Sometimes the norms are embodied in accreditation requirements, but mostly (and most effectively) they are embodied in every professor's sense of what



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departments a minimum college or university ought to have and what courses a minimal departmental program should have. Thus, as institutions decrease in size below the norm, ecological psychology predicts that there will be a resistance to a corresponding decrease in the number of courses taught. In turn this resistance implies either that the number of faculty in relation to students must rise, or that faculty course loads must rise in relation to student course loads, or both. Unless tuitions are to rise, most of these effects of the decrease in size of the institution must be met by an increase in the course load of the faculty members. Thus, ecological psychology predicts that small institutions will have greater faculty course loads and smaller class sizes than large institutions. These effects come about not because of direct effects of smaller size, but because of the interaction between size of the institution and norms that dictate the number of courses any institution must offer.

Even if a small college somehow resists the temptation to increase its faculty teaching loads, the small size

of a college faculty in relation to curricular norms will have a serious effect on its teaching activities. As the number of faculty in a department falls below the number of content areas that are conventionally assumed to constitute a program in that department, faculty members will begin to be required to teach in more than one content area. A specialist in marine ecology may have to take on a course in invertebrate zoology; a personality theorist may have to teach a social psychology course.

Students experience similar consequences. Where the number of faculty members is near the minimum specified by norms for each discipline, the range of courses available is limited. Just how limited depends on the extent to which faculty members compensate by increasing their loads and offering courses in more than one specialty. Some decrease in the range of offerings is inevitable. Since the number of courses in student programs is determined by relatively inflexible norms similar to those

which determine the range of curricula, a student is forced to look more and more broadly among the specialties to find courses to fulfill his program. A student in a large institution may find half a dozen courses on one specialty; a student in a small institution may find only one and will have to fill up his course card with courses from other specialties within the discipline and finally from other disciplines.

Other educational consequences of being small flow from groupings likely to occur in small institutions. Just as curricular structures tend to remain the same as one proceeds from large to small institutions, the social structures tend to remain the same. Consider, for instance, a social structure like a research group. No matter what size an institution is, the fundamental working group of a research organization is likely to consist of a number of people that can be comfortably seated around a smallish table in a smallish room with good acoustics. What is likely to vary from a small institution to a large is the constituency of that research group. At a large institution, the group is likely to consist of people at the same hierarchical level (e.g., all

professors and advanced graduate students), or people in the same narrow research area (e.g., all special psychologists interested in applications of attribution theory). As one looks at smaller and smaller institutions, the logic of ecological psychology predicts that research groups will begin to consist of people with more varying professional interests, and who come from different levels in the hierarchy. The same principle applies to other structures of the university such as academic departments and governance committees.

The analysis suggests that small size in a college and/or university predisposes its members to particular kinds of educational and social relationships. First, because of its tendency to pull together people from different disciplines in the same classrooms and its tendencies to pull different disciplines together in the teaching and learning programs of different individuals, a small educational institution is predisposed toward interdisciplinary education. By its very nature, a small college or university will encourage scholarship, sensitive to a variety of perspectives, and may try to integrate several. Second, because of its tendency to pull together people from different parts of the educational hierarchy, it encourages democratic relationships. In a small institution — if the analysis of ecological psychology is correct — students tend to be drawn into the administrative and research functions of the university by deans and project directors who must fill out all the “positions” on their “teams.” Here students cannot only be taught, but they also can learn by doing and by watching. In a similar way, administrative and teaching functions are likely to be carried on in concert, partly because professors in small institutions are likely to be their

own deans, just as Charlie Brown must be his own manager.

Research and teaching functions of professors also are likely to be more closely integrated, since the pressures on personnel in a small institution do not permit allocation of individuals solely to teaching or research functions. That is, the ecological psychology analysis suggests that a small educational institution will be more thoroughly integrated in a social, political, and intellectual sense than a large institution.

How we feel about these consequences of small size upon a college or university depends to a large degree on our educational philosophy. From the perspective of a believer in general education, the effects may be good. Students, professors, and administrators alike are forced — by the character of the institution — to come in contact with a variety of perspectives. But from the perspectives of a believer in the importance of technical depth in an educational program, the curricular arrangements of a small institution may seem to spread professors and students dangerously thin. A professor who is trying to handle more than one content area gradually may become outdated in one or more or even all of the content areas he is called upon to teach. Students taught by such professors and students who don't have the opportunity to take several courses in fields closely related to their narrow specialty may lack depth of training to pursue advanced training or career activities. Depending on whether one considers liberal arts breadth or technical depth to be the crucial aspect of higher education, one may or may not be distressed by the consequences of small size upon curricular arrangements.

My opinion is that the opportunities accorded by small educational institutions are a crucial part of the educational mix provided by American higher education. I base

this view on the belief that some of the most important technological and conceptual innovations of the last several decades have occurred through borrowing among disciplines. If large institutions discourage this sort of conceptual trafficking between disciplines, and small institutions encourage it, I am led to think that something essential would be lost from American intellectual life if small colleges were closed. I base it also on the belief that the different functions of a university — teaching, research, administration — are best performed in interaction with one another, not separated from one another. A student learns better from a professor whose scholarly commitment the student understands and perhaps has had an opportunity to share; an administrator governs a faculty better if both the administrator and the faculty know that each has experienced the other's problems.

So, shall we let the small colleges and universities die? Or should we urge state and Federal government, foundations and alumni associations to preserve small institutions against the pressures of consolidation in higher education, pressures that are sure to come in the '80s?

The proper answer is conditional. We should sort small educational institutions into two categories: those that are mimicking large institutions or drifting aimlessly from educational fad to educational fad, and those aggressively trying to capitalize on the special opportunities provided by a small institution while mitigating its weaknesses. The former group, the drifters and the mimics, we should allow to succumb; the latter group, the intentional small colleges and universities, we should defend with all the resources available as a vital and necessary component in a healthy American educational system. □