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## Keeping private higher education affordable, relevant

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Amid all the concerns about affordability, value and consumer preference in the higher education arena today, some good news has surfaced that should give private colleges and universities optimism heading into the fall prospective-student visitation season.

A tuition and student-aid survey released Oct. 5 by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities indicates that although "published tuition and fees" at our private institutions increased 3.9 percent, on average, it's the lowest such rate increase in some 40 years. Institutional student aid — typically in the form of scholarships — went up 6.2 percent, offsetting the sticker price of tuition, room and board.

NAICU President David Warren wrote in an email to member presidents, "While the financial challenges facing students and their families are still very real, this year's survey provides encouraging news."

It's good news indeed as college enrollment managers struggle to push their brands beyond the recent economic downturn and hit freshman recruitment targets. At my institution, Bethany College, we're increasingly selective but still driven by the right numbers. Our marketing program yielded 330 incoming students this fall, bringing total enrollment to around 1,000 and demonstrating our ability to attract top-notch students looking for a unique educational experience at West Virginia's oldest and most scenic college. Our first-tier national liberal arts listing in US News & World Report certainly helps (Bethany is the only West Virginia institution to be included in the first-tier rankings), along with our stellar academic reputation and an intensive career-development program offering plentiful internships, study-abroad opportunities and professional networking with our well-placed alumni.

Add in abundant financial aid (Bethany grants) totaling more than \$9 million annually, our small student-to-faculty ratio and the latest campus amenities, among other features, and Bethany makes a persuasive case for enrollment.

Yet when I speak to prospective students and their families during our regular campus visitation days, I am ever mindful of their bottom-line thinking. I can read the question in their faces: "Is this the right college for the money, yielding the right results?"

Naturally, my answer is consistently yes, and we can prove it. For one thing, the length of time needed to earn a degree recommends us. The nationwide average is more than five years and rising. This additional time increases the cost of a student's education. At Bethany, our students complete their degrees within 4.5 years.

Another positive factor is who we are. Our liberal arts mission is not just a tradition at Bethany, it's a leg up in the marketplace. It's been often said that liberal arts colleges prepare students not just for their careers but, perhaps more importantly, for their lives — which are likely to include multiple job and career transitions, employment-market

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shifts and demand for the kind of broad thinking that anticipates those very changes. As our Bethany College board of trustees chairman Greg Jordan, global managing partner of the law firm of Reed Smith, stated to a campus audience last year in reference to the value of his own liberal-arts experience at Bethany, "The evidence is compelling that no matter where you want to go in life, no matter what you want to do, you can get there from here. You can get anywhere in life from here."

So I encourage prospective students and their families to think long-term value, not just react to a college's advertised cost. Meanwhile, my advice to a college's enrollment team is to listen very carefully to what students and parents are asking about—successful career starts, comfortable residence halls, co-curricular activities, campus safety, and, above all, return on investment.

As Chronicle of Higher Education vice president and editorial director Jeff Selingo noted in the September 2012 issue of CASE Currents magazine, "Today parents and students want answers to three questions: 'What and how will I learn?'; 'Will I get a job?'; and 'Will I make enough money in that job to pay for the debt I incur?'"

Such questions have the ring of marching orders, especially for independent colleges and universities where the traditional classroom model still predominates, where the budgets are enrollment-driven and where the imperative of customer service runs strong. It's as if our clients are saying, "We like who you are, and you've made a great first impression with a lovely, tradition-minded campus with caring faculty, where people still perform Shakespeare. Now, prove your real worth."

I hear them.

Underscoring institutional strengths is vital to building and maintaining enrollment. Examples of attractive features might include an innovative mix of traditional and non-traditional programs; online, three-year options in selected disciplines; and international and synergistic partnerships with like-minded (peer) institutions. Small private colleges can often move faster to build new partnerships that enhance attractiveness to students. An example is collaborating with larger institutions to offer bachelor's-to-master's programs in popular career fields like health, information and systems management. In a matter of a few months, Bethany launched just such a program with Carnegie Mellon University last spring.

As higher education continues to be a consumer-driven business, we can take heart from the enduring popularity and reputation of the private, liberal arts college, and take inspiration from those students and families who still look to us as their preferred choice for a comprehensive, student-centered educational experience. That the market has become ever more competitive, our campus model ever more costly to maintain and our case for enrollment in need of ever more clarification and persuasion should not diminish our confidence in planning for the future. But consumer satisfaction and commitment depend on the plans we make now to remain affordable in cost, relevant in mission and rewarding in value. And we have no choice but to be at the top of our marketing game.

As I am reminded each autumn, our future is foretold in the faces we see on campus visitation days: willing and hopeful, but insistent.



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