W.Va.'s Private Colleges Unleash Potential One Student at a Time

West Virginia's eight private colleges and universities mirror the history of the Mountain State, and one of them — Bethany, founded in 1840 — pre dates the formation of our state. But don't let our age fool you: We're vibrant, efficient and affordable. And while we value our traditions, the future is our focus.

Bethany College, West Virginia Wesleyan College, University of Charleston, Wheeling Jesuit University, Alderson-Broaddus College, Davis & Elkins College, Ohio Valley University and Appalachian Bible College are “an accessible, indispensable and highly visible component of the State’s educational, economic and cultural life.” That’s the vision of our consortium, the West Virginia Independent Colleges and Universities Inc., headquartered in Charleston. Rather than compete with our public counterparts, we offer a highly personalized educational experience in the liberal arts and selected professional and pre-professional programs.

So although we're small, we like to say that we unleash potential one student at a time. To be sure, the energy at a small, independent college is different from that of a larger institution. But we educate with passion and purpose, and our alumni are fiercely loyal.

No doubt that's because we create a great job building leadership skills. Nationwide, private colleges and universities are renowned for educating visionaries in business, public service, education, science and technology, the arts and many other fields. Bethany's graduates include Wheeling natives Greg Jordan, Global Managing Partner at Reed Smith, one of the largest law firms in the world, and CBS-TV Emmy-Award winning correspondent Bob Orr, as well as Beech Bottom's Ken Bado, CEO of global technology firm Mark Logic, and Dr. Linda Lewis, clinical professor emerita of neurology from Columbia University. More than 21,000 graduates from our state's private institutions reside in West Virginia.

Private colleges work hard to recruit their students, and we expect a lot of them when they arrive on campus. Who are the students who typically attend independent institutions in West Virginia?

Although we're often viewed (mistakenly) as elitist institutions, many of our students are the first in their families to enroll in higher education, and almost all receive some form of financial aid. The state's PROMISE Scholarship, for example, benefits students who choose not only public but also private colleges or universities. WVICU Circle of Vision and Legacy Endowment Scholarships, funded by private gifts, benefit academically outstanding, financially needy students. We're grateful to the corporations, foundations and individuals who provide outstanding annual support through the WVICU to open the doors of higher education to some of our state's best and brightest college-bound students.

West Virginia's independent college students may not be financially rich when they enter our gates, but they leave undeniably enriched by the experience. With emphasis on teaching, not research, and on individual mentoring, not mass lecturing, the private campus celebrates the specific potential of the person. Our undergraduates are taught by Ph.D. professors, not graduate assistants. The student-to-faculty ratio is typically 13-14 to 1, and rates of completion are higher at private institutions: Independent college students tend to achieve their degrees on average in 4.5 years, compared to a national average of nearly six years for graduates at state schools.

Moreover, with missions that focus on communication, critical analysis and problem-solving, independent institutions develop broad skills for global citizenship. I tell our Bethany freshmen that they'll be as likely to compete with students from Beijing or Delhi as they will Pittsburgh or Wheeling. Private colleges and universities also specialize in career-building experiences like internships, faculty-student research collaboration, international travel and service learning that help students explore not only what they ought to do, but what they want to do.

Like public colleges and universities, independent institutions give back economically and culturally, providing direct and indirect financial impact to the tune of more than $171 million in total operating budgets each year and enhancing the local quality of life. In small communities such as Bethany, Buckhannon or Philippi, following the Bison, Bobcats or Betters instills immeasurable hometown pride. Our teams don't usually play in fancy stadiums, benefit from corporate sponsorships or attract lucrative TV coverage, but everyone has a chance to play and to have fun doing it — and that's how we like it.

The only negative about West Virginia's private institutions of higher education that I can think of is not telling our story loudly enough. Yet we certainly should. When you look at the key indicators that matter in higher education today — assessment of learning, four-year completion rates, career and life preparation, global awareness, to name a few — our private colleges and universities do a masterful job of serving West Virginia.

For more than 7,500 students who enroll in our state's independent institutions each year, and the 72,000 alumni who have preceded them, the private choice is the obvious one. Although our campuses are small, the benefits available to our students are enormous.

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