At a time when investment in higher education has never seemed more urgent, when the nation's colleges and universities have assumed ever greater responsibility for "winning the future," in President Obama's words, West Virginia's eight private colleges lead very public lives of service and distinction. Although you won't find small private colleges playing in fancy football stadiums, building huge facilities with corporate sponsorships, or shuffling students between sprawling branch campuses, their contributions to the state are important in their own right. Rather, in the words of our consortium, West Virginia Independent Colleges and Universities Inc., or WVICU, our vision is to be "accessible, indispensable and highly visible component of the state's educational, economic and cultural life." With a focus on preparing our 7,800 students for careers and lives that will change dramatically within years of their graduation, West Virginia's private colleges are student-centered, administratively lean and academically innovative. Most retain historic affiliations with religious denominations and offer students personalized opportunities for intensive residential study in liberal arts and preprofessional programs. We work hard for our students, many of whom — as in the public higher education community — are the first in their families to attend college. At Bethany, these first-generation students make up some 30 percent of our enrollment. When I look at the assembled high school juniors and seniors and their families during our campus open houses, I can detect in many faces the eagerness to make a four-year college education a milestone event in their family experience. Many in West Virginia's business community, along with foundations and other funders, share our commitment to student access and success through the Circle of Vision Scholarship Program of WVICU, providing essential funds each year to keep the cost of enrollment as affordable as possible. Since 1997, this program has funded approximately $3.5 million in scholarships to more than 2,900 West Virginia students.

Our partnership with the federal government also is critically important. Pell Grants, serving more than 7 million needy students nationwide, represent one of the most responsible and financially feasible investments in America's students. We hope they will continue to be funded (at a maximum of $5,550 per student through next year) at a critical time when the percentage of American students graduating from college continues to lag behind that of some other industrialized nations.

Although small private colleges remain a well-kept secret in West Virginia, our graduates tell a truly international story. In March, Bethany will welcome back to campus as one of their 1987 Bethany House (one of its nursing school) survivors and 1987 Bethany alumnus Thomas Buergenthal, formerly the American judge on the International Court of Justice in The Hague and now a professor of law at George Washington University.

Bethany's graduates include Greg Jordan, global managing partner of Reed Smith, one of the largest law firms in the world; Robert McCann, chief executive officer of Wealth Management Americas and member of the group executive board of UBS; Marie DeParis, vice president of marketing and business development for SONY, the official television home of the New York Mets and Jets and the Big East Conference; Dr. Arthur E. Vans Jr., founder and president of International Relief and Development Inc.; and many other distinguished alumni throughout the world.

Having attended recent meetings of various higher education organizations and consortia, including WVICU, I am struck by what a compelling case we can make for continued support of private colleges, here and throughout our nation.

According to the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, our institutions nationwide enroll nearly 20 percent of all students, award approximately 30 percent of all degrees, and serve a significant percentage of non-traditional (aged 25 or older) students. We have substantial economic impact on our home communities in West Virginia — think of the small towns of Bethany, Philippi, Buckhannon, Elkins and Mount Hope that are home to five of the state's eight private colleges. And we're efficient. Independent college students tend to complete their degrees on average in 4.5 years, compared with a national average of nearly 6 years for graduates at state schools.

We are lesser known than many of our big public counterparts, and you may have to drive along some gorgeous stretches of country road to find us, but West Virginia's private colleges are academically vibrant and economically important. We partner with business and industry, we do research, and most of all, we teach well, focusing on the needs of the individual student in today's complex society.

Although we are private, we do a lot of public good.

Scott D. Miller is president of Bethany College in Brooke County and a widely known writer and speaker on issues affecting higher education. Now in his 21st year as a college CEO, he is in his fourth year as president of West Virginia's oldest degree-granting institution. A graduate of West Virginia Wesleyan College, he was a newspaper reporter in Central West Virginia before becoming a higher education administrator.