

“Plain Living”

Berea College makes a commitment to the welfare of its students and its community

Photos by Stewart Bowman for CrossTalk

By Robert A. Jones

BEREA, KENTUCKY

THE LEAFY CAMPUS of Berea College, at the edge of Appalachia, has long been regarded as a place apart. It was founded, after all, by utopian visionaries who encouraged racial mixing in pre-Civil War Kentucky and, even today, Berea presents itself as the exception-to-the-rule in higher education, the debunker of academic myths, the reverser of trends.

Just how different is Berea? Plenty different.

Take, for example, the ominous trend in private college tuition, where the bill for a college education has been rising faster than house prices in California. At Berea, tuition is free for its 1,500 students, a generosity made possible by the college's stunning \$800 million endowment.

Or consider the fact that private colleges increasingly have become enclaves of the well-to-do. Some top private institutions now report median family incomes for entering freshmen in the range of \$150,000. A study by the Higher Education Research Institute found that, even at selective state universities, 40 percent of this year's freshmen come from families making more than \$100,000 per year.

At Berea, whose campus could be a movie set for an elite college, those demographics are nowhere to be found. In fact, Berea will not accept well-to-do students. It considers only students from the lowest economic strata, most of them from backward pockets of Appalachia. The average family income of incoming freshmen currently stands at \$28,000.

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Or take the current willingness to coddle students with dormitory spas, massage therapists, and parking garages for their BMWs. Berea students would smile at those indulgences. If anyone is providing maid service at Berea, it's the students themselves. Each works ten to 15 hours a week in a “labor position” that ranges from janitorial work to producing videotapes. And campus parking is a breeze

because most students can't have cars.

But the crux of the difference between Berea and many other private colleges is not the demographics or free tuition. Rather, it is the presence of a collective idea about the mission of the college, which is to transform the lives of poor but gifted students from Appalachia and then return them, as graduates, to their communities so they can improve the lives of others.

“We're educating our students to be engaged in a



Sreirath Khieu, a Cambodian student known on campus as “Chan,” makes early American brooms in her “labor position” at Berea College.

different vocational life and world than does a Stanford or a Swarthmore,” said President Larry Shinn. “Being a CEO of a major corporation is not really what we're about, although some of our students do that. The idea is for our graduates to leave Berea and be engaged in a life of service to their communities, to give something back.”

It sounds too sappy to be true: a private college in a bucolic setting that gives away ninety-thousand-dollar educations to poor kids, and so inspires those kids with a sense of mission that they return and rebuild their broke-down communities.

But talk to students and teachers here, and they all seem infused with that sense of commitment. “Most of us here wouldn't get the chance to go to college without Berea,” said Jami Garth, a junior from Monticello, Kentucky, who plans to take up family counseling when she graduates. “We all have something in common here, which is low income. We realize we are being given this great opportunity, and, frankly, we don't want to blow it.”

A few doors down, Academic Provost Dave Porter said, “I like to think of Berea as offering absolutely the best liberal arts education that money can't buy. This institution is a trust for the people of the region. When you come here, you just get caught up in the whole idea of the place.”

And the numbers suggest that Berea, by and large, succeeds in its goal of supplying Appalachia with new generations of leaders. More than half of Berea students go on to graduate school, but eventually about 58 percent enter public service or nonprofit careers, most of them in the Appalachian region. Recent Berea graduates have taken up projects ranging from food co-ops and environmental restoration to small-business counseling.

Take a walk around the Berea campus, and initially you

Unlike other colleges, Berea uses its endowment largely to provide free tuition.

will not sense any difference from a dozen other small, private colleges in the east. Students stroll down tree-lined walkways to academic buildings that harken back to the 19th century. Students loll on the manicured lawns, their laptops glowing.

But keep looking, and the differences start to emerge. In one corner of the campus sits a nondescript building with a sign that

simply says, “Broomcraft.” The sign on another building, close by, says, “Wrought Iron.”

It’s probably safe to say that no building at Swarthmore is labeled “Broomcraft.” That’s because Swarthmore students don’t make brooms. But Berea students do just that. Inside the Broomcraft building is a small factory where students learn how to craft a fine artisan broom from the best materials.

Sreirath Khieu, an international student from Cambodia who goes by the nickname “Chan” on campus, sat at one of the workplace benches, surrounded by sheaves of golden broomcorn. The fifth of seven children in Cambodia, she is the first person in her family to come to America or go to college. She seems to sense the irony of a newly arrived Cambodian turning out brooms that will be sold in nearby shops as replicas of American folk-craft. But she also loves it.

“In Cambodia, making brooms is kind of a low-class job, and I was surprised when they told me my labor position would be in broomcraft,” she said. “I found out that making good brooms is really hard.”

Khieu pauses and then comes to a Zen-like conclusion. “We are not only learning how to make brooms here,” she said. “We are learning what a person needs, inside, to be a good broom maker.”

But the work program is only part of Berea’s unusual approach to higher education. The college has no fraternities or sororities and requires students to live on-campus throughout their undergraduate careers. No alcohol is allowed on or off campus (Berea is in a dry county), and smoking is severely restricted. There is no football team, no funky college town next to the campus, and the car prohibition extends to all students except seniors.

It’s enough to cramp the style of any 19-year-old. “The truth is, you have to work at finding entertainment here,” said Andrew Hartl, a junior from Malta, Ohio. “Sometimes I think of it as the Berea bubble, a protected world that has its own rules. You either live with the rules and make peace with them,

or you struggle. I would guess about 80 percent of the kids make peace with it, and 20 percent struggle.”

Gail Wofford, vice president for labor and student life, agrees that some of the restrictions can be tough. But the rules do not flow from a mistrust of the students, she said. Rather, they are directed at maintaining the college’s strong sense of community.

“We’re saying to the students, ‘You’re going to be with us for four years. In that period, you can’t get away from us by living off campus or driving away in your car. You must stay interested in what Berea has to offer. You must live and learn together like a family, and, if you do that, you will benefit. You will become a better person,’” she said.

When Wofford mentions family, she is referring to the remarkably diverse population of white, black and foreign students that now fills the campus. Even though Berea was founded on Christian principles back in 1855, its attitude has always been inclusive of different races and religious backgrounds. At present 17 percent of students are African American and eight percent are international.

Much of this heritage stems from Berea’s 150-year history. When the founders arrived at their mountain-ridge site 35 miles south of Lexington in 1855, they first created the town of Berea, with the college following a few years later. And it was no mere town but a controversial utopian community that extended equal rights to all women and men, including African Americans. Within the community, blacks and whites were required to live next door to each other in a checkerboard pattern.

Not surprisingly, these ideals did not sit well in the southern Kentucky culture of the time. The community was attacked and driven away by pro-slavery thugs during the Civil War but returned in the following years and established the college expressly for “freedmen,” or former slaves, and the mountain populations of Appalachia.

During those early years the college leaders also developed eight principles, known as the “Great Commitments,” that continue to guide the college’s policies today. These principles are the source of the work program and the four-year residential policy as well as the more general approach to college life that the Great Commitments describe as “plain living.”

In spite of its spare lifestyle, this approach has proven remarkably resilient and successful. Berea’s retention and graduation rates remain high, especially for a college where the students are uniformly poor and must withstand the consequent economic pressures. At present, 80 percent of Berea’s first-year students return for their sophomore year, and 65 percent graduate within five years. Moreover, about 55 percent of its graduates earn advanced degrees.

And the college continues to attract high-level applicants. This fall’s incoming class has an average ACT score of 23 and 1,100 on the SATs. Sixty percent of entering freshmen ranked in the top 20 percent of their high school class, and the average grade point average of all first-year students is a “recalculated” 3.4—a figure used by Berea that excludes all non-academic courses. Pure GPAs were approximately 3.8.

Berea has also fared well in the world of college rankings. *U.S. News & World Report* rated Berea the best comprehensive



Most Berea students accept the strict campus rules, but about “20 percent struggle” with them, says junior Andrew Hartl.

college in the south in 2003, the eighth time the college was so rated. In these rankings, Berea generally has been applauded for the quality of its undergraduate teaching and its commitment to the welfare of its students.

Behind this success lies the weight of the college's \$800 million endowment and an improbable financial machine. Over the past two decades, Berea has emerged as one of the premier fundraising institutions in higher education. The size of its endowment puts it far ahead of many larger institutions, and the college currently is concluding a \$150 million campaign to augment the fund.

In addition, the college separately raises \$4 million a year to provide additional funds for ongoing operations. This stellar performance has been the hallmark of the presidency

of Shinn, a former religion scholar who now travels almost half the year on fundraising forays throughout the nation. During Shinn's presidency, which began in 1994, the endowment has grown by nearly half a billion dollars.

The growing wealth has allowed Berea to add new programs, increase salaries, and renovate

some of the college's 19th-century buildings with advanced electronics and maintenance systems. In addition, the college now equips its incoming students with laptop computers.

"Berea has had a remarkable recent history," said a former

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— Berea student Andrew Hartl



A student works in the college garden. Berea students pay no tuition but work ten to 15 hours a week in "labor positions."

higher education official in Kentucky who asked not to be identified. "The college has always been identified with the poor, but the fact is that Berea is not a poor institution anymore. They have joined the haves and departed from the have-nots."

Shinn and other college officials acknowledge their success, but they rigorously dispute the notion that Berea has arrived at fat city. First and foremost, they argue that Berea's endowment—as opposed to those of other colleges—is used largely to pay for the free tuition program.

"We refer to the endowment as the tuition fund, and that's what it is," said Shinn. "When other colleges charge tuition, they can use their endowment income to hire new faculty, to construct new buildings, or whatever else. We cannot. The great

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WHEN NATIONAL CROSSTALK visited Berea College in 2004, we reported that the college was engaged in a campaign to augment its \$800 million endowment by \$150 million. "That's all over—our endowment is not what it was," said Communications Manager Jay Buckner. "It is now more than a billion dollars."

Buckner hastened to add that the fund is dedicated to a very specific purpose. "We have a pretty conservative policy about how to spend that money," he said. "This is very expensive. We're providing free education to 1,500 students."

Berea's enrollment has not changed, although the college is turning away more applicants than before. "Our enrollment has been capped at 1,500," Buckner explained. "Large enrollments don't help our bottom line at all, since we do not charge tuition."

There have been some significant renovation projects in recent years, including some geared toward giving the campus a smaller "ecological footprint." For instance, many of the buildings now have systems to collect rainwater. "It hits the roof and drains into a cistern," Buckner said. "That water is then reused. We are doing a lot on the sustainability front."

Berea College, like the City of Berea, is still "dry" with regard to

alcohol, although there is currently a resolution to make the city "moist," which would allow the sale and consumption of alcohol under certain circumstances. It is not clear how this might affect campus policy.

First-year students still receive free laptop computers, and they get another one when they become juniors. The students still work in a "labor position" ten to 15 hours per week, although it is a common misconception to imagine that they all work in areas such as broomcraft or wrought iron. "Here in the Public Relations office, for instance, I've got seven students working for me, doing everything from press releases to professional quality videos," Buckner explained.

Although Berea's endowment has grown, costs have increased as well. The college now spends more than \$23,000 per student, per year. So, according to Buckner, fundraising continues apace. "It's still full steam ahead," he said.

—Todd Sallo

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majority of our endowment income goes back to the students, and that single element makes our financial condition very different from most other colleges.”

This year, Berea will spend about \$22,000 for each student at the college. As a comparison, Shinn notes that colleges such as Bowdoin or Swarthmore spend between \$45,000 and \$65,000 per student per year while charging approximately \$35,000 for tuition.

“The free tuition program means that we can’t spend as much as these other colleges,” he said. “It means that our salaries are not as high as some others, that our faculty members teach more classes. People always ask, ‘Why not charge tuition and then you can have what these other colleges have?’ The answer is simple. We have a passion about serving these bright, capable students who otherwise could not afford a quality education. If we charged tuition, Berea would no longer be Berea.”

The policy of admitting only low-income students (this year the maximum allowable income for a family of three is \$47,000, and the college trustees are considering a proposal to lower it still further), and encouraging students into a life of public service rather than, say, investment banking, has created other financial obstacles for the college. Namely, it has eliminated the class of wealthy alumni that constitutes the primary source of donations for most colleges.

What’s worse, if a Berea alum does become wealthy, or even comfortably middle-class, his or her children cannot attend Berea. The family’s income will make them ineligible.

“Let’s say the circumstances force us to be creative,” said Ron Smith, vice president for finance. “We raise money from people we call ‘friends of Berea,’ people who are not alumni but relate to the story of Berea. We find that many people will connect with the mission of the college, and we look for those people constantly.”

The creative fundraising has led Berea to employ some unorthodox methods, at least for a college. Direct mail is used frequently. The college purchases lists of likely supporters and also develops lists of its own. Next to the campus, for example, the college operates a number of retail craft stores and even a hotel—the Boone Tavern Hotel, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places—and regularly harvests names and addresses of customers at those establishments.

Smith tells the story of a mysterious \$7 million bequest that came to the college from the estate of a couple from Iowa. No one could figure out why. Eventually, college officials discovered that the couple had stayed at the Boone Tavern Hotel several years earlier. It was the only connection they ever found between the couple and the college.

Bill Laramee, vice president for alumni and college relations, said Berea almost certainly will succeed in reaching its most recent \$150 million fundraising goal. “In this campaign, the largest gift was \$1.5 million,” he said. “We’re told there is no way we should raise \$150 million with only one gift of \$1.5 million, but we will do it. We do it by collecting many, many smaller donations.”



Berea College “is a trust for people of the region,” says Academic Provost Dave Porter. “When you come here, you just get caught up in the whole idea of the place.”

Smith offers one more reason for the impressive size of Berea’s endowment. “It comes from discipline,” he said. “When we raise money for the endowment, it stays in the endowment. We don’t spend it on a nice new building or something like that. We invest the money and use the income to provide a quality education.”

As for the future, Berea is likely to remain much the same as today, except more so. On the wall of virtually every administrator’s office at the college hangs a framed copy of the Great Commitments. At Berea these commitments are studied, like the Torah in a synagogue, for guidance in all decisions.

For example, some administrators expressed concerns in recent years that the college’s commitment to African American students had slipped below the level implied in the Great Commitments. Extensive discussions ensued, and a decision was made to rectify the situation. This fall the percentage of African Americans in the freshman class will be double that of previous years—about 25 percent.

Joe Bagnoli, associate provost for enrollment management, noted that the African American population in Appalachia amounts to only three percent. “So our student population already had a higher percentage of African Americans than the region we serve,” he said. “But that wasn’t the point. The college had made an early commitment to an interracial community on campus, and we felt we had strayed somewhat from that principle. So now we are returning to it.”

Otherwise, Berea likely will retain its timeless quality. This is not a campus where parking garages and bio-labs pop up overnight. The outside world of sharp elbows and upscale striving hardly seems to intrude, and most here seem to like it that way.

“I want it to stay just the way it is,” said Jami Garth, the junior. “Most of us are from small towns, not the big city, and Berea is the kind of place we need. When I graduate, I will think of Berea still being here, helping other kids the way it helped me.” ♦

Robert A. Jones is a former reporter and columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*.

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