“Plain Living”

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

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.

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

“Sometimes I think of it as the Berea bubble, a protected world that has its own rules.”
—Berea student Andrew Hartl

Berea's enrollment of 1,500 students has not changed, although the college is turning away more applicants than before.
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.”

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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.”

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