

Affiliated Glory

by Theodore Plantinga

Many people in our society are convinced that bigger is better. This is one of the reasons why people tend to prefer large universities and colleges over smaller ones. It is assumed that a large college will have a better faculty; it will have more good professors.

When I listen to such arguments, I sometimes wonder whether a large university would be twice as good if it doubled in size and had twice as many professors. Of course one might reply that the quality of the faculty would probably be watered down, so to speak, in any rapid expansion. But suppose two large universities merged and became one: would the new, combined university be *twice as good* as the formerly distinct universities were separately?

I think about such matters from time to time because I teach in a small college and therefore need to make the case for the advantages of smallness. Thus I sometimes find myself asking: "Granted that there are many distinguished profs at University X or College Y, do the students who enroll there for an undergraduate degree actually take courses with them and get to know them and benefit from having such profs mark their exams and papers?" The answer may well be: Probably not. It is no secret that much of the teaching, and especially the marking, is done by lesser lights. I, too, started out marking student papers and teaching courses at such a university, namely, Toronto, where I was working toward a Ph.D. in philosophy at the time.

But even if graduate students do much of the teaching at a large, well-known university, there is a kind of reflected glory to be caught on the big campus every now and then. Or, if the glory is not caught, perhaps we should think of ourselves as basking in its availability. Perhaps you have encountered someone who reports proudly that he was at Princeton when Einstein was there. Sometimes such a person may be asked, "Did you take a course with him?" The answer is no, for Einstein was not there to teach. Then may come the question: "Did you know him, or meet him?" Again the answer is no, but the former Princetonian proceeds to say, "I did see him walking across the campus every now and then, with those famous mismatched socks. Someone would point him

out, almost in a whisper. He was a legend." And so the former Princetonian basks in the reflected glory of Albert Einstein.

This notion of reflected glory also gets mentioned in debates about life in the big city as opposed to the small town. I remember an episode of the Mary Tyler Moore show many years ago in which this point was nicely made. Mary and her best friend Rhoda lived in Minneapolis -- no small town, admittedly, but it's not the Big Apple either. Rhoda was originally from New York City, and in one episode she made a short trip to see the folks back home. She returned to Minneapolis excited and told Mary how wonderful it was to be back in New York, with the opera at hand and the great art museums, and so forth. Mary asked her whether she had attended the opera while she was there. No, Rhoda responded, but just knowing it was there, that she could go if she chose to, gave her a special feeling. At this point the studio audience laughed, and I laughed too. It seems a bit silly to make a big thing of the opera being in your city but then not to go to it.

Yet life in the big university can be like that. "There were some world-renowned professors on the faculty, and I could have taken a course with them if I had wanted to. But I didn't. Still, it was a good feeling to know that it would have been possible."

Small colleges like Redeemer may or may not have profs known the world over, but whatever else can be said of their professors, they do actually teach the students on campus and mark their work. A visitor to our campus recently reported that he had asked a student he met in the weight room what she liked about the college. What drew her to Redeemer and held her here? Her answer was simple: that her professors *knew* her and *cared about* her. Of this she was certain. I could not help thinking about the benefits of small-town life when I heard the remark.

In the battle between the large and small institutions, the smaller ones need to do more to emphasize and highlight the virtues of the small-town atmosphere they offer. They do make the case that education in small institutions seems to work well: the graduates of such schools perform well in other settings. Likewise, many very successful people grew up in small towns. (I did not, by the way; I spent the years between age 4 and age 17 in Winnipeg and attended large public schools. I came to my current convictions regarding the advantages of small institutions after I started teaching at Redeemer.)

In arguing for those advantages, I do not wish to denigrate the cultural opportunities of a major city like New York. Neither would I dismiss the value

of having distinguished culture-formers on campus even if the average undergraduate student never has any contact with them. I can well understand how some distinguished members of the university community help set the tone for the educational enterprise; indeed, by their very presence they are able to add dignity to everyday campus affairs.

I can also appreciate the desire people have for affiliated glory, as I would like to call it. Who can resist pointing out, every now and then, that certain distinguished folks (whether artists, athletes or political leaders) came from one's home town? A college is also a home town of sorts. By being a graduate and alumnus of Calvin College, I share in the reflected glory of some distinguished alumni whom I have never met. (My favorite comic novelist, Peter De Vries, is a Calvin graduate, and I take pride in being linked to him through our common alma mater.) Their accomplishments can be a source of satisfaction for me. In our age of networking, we like to think that we are somehow connected to important, and even famous, people. This is part of what a distinguished university with a long history has to sell to prospective students. William James, who both studied and taught at Harvard University, is long dead and gone, but Harvard students can still take pride in him and derive some satisfaction from going into a building named him in his honor.

At the very outset, when Redeemer College had no students and could offer virtually nothing in the way of affiliated or reflected glory, a hardy band of 97 pioneers, as we called them in those days, signed up for instruction. What were they after? What motivated them? I do believe they chose wisely, and I recall that back in 1982, when the college opened, we often talked about the choice they had made. In the recruitment process, they had been told that Redeemer's profs would be there for them in a very special way during that first year: there would be no upper-class courses or students to draw attention away from the first-year scene. I believe we did some of our best teaching during that very first year.

In the process of expanding to a full four-year program, we have become less fixated on first-year courses and students. But our students continue to receive the sustained attention of the profs actually listed in the calendar. We have on occasion indulged in the luxury of having an academic on campus who did little or no teaching but elevated the tone of the place by his presence, but on the whole we have stuck to our original promise of concentrating on undergraduate education.

The marking of student work is an important business here, and it is central to our operations. (At this point I must speak for myself alone; I am not familiar

with the work habits of all my Redeemer colleagues.) It is my practice to do all my own marking of student essays, tests, exams, and term papers. Only for one short period of time did I consent to have a student assistant do some of this work for me. But I was not satisfied with the result, and so I returned to the old ways. To mark a lot of student work is to have a lot of contact with one's students.

In debates about class size, I sometimes hear it said that if you can lecture to 30 students, then also to 60, and just as well to 120, or even 240, provided the classroom is adequate and a sound system is available to amplify your voice. In one sense this is true, but for me the teaching process includes the marking of student work. I also need to have some contact with the students outside of class. Part of that contact revolves around term papers in progress. I have such discussion not just with my own students but also with students writing term papers for other courses; indeed, just a few moments ago I was interrupted, while composing this essay, by a student who had come to my office for help with a paper for someone else's course. In the small-town atmosphere that prevails here at Redeemer, students feel free to do this sort of thing. And so it may be fair to say that I can lecture to 240 at a time, but I would have a lot of difficulty relating to so many students in the way I would like, the way that builds memorable relationships.

The small town thesis regarding colleges like Redeemer has a bearing on a current campus issue, namely, the "wired campus" proposal. (In case you are a "stranger in Jerusalem," let me inform you that the "wired campus" is basically a plan to greatly enhance computer-based communication and internet access all over campus and thereby to maximize the potential of computers for tertiary education. For more on the subject, see my "End-of-Term Report" elsewhere in this issue.)

One of the questions we sometimes hear from the Redeemer opponents of the "wired campus" plan is: "Why haven't the big schools done this already if it's such a great idea?" One reason, I suppose, is that their sheer size already makes it hard for them to maintain a sense of community on campus; to encourage heavy use of computer-based communication would mean becoming still more impersonal. It seems to me that small schools like Redeemer are in a good position to make extensive use of computers for teaching and learning and communicating precisely because their small size means that people will still have ample opportunity for face-to-face contact.

Note that I did not say: *personal* contact. I believe that e-mail exchanges count as personal contact, provided that the parties to the exchange have other

opportunities to meet and to get to know one another on a face-to-face basis. In this regard I speak from experience. We already make considerable use of e-mail, and I do not find that it is detracting from my ability to get to know students on a personal basis. I do admit that I do not get to hear their voices as much as I would like, for some of the classes are of such a size that many students never speak up. But I do see their work, including handwritten essays and tests. And I have many opportunities for face-to-face conversation in the halls, the library and my office.

I believe it is the small college that can implement the "wired campus" idea without running the risk of selling its soul. Colleges like Redeemer need to do more to get this idea across. Life in a small town can be very fulfilling, and I suspect it is even richer in the 1990s now that small-town residents have the chance to connect to a wider world on a daily basis via the internet and e-mail. The same point can be made with regard to students in a small college.

But there is still that business of reflected and affiliated glory to be borne in mind. Even if you do not go to the opera while you are in New York, it feels good to know that you could if you wanted to. Somehow you feel connected to culture while you're there. Can the small college provide that same feeling of connectedness?

It is best to begin by admitting that there will always be a gap between the small institution and the large one when it comes to allowing people to feel part of something much greater and grander than themselves. But since the reflected and affiliated glory for which many people yearn is largely a matter of enjoying the worth and accomplishments of *others*, there are some possibilities to be explored. Here I would refer readers to my related article "Taking and Giving Credit," which also appears in this issue. Just as an institution can enhance its perceived worth by sponsoring or making a connection with important and respected work done by others in the form of teaching or research or publication, so students at such an institution can get such benefit and can come to feel that they are a part of something larger. It's a bit like being associated with a minuscule denomination as opposed to a somewhat larger one. In a larger denomination one has more of a feeling of being connected officially to worthy work undertaken in Christ's name in many parts of the world.

My thesis is that the small college need not conceive of itself mainly as akin to a minuscule denomination. Through networks and consortia and co-sponsorship arrangements, it can connect students to larger projects and can also encourage them to go off-campus for a semester or two in order to be intimately involved with some of those projects, perhaps deepening their

acquaintance with a foreign language in the process. Redeemer College already does a good deal of this sort of thing.

These possibilities bring me back to the "wired campus." One of the benefits of making extensive use of computers for communication is that one's sense of being part of a larger enterprise that includes faraway locations is enhanced. To be wired is to accept Marshall McLuhan's dictum that we now live in a global village and to welcome the new challenges and responsibilities that go with such status. The wired Christian student can be concerned about people all over the world and in touch with developments on every continent while yet remaining firmly rooted in a local learning community. I see some wonderful educational opportunities here.