

Vision for Schreiner

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A successful media executive recently told me, “I used to think that my corporation had a right to be in business. After all, it had operated honorably for 80 years with solid results, made money and provided a valuable service. But no more.” No, the digital age and shifting advertising patterns have demonstrated that print journalism has been subsisting on a business model no longer sustainable. Right or wrong, it has awoken to the fact that the world has changed.

Higher education, more particularly, higher education as provided by the smaller residential college, has existed for many years, operating honorably and providing a valuable service. Will it too become a victim of the digital age and shifting economics? Will an unsustainable financial model make private college education fade away, with the exception of a comparatively few well-endowed, well-established institutions? If we blindly assume that we can continue unchanged, many of us may find ourselves going the way of the *Rocky Mountain News* or *Seattle Post Intelligencer*. Or Waldorf and Columbia Southern Colleges, both recently bought out by online for-profit firms. Our instincts tell us this is not fair. After all, colleges are not Enrons. They are on the side of the angels. But at some point, even the best arguments may become irrelevant. Our future must take into account that a changing world will impact American colleges just as surely as it has communications, health services and every other profession.

Those thoughts have occupied my mind in preparing to speak with you about my vision of Schreiner’s future. Why take that subject up now? The awareness that as FY 09 closes I have been at Schreiner for a decade is one reason. A natural introspection we have all felt in these months of recession contributed. And I have heard a couple of casual suggestions that some folks are not clear just what the president expects of Schreiner. Envisioning an institution’s future is most certainly an essential activity. Envisioning an institution’s future is also a collective enterprise. Our bylaws’ “Philosophy of Governance” assigns to the administration responsibility for “leading in planning,” but both the governing board and faculty truly share this task with administration, as has been evident in past strategic planning processes. As two eyes are required to create a parallax, permitting us to gauge depth in vision, so multiple perspectives are needed to articulate an authoritative institutional vision.

Nevertheless, a governing board rightly expects the president to continuously articulate the guiding vision of the university before all constituencies, demonstrating its relevance, testing its elements against experience and challenging those responsible for its accomplishment. My sense of Schreiner’s future is fueled by two present realities, which is where I would like to begin:

- First, I believe that **Schreiner has a distinctive heritage, whose continuation is critical to its future.** The relationship between faculty and students, the commitment to what we nowadays call “value added” education, a dogged persistence of the whole campus community in the face of adversity—these are elements of that heritage. I believe that this institution cares more about its students and lives out that caring more authentically than our peer institutions commonly do. I believe that. And we have captured that heritage in the motto “Learning by Heart.” NOTE: a friend with whom I shared these remarks

suggested that another key element of that heritage is our willingness to change and adapt, and I heartily agree with that observation.

- Second, through the efforts of Sam Junkin and Karen Kilgore in building the Schreiner Oaks Society and through our good fortune in attracting substantial support from Bob Trull, Ken Cailloux and a number of other generous donors, **we have enjoyed the resources to create possibilities that previous generations could only dream of.** These are assets we must not squander.

Even with these assets, the challenges are plentiful. We still battle limited name recognition. Our academic programs are still very much in the process of achieving their potential. Simply balancing the budget each year requires constant vigilance. A modest endowment forces us to rely too greatly on tuition, and our student demographic does not generate the tuition dollars per enrollee that we would wish. But those two basic truths are more fundamental than all the challenges named: **for years Schreiner has understood its learning mission, and it has attracted sufficient support to provide a foundation for extending that tradition into the future.**

Beyond these factors specific to Schreiner, there are general, interrelated circumstances which we must address in shaping, with God's grace, our future. You will recognize them, but let me name some of the more prominent:

- **College cost:** The current economic **recession will hasten our need to deal with critical cost issues.** We are, I believe, facing a watershed in college financing, and practices of recent years will not be viable in the future. Even with the growth in student aid, tuition costs have risen faster than average family income. Federal and state aid has declined when inflation is factored in and is likely to continue to do so. These facts will present an increasingly difficult challenge to fiscal management.
- **Competition:** There will remain a **demand for the kind of individualized learning** that has been Schreiner's tradition, but the potential providers will be **in even more intense competition** for a decreasing percentage of the overall college-going pool, and those with small endowments, modest selectivity and lesser name recognition will be the most vulnerable. Successful colleges must **assess** clearly their **strengths and core values** and hold firmly to these **while remaining flexible** and responsive to opportunities that change brings.
- **Learning delivery:** One form of competition comes from online learning, particularly in the for-profit sector, and the broad potential for technology to enhance how teaching and learning occur. We either learn how to incorporate the digital world into our learning model effectively, or we will find ourselves falling further behind and more out of touch with the world of "digital natives" we seek to educate.
- **Institutional mission:** There will be no single winner in the perennial "job training v. liberal learning" debate: we will continue to see **strong validation of the importance of broad learning** which develops critical and creative thinking, effective communication, and the ability to make sense of a complex world, but that will not erase the pressure **to connect our graduates to graduate/professional study or to the world of work.**
- **Demonstrating success:** The previous point leads to a familiar fact: higher education, like other enterprises, is under scrutiny and expected to demonstrate its benefits. Whether we encounter this issue in terms of SACS expectations for a QEP, new federal reporting mandates, our own quest for improved retention and

graduation data, or selecting the best instruments for measuring student learning, meaningful assessment will remain a central fact of our existence.

Let me address my sense of Schreiner's future in light of these challenges. **How will this institution change as it addresses the challenges of tuition cost, educational delivery, documentation of value and successful outcomes, competition for students, and retaining core values and sense of mission while remaining flexible to change?** Let us consider the critical elements of our students, our faculty, our programs, our facilities, our finances and our character or soul in the coming years.

Students: As our current plan envisions, I see Schreiner growing to the desired 1200-1300 size and leveling off. Our attention then will be focused on doing all we can to attract students more likely to remain, persist and graduate. That will, for example, mean we must appeal to more students who are well prepared for college intellectually and emotionally. It will mean attracting more whose families are better able to pay college costs. But it also means recruiting more who value what Schreiner has to offer, regardless of their income or their SAT, including a larger contingent of international students. Growth in community college transfers who complete their degrees at Schreiner will be another consequence of economic realities. But attracting transfers who earn degrees with us will also demonstrate that Schreiner has moved from being a "starter" location to a "completer" site. Within a few years, I expect Schreiner to become officially a Hispanic-serving institution, with a minimum of 25% Hispanic students. Insofar as Schreiner grows beyond the 1200-1300 range, I anticipate that it would do so through graduate programs, programs delivered largely at alternative times and sites or through the Internet. Such programs offer ways to increase revenue without a corresponding growth in the physical plant and, hence, increased debt.

Faculty: I anticipate that our faculty will grow commensurate with our student body. A 13 to 1 student faculty ratio is not a magical figure incapable of bending, but it is a sign of our commitment to close learning relationships as a core value. Likewise, I anticipate retaining a mix of full- and part-time, tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty. The ways in which colleges will seek to balance professional security with flexibility will touch Schreiner as they will all institutions, though my crystal ball is cloudy beyond that statement. However, our core undergraduate commitment will remain closely tied to instructors whose full professional life is engaged in their work with our students. Instruction will continue to be our priority, but I anticipate we will devise varying models for faculty work-loads capitalizing on their strengths and their programs' needs. I expect continued growth of the use of technology and of active learning through internships and research. And I anticipate that we will see increasing recognition of our faculty beyond the local region based on their varied accomplishments.

Programs: Academic programs will expand on both undergraduate and graduate levels. A handful of them will have exceptional reputations. Schreiner's academic programs will become increasingly distinctive, lending themselves well to promotion. We will find that the current emphasis on professionally oriented majors, from marketing to teacher preparation to sport management to graphic design to the anticipated nursing degree, will continue to grow. Does this mean Schreiner will cease to be a liberal arts institution? One of our trustees, during the strategic planning process prior to the most recent one, observed that he thought Schreiner was more accurately described as a "liberal arts-based institution." I am increasingly persuaded of the wisdom of that statement. Schreiner will be decidedly liberal arts in its insistence on a strong core curriculum,

including an interdisciplinary emphasis, for all its students. It will be decidedly liberal arts in its holistic educational goals and co-curricular programs designed in a residential setting to hone students' leadership skills, the role of faith in their lives and the importance of giving back through volunteer service. I expect our student athlete percentage to grow, primarily through the expansion of junior varsity programs permitting greater numbers to participate. So we must not look for Schreiner to take the course of the "no-frills" program of study that strips the institution's responsibility to coursework and degrees. But I believe our growth and ability to attract more and better students who persist to graduation lies primarily in the continued development and promotion of strong professional or pre-professional degree programs, or, as the Carnegie Foundation classifies us, as "baccalaureate diverse."

Finances: Schreiner has been conservative in its tuition increases through the years. When you read figures for state, regional or national increases in college tuition costs, you can count on the fact that these are larger, sometimes much larger, than Schreiner's corresponding numbers. And we continue to direct 40% of any tuition sticker price increase into student aid, a discount percentage that puts us in the mainstream for our type of institution. Regrettably, however, only 1/3 of that discount is supported by actual dollars from gifts or endowment returns; the rest is on paper only. How American private higher education got itself into its current pricing model is too complex a subject for discussion today, but that system is one of the features that I predict will change in coming years. William Durden, president of Dickinson College, speaks for many when he observes, "I think we've reached the point of popular revolt" over college tuition, and I tend to agree with him, even though Dickinson's tuition is twice that of Schreiner. We would be foolish to persist with a model until it breaks down on us. But what are our alternatives? I have no single answer, but I believe that the answers include at least these actions occupying our attention in the future:

- We **shape our freshman classes**, as described above, so that tuition discount is lower, first year retention is higher, and more students graduate in four or five years. Admission cost per student drops. Satisfaction and reputation increase. As we are better known, we will be able to move to a more mature financial aid philosophy which enables us to ratchet down total discount, with financial aid focusing less on merit to attract students and more on need. Easy to say. Hard to accomplish. Necessary for our long term future.
- We **build our endowment** so that it can support a larger percentage of the operating budget, taking pressure off tuition. The same is true for our annual gifts and grants, a task that has proven to be a tough challenge.
- We truly **claim the benefits of a mixed system of program delivery**, employing online learning in ways that promote efficiency. We can—we must—accomplish that goal without undermining our close relationships with students. In fact, technology will be a major factor in helping us afford to retain those small class sizes and resulting relationships, as our board chair has pointed out. Our growth should include suitable graduate programs whose audiences are more amenable to online delivery.
- We **target every possible way to facilitate graduating on time** and earlier. A college whose students can earn a degree in four years, or three-and-a-half or even three, is a productive institution, and it does not have to injure its quality of instruction in the process. We have a handful of students graduating in less than four years now, and they are among our most involved and capable.

- We **select new programs carefully for their marketability and our ability to provide them well**. And we monitor current programs with an eye to how they earn their way. This does not mean that programs can all be evaluated by the same set of criteria—a music program and a psychology program are different animals-- but there are disciplinary standards that can be employed to tell us which of our programs are best reaching their potential. But we must introduce new majors with careful attention to their missional fit, our ability to provide quality and their impact on resources.
- We **target our hires and expenditures with care**. Schreiner runs lean, very lean. We will run lean in the future. This means we will have to be very smart in approving new positions, in allocating responsibilities and in increasing operating budgets. Continued cross-training of staff and enhancement of our volunteer program will also contribute to this goal. And to retain the increase in productivity that we have accomplished in departments across campus, we must pay equitably.
- We **add revenue sources**. One source with major potential is the federal grant, from Title III institutional support (or Title V, when we are Hispanic-serving) to NEH humanities grants or NSF grants supporting the sciences. Tapping these resources requires investment in time and energy, but they can contribute greatly to institutional quality. We will also need to continue to use our facilities well in the summer season to supplement revenue. Our Hill Country location and quality facilities should prove attractive to professional groups seeking training locations. And our loop properties, when the economy is healthier, are an essential element of this plan, because they have the potential to materially build our endowment and its contribution to operations.

In addition to these steps to wean ourselves from the treadmill of continuously, predictably increasing tuition, we have a more fundamental fiscal goal that in the coming years we must achieve. For too long, as our CFO has pointed out, our goal has been “getting by” by finishing the year in the black. It was a necessary first step, and it has not been easy. But in the coming years, we need to replace that annual struggle with a more robust goal of sustained financial health. This includes such changes as raising annual fund dollars for the **following** rather than the **current** year, so that we are no longer at the mercy of eleventh hour heroics to balance our budget. Another such practice is to produce an adequate reserve annually, enabling us to attain sufficient liquidity to weather economic bumps. This change does not entail suddenly becoming wealthy, but it does entail taking a step above our comparatively austere current level of operations. But I see that step toward maturity occurring in the near future.

Physical Plant: Our Mountaineer Center project preoccupies our current perspective, and we must complete it. But beyond it we have longstanding commitments to campus spiritual life through a chapel and to the performing arts through enhancement of music and theatre facilities. And additional upper-level student housing will be required for us to serve the targeted student population. In addition, we must continue the long term commitment to deferred maintenance and shaping of the overall appeal of what is an attractive campus.

Soul: Attentive to good management and fiscal operations as this report has been, Schreiner is more than a business operation. It has a character and a soul, and if we do not nurture those, our other efforts will be wasted. That soul is bound up with the trait of caring I mentioned at the start, something that eludes quantifying, but remains essential.

As we prosper, we must resist the temptation to say to ourselves, “Our buildings and programs and reputation can do the job now. We don’t have to fret ourselves to maintain that distinctive Schreiner community spirit and readiness to solve problems.” I also envision Schreiner’s character in the future as continuing to be expressed through its church-relatedness. Although our student body and our faculty and staff are likely to become more rather than less diverse, we should remain an institution whose mission is based on the premise that all truth is God’s truth to be explored in a setting that respects and provides a central place for the spirit, ecumenical in nature and interpreted through values consistent with the Christian Reformed tradition. That tradition, I would remind us, expresses itself as “always reformed, always reforming.” As the church catholic is changing, so the specifics of our commitment will also evolve, but it should remain central to what we expect of ourselves. Over forty years ago, Schreiner’s board had the opportunity to dissolve the institution’s ties to the church and to pursue a secular identity as a community college. It resisted that temptation, although at the time, the appeal was strong. I envision that this current board and its evolving successors will also embrace the concept of Schreiner as a faith-related institution whose mission and activities convey the conviction that its graduates go into the world better equipped “to live purposeful, humane and productive lives in their work, faith groups, families and communities.”

This goal, though it has waxed and waned through the years, has always been associated with the institution’s passion for transformative learning. These are big words, big concepts, but anyone who knows Schreiner’s history knows they have substance. I believe they will continue to. “Learning by Heart” was not a clever phrase coined by a huckster, but a powerful motto developed from close observation of the institution.