TURNING UP
THE VOLUME

At Gallaudet, a longtime haven for deaf students, more undergrads are products of a hearing world without the need for sign language

by Daniel de Vise

be quiet campus of Gallau- det University in Northeast Washington was always a place where students could speak the unspoken lan- guage of deaf America and be under- stood.

That is no longer so true. For the first time in living memory, signifi- cant numbers of freshmen at the nation’s premiere university for the deaf and hard of hearing arrive lack- ing proficiency in American Sign Language and experience with deaf culture.

Rising numbers of Gallaudet stu- dents are products of a hearing world. The share of undergraduates who come from mainstream public schools rather than residential schools for the deaf has grown from 33 percent to 44 percent in four years.

The number of students with cochle- ar implants, which stimulate the au- ditory nerve to create a sense of sound, has doubled to 102 since 2005.

Gallaudet is also enrolling more hearing students in programs to train sign-language interpreters and teachers. Together, the changes are redefining a school that sits at the very epicenter of American deaf soci- ety.

A new generation of deaf and hard- of-hearing children can study where they please. Changes in federal law have rerouted deaf students from residential deaf schools to main- stream public campuses, which are now obliged to serve them. Cochlear implants are gaining acceptance and changing the nature of deafness, al- though the deaf community remains divided on their use.

The influx of “non-signers,” who can hear and speak or who read lips or text, may be necessary for Gallaudet’s survival. Yet it has sparked passionate debate on whether the university is becoming “hearing-ized” and wheth- er deaf culture is slipping away.

“We want a signing environment, because how often do deaf students get that environment?” said Dylan Hinks, 20, student body president.

“This is the place where I want to have comfort and ease in my communica- tion.”

GALLAUDET CONTINUED ON A16

During lunch at Gallaudet University in the District last week, students use sign language to communicate.
There was talk of a vanishing deaf culture at Gallaudet five years ago, when protesters shut down the campus over the appointment of then-Provost Jane Fernandes as president. More than 100 demonstrators were arrested. Trustees eventually revoked the appointment.

The consensus on campus today is that the protest centered on the propriety of the presidential search. Protesters said outgoing President I. King Jordan hijacked the proceedings to elevate Fernandes, his protege.

But Fernandes portrayed herself as a casualty in a deaf-culture war. Born deaf, Fernandes grew up speaking English and learned to sign as an adult. She claimed that, to students advocating the primacy of sign language, she was “not deaf enough.”

Fernandes now serves as provost of the University of North Carolina at Asheville. In an e-mail interview, she said, “There remains entrenched at Gallaudet a strong deaf culture that perpetuates a very narrow way to live as a deaf person.”

One year during her tenure as provost, Fernandes said, upperclass students hazed freshmen, ordering them not to speak in any of their classes so that they were forced to sign.

“I had freshmen in tears, telling me that Gallaudet recruited them under false pretenses, because they were told Gallaudet welcomed all deaf students,” she said.

After Fernandes’s ouster, accreditors from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education put Gallaudet on probation. The censure dealt a stunning blow to Gallaudet’s academic currency. Some feared that the school would close.

Accreditors found academic standards virtually nonexistent. The university admitted students who could not graduate and employed professors who could barely sign. The institution was not keeping pace with the changing deaf world. Undergraduate enrollment had slipped from 1,274 in fall 2005 to 1,040 in 2007.

The Gallaudet of today scarcely resembles that fractured campus. President T. Alan Hurwitz, recruited away from a rival deaf school within New York’s Rochester Institute of Technology, has raised standards and largely united Gallaudet around a new vision of bilingual deaf education.

“People are beginning to realize that American Sign Language is a value added,” said Hurwitz, who has been deaf since birth and is a fluent signer.

Hurwitz was so wary of Gallaudet’s history that he turned down the search committee several times before consenting to an interview. On the day he was introduced as president, Hurwitz said, “We didn’t know if everyone was going to stand up and protest.”

Twenty months into his administration, there is little to protest. Gallaudet’s graduation rate has risen from 25 percent to 41 percent in four years. The share of graduates who continue their education has nearly doubled to 63 percent. The school has raised admission requirements, and average ACT reading scores for entering freshmen are at their highest point in recent history. Undergraduate enrollment has rebounded to 1,118.

Hurwitz has calmed the culture wars with a schoolwide policy that affirms the primacy of sign language but also posits Gallaudet as a bilingual school.

Professors now must prove mastery of sign language to get tenure. Students, too, are expected to sign. In a campuswide e-mail last fall, Hurwitz wrote: “Everyone on campus — no matter his or her signing level — should make every effort to communicate in sign language when in public areas on campus.”

But upholding that standard is increasingly difficult on a campus where nearly half of the freshmen now come from mainstream high schools and dozens arrive not knowing how to sign. To help them, university leaders last year created a six-week crash course for 46 new signers, an orientation to Gallaudet and to the deaf culture.
Students walk near the Merrill Learning Center at Gallaudet. The influx of "non-signers" — who can hear and speak or who read lips or text — has sparked a debate over the school's deaf culture.
Love it or hate it, colleges learn to live with U.S. News guide
BY DANIEL DE VISE

Bob Morse is a wonk, a number-cruncher who works in a money office at a struggling publishing company in Georgetown. He’s also one of the most powerful wonks in the country, wielding the kind of power that elicits enmity and causes anguish.

Morse runs U.S. News & World Report’s annual Best Colleges guide, the oldest and best-known publication to rank America’s premier colleges.

The annual release of the rankings, set for Sept. 13 this year, is a marquee event in higher education. Some call it the academic equivalent of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue.

Colleges broadcast U.S. News rankings on Web sites and in news releases, tout them in recruiting pamphlets, alumni magazines and “Dear Colleague” letters, and embed them on T-shirts and billboards. Institutions build strategic plans around the rankings and reward presidents when their schools ascend.

“U.S. News doesn’t advertise the rankings,” Morse said in a recent interview at the publication’s headquarters. “The schools advertise for us.”

Morse, 53, has endured for two decades as chief arbiter of higher education.

He can make a credible claim to academic aristocracy without a berth on the first page of a U.S. News story. He is a college what Robert Parker is to wine.

College presidents dismiss the rankings. They line up behind conference microphones to denounce Morse and his methods.

Privately, college administrators fret about rankings and ponder how to move up. Presidents and deans telephone Morse several times a week to ask “why the rank they way they do.” Morse said. He usually takes the calls himself.

At industry meetups, Morse answers his critics in a halting monotone. He speaks with a mild stutter.

“He’s a man of his word, and he’s very, very effective,” said Ted Palm, a fellow traveler in the college-guide business, who rates colleges but does not rank them.

“He just wants to do his job, and he does it.”

The rankings have changed the way colleges do business. Critics see their influence every time an institution presses alumni for nominal donations, coaxes non-remittal students to apply or raises the SAT score required for admission.

“Twenty-eight years after the release of the first U.S. News lists, Morse and his publication dominate college rankings more than any other,” Morse said. “They’re the #1 game in the business and they play it, and it’s on its last legs.”

The rankingsshow the number of graduates at the time they leave college.

The rankings are used by college administrators to make decisions about admissions policies and to ensure that their institutions remain competitive.

The rankings also influence donors, who may be more likely to give to a school with a higher ranking.

For some years, Morse’s methods have faced criticism.

The rankings are based on data submitted by colleges and universities, which may not accurately reflect the schools’ performance.

The rankings also rely on subjective evaluations, which may not accurately reflect the quality of education provided.

The rankings do not take into account the diversity of students attending a college or the financial aid opportunities available.

The rankings do not consider the impact of a college on the local community or the opportunities for students to engage in extracurricular activities.

The rankings do not reflect the contributions of faculty members to society, research, or the arts.

The rankings do not consider the impact of a college on the environment or the community's well-being.

The rankings are based on a mathematical formula that is not transparent or widely understood.

The rankings do not consider the impact of a college on the local economy, such as the number of jobs created or the amount of revenue generated.

The rankings are based on data that may be outdated or inaccurate.

The rankings are based on data that may be manipulated or influenced by institutions.

The rankings are based on data that may reflect biases or stereotypes.

The rankings are based on data that may be subject to errors or mistakes.

The rankings are used as a means of comparison, but they may not be the best way to evaluate the quality of education provided.

The rankings are used to influence students’ decisions, but they may not be the best way to determine which college is the best fit for each student.

The rankings are used to influence policymakers, but they may not be the best way to evaluate the impact of higher education on society.

The rankings are used to influence employers, but they may not be the best way to evaluate the skills and knowledge of graduates.

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### Movement at the top

In the past 20 years, some elite colleges have risen or fallen significantly over time in the U.S. News rankings.

#### NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES

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<tr>
<th>Ranking Better</th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>2011</th>
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<td>Washington University, St. Louis</td>
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<td>Northwestern University</td>
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<td>Columbia University</td>
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#### Ranking worse:

| University of North Carolina    | 30   | 25   |
| University of Virginia          | 25   | 20   |
| University of California, Berkeley | 15  | 15   |
| Cornell University              | 10   | 5    |

#### LIBERAL ARTS SCHOOLS

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<td>Williams College</td>
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#### Ranking worse:

| Amherst College | 15   | 15   |
| Smith College   | 10   | 5    |
| Wellesley College | 5   | 5    |

Source: U.S. News & World Report
Little love for the 3-year degree

Accelerated college plan has its advantages, but students are in no hurry

BY DANIEL DE VINE

Lake Forest College in Illinois is among those institutions that are offering a three-year degree program, which is said to be a large-scale project in higher education. But there are many concerns about the impact on the students' experience in college.

Several institutions have launched three-year degrees in a flurry of activity triggered by the economic downturn that began in 2008. By now, at least 10 states, Ohio and Rhode Island, have instructed public colleges to offer accelerated degrees.

But students have not responded, and most three-year degree programs have flopped — a reminder, college leaders say, that students still regard college as an experience to be savored. Why rush the best four years of your life?

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a campus of 17,500 students, enrolled five students last year in its inaugural three-year degree program. The Fast Forward program at Manchester College in Indiana enrolled 20. The Degree in 3 program at nearby Ball State University served 26.

There are exceptions. A new three-year Global Scholars degree at American University in Washington, D.C. has been somewhat more popular, with 58 students expected to enroll this fall. A three-year program at Harvard College in Upstate New York served 47 students last year and expects about twice as many this fall. But even those programs serve a tiny percentage of the institutions’ students.

Katie Miller enrolled in the three-year degree program at Manchester, a liberal arts college southwest of Chicago. But once she arrived on campus in fall 2009, the rich palette of college life beckoned. She studied in Spain, London, Paris and France and signed up for course work outside her education major. She soon realized she would need more than three years to experience it all. She opted out of accelerated study.

“TI decided that you only have a certain amount of time to enjoy the college experience,” said Miller. “In four years, I went in as much of a hurry as I thought.”

Pluses, though few takers

Some scholars see the three-year degree as the next logical step in the evolution of American higher education. More students arrive at college with a stack of credits from Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams, allowing them to graduate sooner; even if the college didn’t have an accelerated program. College leaders are still looking to reverse the upward trend in sticker price, which at less private institutions tops $50,000 a year for tuition and living expenses.

Most colleges bow to the agrarian calendar and an arbitrary four-year pace for the bachelor’s degree, a schedule adopted by Harvard College in 1632 in accordance with British custom. (England long ago switched to a three-year degree.)

Compromising the bachelor’s degree into three years could be healthy for American colleges, advocates say, encouraging them to use buildings that would otherwise be empty during winter and summer breaks and to expand online study.

Three-year degrees have come and gone over the years, but the idea never took because “not enough schools are doing it,” said Stephen Trohnberg, president emeritus of George Washington University.

Lake Forest College in Illinois and Judson College in Alabama have offered three-year degrees since the 1960s. But they graduated 36 accelerated students in the past 12 years. Judson has had about 100 three-year graduates since 1956. Neither school has seen participation rise of late.

The recent proliferation of three-year degree has heightened interest in accelerated study among college freshmen. But enthusiasm tends to peter out.

“A lot of students are interested in it,” said Dave McPherson, executive vice president of Manchester College. “A small number of students sign up for it, and an even smaller number finish it.”

Lake Forest, in the Chicago suburbs, promotes its program as a money-saver for students and parents. “We just really don’t have any takers,” said Janet McCracken, dean of the faculty.

The three-year degree may not gain traction until it becomes standard in a large state university system, said Robert Zemsky, a higher-education scholar at the University of Pennsylvania. Initiatives in Ohio and Rhode Island have not borne fruit.

Or the accelerated BA may be subsumed within a more ambitious goal: accelerated graduate study. Several universities in the Washington region have introduced accelerated master’s and doctoral degree. Some schools combine those degrees with undergraduate study to deliver, say, a bachelor and master’s in four or five years, rather than the customary six.

Compressed schedules

Completing a bachelor’s degree in three years typically means missing 300 credit hours in three-quarters of the time. Accelerated programs often require students to take both intense winter terms or to complete coursework in summer online.

Some accept only students who completed college credits in high school.

There’s little wiggle room for students to change majors or add electives. Accelerated programs leave less time for athletics, clubs and social life. They also leave little time for employment, and that could be a problem for some of the students who would benefit most from a discounted education.

“If you try to do it in three years, your options are limited,” said Candace Peterson, a rising freshman from Phoenix who plans to enroll in the three-year program at American University.

Evaluators like the idea of accelerated study. But as a Global Scholar, she also wants to see the globe. In a three-year program, she might not have time.

“They say you can study abroad for a semester. But I want to study abroad for a full year.”

She’s not sure how that will work out,” she said.

The payoff from a three-year degree comes in year four, when, instead of paying for college, a student is free to draw income.

Mercedes Mandler, 21, graduated this spring from Manchester College with a three-year degree in physical education. She cobbled together credits from summer classes and internships, took a heavy course load, and transferred six credits from high school.

“I kind of sacrificed free time to hang out with friends,” she said. But she saved about $25,000 in college expenses, and now she’s free to hunt for a job as a school gym teacher.

At the flagship University of Massachusetts Amherst, 35 to 40 students a year finish degrees in three years. Provost James Storkes expects that number to rise to more than 100 under a new three-year degree option.

“It’s still a very small number,” he said.

(Abby Flender/Detroit Free Press)

Katie Miller, right, gives tours of Manchester College in Indiana. She enrolled in the three-year program but later opted out.
You’re in, but are you going? Check the merit aid.
Top students seeking best deals spur bidding wars among colleges

BY DANIEL DE VISE

Gillian Spolarich’s college search played out like a romantic triangle. She was set on American University. But the College of Charleston was set on her. The Southern sister sweetened its admission offer with a pledge of more than $30,000 in merit aid.

In the end, the high school senior from Silver Spring took the better offer from the second-choice school in South Carolina, placing price before prestige.

It is becoming a common post-recession scenario: Affluent applicants, shocked by college sticker prices and loan levy of debt, are choosing a school not because it is the first choice but because it is the best deal. Students are using their academic credentials to leverage generous merit awards from second- or third-choice schools looking to boost their own academic profiles. Colleges are responding with record sums of merit aid, transforming the admissions process into a polite bidding war.

The average student at a private college last year reaped a 42 percent discount on the published tuition, according to an industry survey, a historical high. Admission experts say more colleges use merit awards to lure strong students who might not otherwise attend, including those who could afford to pay full price.

Private institutions spent $2,060 per student in 2010 on aid to families without financial need. That category of aid has increased by half in 10 years in constant dollars, according to the College Board. Public colleges, too, trade in merit aid. They spent $480 per student on aid “beyond need” in 2010, a 37 percent increase in 10 years.

In addition, experts say a significant amount of merit aid is given to other students. But the total is difficult to quantify.

Price has always been a concern in choosing a college. But experts say there is a tradition among many upper-middle-class families — those with six-figure incomes and little hope for need-based aid — of funding the money to attend the most selective school that offers admission, whatever the price.

That is changing, admissions counselors say. Today, even privileged families are questioning the wisdom of paying $50,000 a year for college, especially an institution that lacks the pedigree of a Harvard or Yale.

“Even if you have money, $500,000 is still a lot of money,” said Lisa Solheimer, director of college counseling at the private North Country School in the New York City borough of Queens. “The thing to remember is, there are extraordinary educations to be had at colleges that cost all different kinds of money.”

Working out the math

Spolarich, 18, seemed a natural fit at American. Its Northwest Washington campus is close to her Montgomery County home. Its strong communications program beckoned to the senior, an editor at the Blake High School Beat student newspaper.

She was one of many AU applicants representing the top 5 percent of their high school class. The College of Charleston was a more impulsive choice. Spolarich visited the campus while driving to Florida with her mother, drawn to the colonial charm of Charleston and its 18th-century public college, one of the nation’s oldest.

Spolarich soon learned that, with her 3.85 unweighted grade-point average and 30-plus ACT scores, she was just the sort of student the College of Charleston wanted to attract.

Her numbers, unremarkable in the AU applicant pool, stood out at Charleston. AU wanted Charleston to seem her top choice.

“They were straightforward at the beginning that if she applied, and if her numbers were what she had written on the [information] card, they would be able to make her a very good offer,” said Audrey Spolarich, Gillian’s mother. “They were straightforward at the beginning that if she applied, and if her numbers were what she had written on the [information] card, they would be able to make her a very good offer,” said Audrey Spolarich, Gillian’s mother.

Intensified when Spolarich returned to Charleston in March for Accepted Students Weekend. In the honors college, Gillian would enjoy smaller class sizes, interdisciplinary study, preferential housing and first dibs on registration.

“She met the college president. It was really crazy how friendly people were,” said Spolarich.

The college offered her enough to wipe out an annual bill from about $34,000 to about $21,000, effectively erasing the $20,000 price tag for Gillian as an out-of-state student, Audrey Spolarich said.

AU had offered no aid. Tuition, fees and living expenses total about $50,000 a year, typical for a first-rank private university.

The Spolarich family did the math. Even with two solid incomes (Gillian’s father is chief financial officer for a federal agency, and her mother is a stra-tegic development consultant), someone would have to postpone retirement to cover the cost.

“And then, I don’t know, my mom and dad were just like, ‘I can’t pay for this.’” Gillian Spolarich said. “And I was like, ‘I know, this is a pretty competitive school.’

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They were looking to improve the profile of the class to give themselves bragging rights,” said Douglas Bennett, president of Earlham College in Richmond, Ind.

Of course, colleges also have long steered scholarships to athletes and others with special talents.

Most aid is still need-based. But admission experts say colleges increasingly use grant dollars as a tool to attract good students, needy or not. The full extent of merit aid is hard to gauge because schools define it in different ways, said Haley Chitty, spokesman for the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.

A dozen of the most selective colleges offer financial assistance only on a need basis, an arrangement they deem more equitable. But then, those schools can attract top-performing students without merit aid, said Amanda Griffin, an economist at Wake Forest University.

Hundreds of other colleges favor merit aid, offering packages that can cover most or all of the cost of an education. Schools manage the expense by passing it along to the students who pay full price.

Merit aid is thus partly responsible for the steep tuition increases of the past 20 years.

Spiraling aid has caused financial trouble for some private colleges. For college applicants, on the other hand, it has spawned a buyer’s market. High-achieving students can reap steep discounts at colleges with strong reputations for undergraduate education.

“We’re getting calls back from families saying, ‘We’re getting this much from another college. Can you match it?’” said Joseph Urgo, president of St. Mary’s College of Maryland, a public liberal arts college that competes with private institutions.

“We’re wasting billions of dollars nationally competing for kids,” Urgo said. “But we can’t stop it.”

Joseph Urgo, St. Mary’s College of Maryland

TUESDAY, MAY 31, 2011

College of Baltimore

The Washington Post

Samantha Sheveach of Queens chose the University of Delaware over Penn State, her first choice, because of merit aid.

Sheveach was a strong applicant, with an A average at Mary Louis Academy, a Catholic college preparatory, and high SAT scores. She had always wanted to go to Penn State and applied to Delaware as a afterthought.

Penn State offered admission but not aid. “It was $43,000 a year” she said. “So expensive, even for a state school.”

Delaware deemed Sheveach a top prospect. The school offered $20,000 in merit aid and a spot in the honors program. At an event for admitted students, she met other honors recruits who had turned down Ivy League schools.

Sheveach said she chose the Delaware school for the sake of her parents.

“They said that they would have paid for Penn State,” she said. “But I didn’t want them to be $160,000 in debt. You need to think about the investment you’re making: Are you going to get that $160,000 back?”

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A DAY TO REMEMBER

BY DANIEL DE VISE

A community college commencement is, for many, a celebration of second chances.

Consider Su Meck. The 45-year-old homemaker from Gaithersburg graduated Friday from Montgomery College with an associate degree in music. It’s the culmination of a life that, in most senses of the word, began at 22.

In February 1988, a ceiling fan fell on Meck’s head. The blow erased her memory, and she awoke after a week in a coma with the mental capacity of a young child. She no longer knew her husband or her two baby sons. She barely spoke and could not read or write, walk or eat, dress or drive.

“It was Su 2.0,” said Jim Meck, her husband, a systems engineer. “She had rebooted.”

Su Meck had been in her kitchen that evening, making macaroni and cheese. She picked up Patrick, her 6-month-old son, and held him aloft. His body brushed against a ceiling fan and somehow unhooked it. It plummeted and struck Su’s head, according to Jim, the only one in the family with a memory of that day.

An MRI exam showed her brain suffused with cracks, “like shaken Jell-O,” her husband was told. The injury left her with complete retrograde amnesia, the inability to remember the past, a condition sometimes called Hollywood amnesia because it seldom happens outside the movies.

“It was literally like she had died,” Jim said. “Her personality was gone.”

Jim and Su had met five years earlier at Ohio Wesleyan University. He was a junior. She was a freshman. They had left college upon his graduation, married and settled in Fort Worth, where Jim took a job at General Dynamics and they started a family.

A rebellious child from the Main Line suburbs of Philadelphia, Su had removed the “e” from her name to set herself apart from three other Sue Millers at school. She had fallen in with the wrong crowd and done time in juvenile hall. She kept a drum kit in her bedroom.

“I distinctly remember a lot of

MECK CONTINUED ON A15
fighting, a lot of door-slamming and then a lot of really loud drumming,” recalled Mark Miller, her brother.

When Su awoke from the coma, the past was quite literally gone, and she says that almost nothing that happened in the first 22 years of her life has returned. The few flashes of recollection have been brief and mostly fleeting, such as the distinctive feel of a drum tuning key, or the time she sat down at a piano, a few months after the accident, and played “The Entertainer” from what could only have been a memory. She could never do it again.

Friends and loved ones were now strangers. Many found Su’s empty gaze unbearable.

“I remember the first time I walked into the hospital room,” said Barb Griffiths, Su’s eldest sister. “I said, ‘Hi, Su, how are you?’ She just looked at me, and there was absolutely no recognition in her face. Oh my gosh, it just tore me apart.”

A sort of free fall
Su left the hospital after two months. She had completed a checklist of tasks, such as riding a bicycle, preparing a meal and reading a simple children’s book. New York’s first book was Dr. Seuss’s “Hop on Pop.” She had help — from her husband, other relatives and an au pair. But returning to life as a wife and young mother was “a sort of free fall,” she said.

There was a big hole at the center. Who was she? Why had she married this man, moved to this house, had these children? What thoughts lurked in the mind of the woman who lifted her baby boy from the kitchen floor that fateful day?

“I always wondered: What am I supposed to do now? What is the plan? What is the goal?” she said. “Am I supposed to be this other person who I was, or am I supposed to be this new person?”

To complicate matters, for weeks after the injury Su could not make new memories. She would awaken each day to a house full of strangers. It would be years before she could remember where she had parked the car at the mall. On the way home, she would circle the neighborhood, clicking the garage door opener for a hint of which address was hers. She became known around the house as the “tardy fairy,” for her habit of putting things away and then forgetting where she had put them.

“We’d have the milk out and we’d put it back in the fridge and close the fridge and . . . where did the milk go?” said Benjamin Meck, 24, the eldest of Su’s three children. Her other son, Patrick, is 23. Kassidy, the only child Su remembers from birth, is 18.

As a toddler, Benjamin developed a prodigious capacity to recall parking spaces. “Talking on the telephone was disorienting in the first few years out of the hospital, so Su and her family communicated with letters. Su wrote hers with the spelling and penmanship of a young child. The boys play good with Legos now so gives me a chance to rite,” she told her mother in one mailing. In another: “I hav to go to mor doctors be case fall lots to postlocal.com. In another: “I hav to go to mor doctors be case fall lots to postlocal.com.

Su and her husband are planning a move to Massachusetts, where she will enroll at Smith College in the fall as a transfer student seeking a bachelor’s degree.

Her specialty is still the drums. She plays on a kit her husband bought for her for Christmas four years ago. It sits in the family den, framed by posters of Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd and the Who. Atop the kit is a small, stuffed Animal, the crazy Muppet drummer, another relic of a forgotten childhood. Su went through two decades of treatment after the accident, and then a lot of really loud drumming, and then a lot of really loud drumming.”

Something more
Nineteen years after the accident, in 2007, Su walked into a classroom as if for the first time. Her children were heading off to college themselves. Su yearned to be known as something other than mother and wife. It was the familiar dilemma of the stay-at-home mom, except that this mom knew nothing else.

“I didn’t really know what I was going to do,” she said. “And Montgomery College was there.”

She asked her children what to bring to class, how to take notes, how to ask questions and write papers.

Her first classes were in sociology, stress management and remedial math — at 42, Su was still multiplying by repeated addition.

Su was a slow learner — her husband can read eight pages to her one. She plodded through assignments, reading difficult passages again and again so she would remember them.

“I think she must have spent hours and hours and hours every day to try to do this,” said Michael Nasso, a brain expert at Johns Hopkins University.

She persevered in the quest for her first college degree, earning a 3.9 average and rising to chapter president of the Phi Theta Kappa honor society.

Here, surely, lay a trace of the old Su, the same stubborn resolve that had driven her youthful rebellion and, later, her obsessive study habits as a teen at Ohio Wesleyan.

“I think that part of her personality stayed with her,” said her sister Barb. “I think she needed to do this for herself.”

Su Meck prays with her father, Bob Miller, and daughter, Kassidy, before a meal at the Mecks’ home in Gaithersburg. The family was celebrating Meck’s graduation. She earned an associate degree in music.
Su Meck hugs her mother, Janet Miller, after her graduation from Montgomery College. At left is Meck's daughter, Kassidy, 18 — the only one of Meck's three children she remembers from birth.
Pennants for pop culture

From MIT brainiac to Berkeley radical, the college evokes the character

BY DANIEL DE VISE

Tina Fey studied drama at the University of Virginia. But that genteel Southern collegiate pedigree would hardly suit Liz Lemon, her “30 Rock” alter ego. Instead, we are told that Lemon — Northern and cerebral, but also middle-class and hopelessly dorky — attended Bryn Mawr College and the University of Maryland, “on a partial competitive jazz dance scholarship.”

Real colleges pop up all over our fictional landscapes, their names invoked to breathe life and depth into characters. The universities of Minnesota and Virginia serve as backdrops in “Freedom,” Jonathan Franzen’s celebrated novel. “The Simpsons” caricatured the Seven Sisters in an episode touching on the collegiate aspirations of bookish daughter Lisa. (“Come to Radcliffe and meet Harvard men,” they beckon. “Or come to Wellesley and marry them.”) And the Oscar-winning film “The Social Network” essentially stars Harvard University — although the campus we see on screen is actually that of a stand-in, Johns Hopkins University.

A citation in fiction means an institution’s brand is sufficiently familiar to help define a fictional character: Princeton preppy, Penn State party boy, MIT brainiac, Harvard kingmaker, Berkeley radical, Notre Dame jock.

Writers create collegiate identities for their characters for the same reason motorists affix alma mater bumper stickers to their cars: to evoke something to which they aspire or that defines a part of their identity.
their cars — college can be central to our sense of social identity, as essential as home town, career or income bracket. A writer might just as easily peg a character as a Camel smoker or a Prius driver. But colleges are more richly evocative than cigarettes or cars.

Colleges “are talismanic in all kinds of ways, of course, signaling the final arc of adolescence, of freedom, of languor and the first or last sparks of intellectual promise,” said John Gregory Brown, an English professor at Sweet Briar College in Virginia. Colleges “show up in novels and stories to suggest the ghosts that might be lingering in a character’s life.”

Colleges seeking brand identity and national reputes are just as happy to claim fictional alumni as real ones. Wikipedia pages for colleges and universities routinely track references on television and in film, in some seemingly haphazard and random, many more knowing and purposeful. Any fictional portrayal, good or bad, serves “as a bellwether of sorts of how embedded you are in the popular consciousness,” said Michael Schoenfeld, Duke’s vice president for public affairs.

Colleges may derive tangible benefits from pop culture cameo as well, although such benefits are difficult to measure. The sheer number of intelligent people in “The Social Network” — not to mention the sympathetic partying — surely contributed in some small way to Harvard’s record 38,000 applications this year. “I do expect it to help,” said Greg Roberts, dean of admissions at U-Va. “I do expect to see some deferrals.”

Authors have been writing college novels for 200 years, according to John E. Kramer, who since 2002 has compiled the most comprehensive bibliography of college novels. His seminal work, “The American College Novel,” referred to 348 college novels, the most on Kramer’s list, followed by Yale (32), Princeton and Cornell (31). Two other schools claim more than a dozen literary treatments: Berkeley (19) and the University of Chicago (18).

Among Washington area schools, U-Va. is the best-represented on Kramer’s list, with three literary citations, not including the recent “Freedom,” which likens the Grounds to a Young Republicans convention. The school’s scholarly athlete ethos may be better served in the film “The Silence of the Lambs,” whose central character, earns a PhD agent Clarice Starling, is said to have graduated at the top of her class. She tells a captain, “It’s not exactly a charm school.”

George Washington and U-Md. have two; Georgetown, an institution associated with Washington’s power and mystique. “I would argue that it’s trayal seems to burnish a school’s reputation,” Slote said. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Ivy League wins the collegiate-fiction popularity contest hands down. Harvard is the setting for 77 college novels, the most on Kramer’s list, followed by Yale (32), Princeton (21) and Cornell (22). Only two other schools claim more than a dozen literary treatments: Berkeley (19) and the University of Chicago (18).

The Ivy League is the Ivy League, and the metaphor of college as a party school, “as a party school,” he said. “On the other hand, that grossly over-simplifies one of the great universi...”
Learning for the sake of living well

At St. John’s College in Annapolis, a passion for liberal arts withstands an adversarial economy

BY DANIEL DE VISE

The economic downturn has not been kind to liberal arts schools. Middle-income families with depleted portfolios are fleeing to public colleges. To some, the very term “liberal arts” now symbolizes impractical indulgence. Tuition is at an all-time high. So, too, are tuition discounts. The vicious cycle is driving colleges into debt.

For Christopher Nelson, that fractured business model begots a single question: What would Socrates say?

Nelson is completing his 20th year as president of St. John’s College in Annapolis, one of the nation’s oldest and most distinctive schools, where there are no academic departments. At this college devoted to great works of Western civilization, Nelson has become a national spokesman for the liberal arts, a visible and passionate defender of learning for learning’s sake.

In an era when many recession-scarred parents have come to view college as a path to a higher income bracket, Nelson dares to define it as the route to a life well-lived.

“As important as the world of work is to us, we don’t live in order to get a job,” he told an audience in San Francisco this year. “But we work in order to make it possible for us to live a good life.”

Liberal arts colleges, once dominant in higher education, now command less than one-tenth of the higher-education market, which has gravitated to schools offering more practical majors at lower price points. The sector is “always defending itself, always on the edge,” said William Durden, president of Dickinson College in Pennsylvania and fellow defender of the faith.

The Great Recession of 2008 exposed vulnerabilities at St. John’s. Applications fell from 460 in 2008 to 357 in 2010, yielding an uncharacteristically small freshman class. The average tuition discount off the school’s $54,000 annual price tag rose from 29 percent to 40 percent, driven by its commitment to meet spiraling need.

Nelson is nursing the school back to health by breaking with tradition. The famously anti-commercial school now actively recruits thousands of potential students, rather than waiting for the intellectually curious to find their way to Annapolis. Nelson even hired marketing consultants, who persuaded the school to emphasize its high graduate-school placement rates and play down the fact that St. John’s has no majors.

Yes, he thinks big thoughts. But what makes Nelson a particularly effective president, colleagues say, is his canny ability to engage with the world, a skill honed in his previous life as a labor lawyer. He is perfectly at ease parsing what he calls “the human project” with a roomful of politicians.

“I count him among the three or four most influential presidents in the country,” said David Warren, president of the

St. John’s has always focused on academics first and other details — like money — later.

“We don’t live in order to get a job. But we work in order to make it possible for us to live a good life.”

— Christopher Nelson

St. John’s College president

A student walks up the steps of McDowell Hall at St. John’s College in Annapolis. All students follow the same liberal arts program.
LIBERAL ARTS FROM B1

D.C.-based National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

In Nelson's office one recent morning, an industry leader on speakerphone beseeched him to lean on a prominent state lawmaker to fund capital projects at several private colleges. "I know that you have a very good relationship with the lawmaker," she said.

Nelson made the call. The projects were funded.

When not behind his desk, Nelson crisscrosses the nation, delivering speeches in a rolling, bass-baritone voice about the transformational power of liberal learning.

"The well-educated adult," he told a Washington group this year, "has an integrity of character, a rootedness in essentials, and a self-understanding that makes it possible to live well and consistently in an unpredictable world."

Nelson was a founder of the Annapolis Group, a consortium of more than 100 liberal arts schools whose presidents first gathered at his residence in 1993. He was among the first presidents to boycott the U.S. News & World Report college rankings, dismissing them as foolish and withholding necessary data. Two decades later, St. John's stands almost alone.

Nelson grew up in the New York suburbs, the eldest of four. He rose to student-body president at White Plains High School. As a St. John's student, he earned the nickname Hector, after the Trojan hero, for derring-do on the athletic field.

A comparatively tiny college of 500 students, with a sister campus in Santa Fe, N.M., St. John's has one of the strongest brands in academe. The Annapolis campus traces its origins to 1696 and would probably rank among the top 50 liberal arts schools, if Nelson would cooperate. This year, U.S. News lists the school as No. 166 among national liberal arts colleges, based on incomplete data. Williams, Amherst and Swarthmore top the list.

St. John's operates differently than other colleges. Its curriculum requires all students to read the same essential texts, in roughly the order they were written, starting with Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey." There are no lectures, only seminars guided by faculty "tutors."

The Program, as it is called, attracts a small group of passionate students. Nearly everyone gets in, making St. John's less selective than its peers. But the students generally bring high test scores and a strenuous work ethic. Nearly everyone graduates when Nelson arrived. Nelson's ranks among the top 2 percent of colleges for producing future PhDs.

St. John's, an intellectual pilgrim. He learned to read later than his son was "slow." He tested poorly. "He was among the first presidents to boycott the U.S. News & World Report college rankings, dismissing them as foolish and withholding necessary data. Two decades later, St. John's stands almost alone in its defiance.

"The steady diet of Chaucer, Copernicus, Dante and Heidegger is no cakewalk; there is a high rate of burnout. Fewer than half of Johnnies graduated when Nelson arrived. The rate now reaches 70 percent."

St. John's has always put academics first. Practical matters, such as buildings, fundraising and money in general, were something of an afterthought before Nelson arrived.

He was an unusual choice for president. Though active on the St. John's governing board, Nelson had never worked in academia, an odd deficit for the leader of a must cerebral college.

But colleagues say he combines administrative skill and intellectual heft. Nelson ran meetings in much the same way the tutors ran seminars: listening, thinking, deliberating.

"He'll sit at a table forever until we get it figured out," said Barbara Goyette, vice president of fundraising and alumni relations.

"Well, there's a very good book," Nelson says, "virtue" in casual conversation. At a recent morning coffee in Nelson's office, a student told him how he was wrestling with what it means "to be just, rather than just to seem just."

"It's a big choice," Nelson said, opening a meeting of the board. "I mean, do we get it figured out?"

"We may, if we're very, very lucky, get someone in the future who's as good as he is," said Harvey Flaschenhaft, a tutor since 1968. "I don't think we'll ever have anyone who's better."

Applications to St. John's rebounded to 394 this year. Nelson expects a larger freshman class and hopes financial aid expenditures will level off.

"Good news from admissions," Nelson said, opening a meeting of the school's financial committee on a recent morning. "I mean, those numbers are holding up really nicely."

St. John's College President Christopher Nelson, left, talks with seniors Kaura Mackey, Martin Greenwald and Andrew Peak.
Berkeley, Calif. — Across the nation, a historic collapse in state funding for higher education threatens to diminish the stature of premier public universities and erode their mission as engines of upward social mobility.

At the University of Virginia, state support has dwindled in two decades from 26 percent of the operating budget to 7 percent. At the University of Michigan, it has declined from 48 percent to 17 percent.

Not even the nation’s finest public university is immune. The University of California at Berkeley — birthplace of the free-speech movement, home to nine living Nobel laureates — has collected more money from students than from California.

Tuition has doubled in six years, and the university is admitting more students from out of state. The state share of Berkeley’s operating budget has declined significantly since 1991.

The poverty rate for veterans age 18 to 34 reached 12.5 percent in 2010, more than double that of 10 years earlier, according to a report last month from Congress’s Joint Economic Committee.

The key to dealing with the Iraq-Afghanistan generation will be keeping veterans off the street in the first place. “People don’t become homeless immediately,” said Dennis Culhane, a University of Pennsylvania professor and authority in the field. “It takes a few years, so we have time to prepare.”

A VA prevention program begun in 2011 is awarding $160 million in grants to nonprofit community agencies, with the goals of preventing low-income families from falling into homelessness or rapidly returning them to stable housing. “We’ve learned we can’t end homelessness by street rescues alone,” said VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki.

The most effective remedy, advocates say, is the joint voucher program, HUD-VASH, which provides permanent supportive housing to homeless veterans.

Veterans pay 30 percent of their income to rent, and the voucher covers any rent above that amount. Each voucher costs the government on average $4,500 a year, plus $4,348 in case management services — much less than the costs of staying in jails, hospitals or emergency shelters, advocates say. Recipients face regular reviews to make sure they continue to qualify based on income and health-care needs, at some point they may transition to regular low-income housing vouchers.

“It literally saved me,” said Mickiela Montoya, who served with the Army National Guard in Iraq and received a voucher last year for an Orange County, Calif., apartment where she lives with her 4-year-old daughter.

The vouchers are distributed to public housing authorities across the country based on need. “The problem is there are always new people coming into the system, and there aren’t that many vouchers to go out,” said Kathy Sibert, executive director of Arlington Street People’s Assistance Network, or A-SPAN.

Veterans are waiting for vouchers in virtually all jurisdictions across the country, according to Veterans Affairs officials.

Gary Bush, a homeless 54-year-old Navy veteran in Arlington whose hollow cheeks and sunken eyes tell of long nights on the streets, has asked for a voucher, but was discouraged by the response. “They tell me the waiting list is 500 deep,” Bush said while eating stew at St. George’s Episcopal Church in Arlington.

“Some in [vouchers] are going to people who are easiest to house, and not to the person who’s been on the street the longest and has the most issue,” said Jake McGuire, a spokesman for Community Solutions, an advocacy group for the homeless.

VA officials acknowledge the concerns and have reminded field offices that the vouchers are meant primarily for chronically homeless veterans with mental health or substance-abuse problems. But the vouchers are generally given to any qualifying homeless veteran on a first-come, first-served basis.

Those selected often must wait four months to a year for housing, depending on the amount of paper work required by the jurisdiction, said Becky Kanis, who directs a homeless project run by Community Solutions.

In addition, it has been difficult
From Page One

Addressing the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans in June, Shinseki asserted that the number of homeless veterans had been reduced in two years from 131,000 to 76,500. VA officials now acknowledge the numbers were not comparable.

Culhane, who also is director of research for VA's National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans, said the numbers are now much more accurate, with a 2011 count of homeless veterans on a given night conducted by teams in 432 communities nationwide.

VA and HUD officials hailed the new figures this month, a 12 percent drop in the one-night count of homeless veterans, from 76,329 on a single night in January 2010 to 67,495 in January 2011.

But even if all homeless veterans could be counted, there are doubts that all could be housed. “I don’t know if we’ll ever get all of them,” said David Treadwell, a retired Army officer who fought in Vietnam and now directs Central Union Mission, an organization that cares for the homeless in the District. “You meet guys who are dedicated to being on the street.”

“Field experience shows everyone can be housed,” said Culhane. “Not without relapse, but it can be done.”

The VA’s 2012 budget includes $939 million to prevent and reduce homelessness, an increase of 17.5 percent from 2011.

And the demand for services continues to rise. At the VA Medical Center in Washington, the number of homeless veterans seeking treatment annually has grown from 900 to 2,000 during the past three years. The hallways bustle with veterans visiting doctors or attending substance-abuse programs and other classes.

Ending veteran homelessness seemed far-fetched to staffers at the center when the goal was announced in 2009. “It felt overwhelming at the time,” said Maria Llorente, chief of mental health services. But the housing vouchers and better coordination between Veterans Affairs and other agencies have made the goal attainable, she added. “We are genuinely optimistic.”

Eddie Baker, a 56-year-old Army veteran, works at the VA hospital providing peer support for homeless veterans, including more from Iraq and Afghanistan. “I can relate intimately,” said Baker, who has been homeless since 2004. “They understand that we’ve been through this.”

Baker, who lives at a homeless shelter in Capitol Heights, has tried to get a housing voucher, so far without luck.
Corey Olsen had a lot to say about J.R.R. Tolkien. But it seemed a pity to consign his thoughts to a scholarly journal, to be read by a few hundred fellow academics who already knew more than enough about the author of “The Lord of the Rings.”

So in spring 2007, the Washington College professor took his scholarship public, with a podcast called “How to Read Tolkien and Why” and a Web site called the Tolkien Professor.

A million downloads later, Olsen is one of the most popular medievalists in America. His unusual path to success—a smartly branded Web site and a legion of iTunes listeners—marks an alternative to the publish-or-perish tradition of scholarship on the tenure track.

“Instead of spending all my time doing scholarly publishing, which we’re told to do—which most people will never read—I basically decided to put myself out to the public,” Olsen said.

It remains to be seen whether academia will reward Olsen or punish him for breaking out of his scholarly track. When it comes to building resumes and courting full professorships, podcasts don’t typically count.

Olsen is a new breed of public intellectual, the latest in a long line of scholars who have leveraged mass media to reach a broader audience.


At 36, Olsen represents a new generation of professors who grew up around computers and knows its way around an iPhone. The bookish son of a New Hampshire construction worker, Olsen read “The Hobbit” tolkien prof continued on C10

Down to Middle-earth

by Daniel de Vise
in Chestertown, Md.

A professor journeys beyond the ivory tower to take his love of J.R.R. Tolkien to the people
EARLY LOVE: Corey Olsen read J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit" at age 8 and was a self-professed expert on "The Lord of the Rings" by seventh grade.
J.R.R. Tolkien is not generally counted among the great fiction writers of his century. Yet, Tolkien scholars and classes have multiplied over the years, and Middle-earth fanzines have evolved into academic journals. Olsen says that Tolkien is often dismissed among academics “because fantasy stories about elves and dragons obviously cannot be serious literature.”

“Instead of spending all my time doing scholarly publishing, which we’re told to do — which most people will never read — I basically decided to put myself out to the public.”

— Corey Olsen

Olsen published an article and a review in the scholarly journal Tolkien Studies in 2008 and 2009, but he sensed an opportunity squandered. More than 100 million copies of “The Lord of the Rings” have been sold. The Peter Jackson movies of the past decade earned roughly a billion dollars each.

Tolkien is not as popular among academics as he is among the public. Though Tolkien was a language scholar at Oxford, he is not generally counted among the great fiction writers of his century, nor is “The Lord of the Rings” counted among its great books.

But within academia, there is also subtle resistance. Olsen’s podcasts, after all, are not peer-reviewed or vetted by fellow scholars. That means no one has given a formal blessing to his scholarship.

At the University of Maryland, works of “The Lord of the Rings” knowledge with our quiz at washingtonpost.com/style.
Getting in Shape

It’s not “broken,” so you could argue that it doesn’t need to be “fixed.” The fact is, America’s higher education system is still widely regarded as the best in the world. And that reputation certainly fits the nation’s top research universities and liberal arts colleges, those with swelling endowments and shrinking admission rates. But this vaunted reputation — which draws students from all over the globe — also masks what can only be described as some major flaws: spiraling tuition and fees. Yawning “graduation gaps” between students of different racial and ethnic categories. And nagging questions about how much today’s college students actually learn. We take a look at eight big problems facing the academy and, aided by some of its greatest minds, offer up some big ideas to help solve them. So, while it may not be broken, why not perfect it?

BY DANIEL DEVISE
ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE HEADS OF STATE
Measure how much students learn at every college

A mere decade ago, few colleges had any objective means to measure how much their students learned between enrollment and graduation. American higher education rested on its laurels, secure in its reputation as the best in the world, a credential based largely on the achievement of a few hundred national universities and selective liberal arts schools.

Slowly but surely, the accountability movement, along with rising concern that we’re no longer the best, have breached the ivory tower.

The 2001 arrival of a federal mandate for student proficiency in K-12 education, No Child Left Behind, compelled serious discussion of standardized testing in American universities. A 2000 report by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education had graded every state “incomplete” for evidence of student learning. In 2006, a commission empaneled by the George W. Bush administration flirted with the idea of proposing a collegiate “No Child” law.
"We don’t know whether our graduating students know more than the freshmen," said Richard Vedder, an Ohio University economist who participated in the 2006 report. "We don’t know if they know more than they did 20 years ago."

Sensing a sea change, the higher education community responded with something approaching a national effort to measure student learning. In 2007, two organizations representing more than 500 public universities (and 70 percent of U.S. bachelor's degrees) launched a Voluntary System of Accountability. They encouraged member schools to choose among three standardized tests that offer comparable measurements of critical thinking. Other, smaller alliances followed.

More than 500 institutions have participated in the Collegiate Learning Assessment, the most popular of the new tests. The test and its competitors, the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency and the Proficiency Profile, generally attempt to measure the reasoning skills of students at a particular college, how they stack up against students at other schools, and what they have learned between freshman and senior years.

The other key product of the accountability movement is the National Survey of Student Engagement, a decade-old initiative that attempts to measure whether a college is a rich learning environment, including powerful new data on how much time students spend engaged in study. More than 600 colleges participate annually.

Proponents of the accountability movement envision a time when the assessments are so pervasive, and so public, that the annual college rankings by U.S. News & World Report, Forbes and their ilk include data on student learning — something they measure now only indirectly, through such metrics as graduation rate and student-faculty ratio.

"We’re forced to do the rankings using second-rate, third-rate measures," said Vedder, who oversees the Forbes rankings, "because there are no first-rate measures."

Student learning data might become a part of every college guidebook and find-a-college Web site. Many college leaders remain staunchly opposed to standardized testing, arguing that colleges are more intellectually diverse than high schools, and that no standardized test can measure their product.

"I think standardized tests at the collegiate level are anti-intellectual," said Patricia McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University.

Some critics also complain that the tests’ focus on rating the school rather than the individual gives students little incentive to score well.

There is also concern about publishing scores, a step that might lead some colleges to abandon testing or, worse, turn away disadvantaged students to raise their numbers.

"You introduce some perverse incentives when you start making the information public," said Alexander McCormick, director of the student-engagement survey.

Any federal effort to require standardized testing in colleges would launch a rhetorical battle for the ages. Reformers suggest an alternative: Accreditors, whose academic reviews are key to a school’s survival, could require colleges to publish proof of student learning as a condition for accreditation.

"Instead of people saying, 'You can’t do this,' now the conversation is about how you do this, and I think that’s very positive," said Roger Benjamin, president of the Council for Aid to Education, which administers the Collegiate Learning Assessment.
End merit aid

Few policy leaders would seriously propose eliminating financial aid based on academic merit, an essential variable in today's competitive college-admissions marketplace.

Yet, critics deride merit aid as affirmative action for the wealthy, a system that increases access for students who can afford college without it.

"There are colleges where the average price paid by rich kids is lower than the average price paid by poor kids, and the reason is merit aid," said Sandy Baum, an independent policy analyst.

Thirty years ago, merit aid was the rare scholarship to the extraordinary student, the vestige of an era when smart people might not go to college without a cash incentive.

Today, many upper-income families enter the college search with an expectation of merit aid. They shop for colleges as they would for cars, weighing offers from rival schools, haggling with admissions officers, effectively auctioning off a star student to the highest bidder.

Private colleges dispense merit aid at a rate of $2,060 per student, while public colleges spend $410 per student, according to College Board data.

It's natural that families would shop around: The sticker price at top private colleges can exceed $50,000 a year in tuition and living expenses, beyond the reach of the middle class.

But merit dollars are spent, by and large, on students who would go to college, anyway. A middle-class student denied merit aid by a $50,000-a-year college might not be able to afford that college, but he or she can still afford college.

Merit aid favors the wealthy: Children from affluent families tend to have greater "merit," in the form of higher grades and test scores.

Less-selective colleges leverage merit dollars to attract tuition-paying students and fill seats. More-selective schools offer merit aid to lure top students who raise the schools' academic standing. Winners of the bidding wars lose tuition money that might otherwise be spent on teaching or on students with need. Merit discounts inflate the tuition charged to those who pay full price.

"Every dollar that we spend on merit aid as opposed to need-based aid is wasted," said Douglas Bennett, president of Earlham College in Indiana.

A small group of elite, well-endowed colleges have resisted merit aid, awarding aid solely for need. Some schools promise to meet the full need of students with aid, so that no one — in theory — is priced out.

There are arguments for merit aid. Merit scholarships are popular among donors who want to reward hard work. Some merit-based programs steer students into high-demand fields.

But critics of merit aid say there is no compelling reason for colleges to court high-performing students save collegiate rankings, a pursuit scores of college presidents publicly disavow.

If college is becoming unaffordable, the reformers say, all the more reason to award aid dollars to those in need.

Jamie Merisotis, chief executive of the Lumina Foundation, suggests colleges be urged to incorporate "some form of need" into all financial aid awards.

Baum suggests the best way to curb merit aid would be to loosen federal antitrust rules that bar colleges from sharing price data. If colleges shared aid awards with their rivals, they could potentially end the merit-aid bidding wars.
3

Standardize the three-year bachelor’s degree

Henry Dunster, Harvard’s first president, altered the course of collegiate history in 1652 when his Harvard Corporation lengthened the time required for a bachelor’s degree from three years to four.

Now there is a movement to shorten it back to three.

Several prominent colleges have launched three-year degrees in the past few years, promising students all the richness of a college education in shorter time and at lower cost.

The flagship University of Massachusetts Amherst became a high-profile exemplar of the trend this fall, offering three-year degrees in economics, music and sociology in a pilot program. It’s tailored to students who have Advanced Placement credits and are willing to take summer school. The potential savings: at least $15,000 in tuition, fees and living expenses.

Other new programs are becoming almost too numerous to list: Hartwick College in New York. Chatham University in Pittsburgh. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

“Education should never be a one-size-fits-all enterprise,” said Margaret Drugovich, president of Hartwick.

New University of Virginia President Teresa Sullivan has proposed a three-plus-one program, giving students a bachelor’s degree in three years and a master’s in four, at significant savings.

“The parents I’ve talked to like it a lot,” Sullivan said.

American University will launch its first three-year degree this fall, in international service. At the University of the District of Columbia, President Allen Sessoms proposes what amounts to a two-year degree for some District high school students, who would effectively start college in their junior year. Rhode Island lawmakers in 2009 mandated a three-year option at the state’s four-year colleges.

Powerful forces are driving the change. One is the rise of college-level coursework in high school: The AP program has tripled in size in little over a decade.

Another factor is the 2008 recession, which compelled colleges to find ways to lower their price. A third is the rise of for-profit colleges and online study, forces that have liberated students to take classes when and where they please.

The share of students who complete college in three years is already rising, from 1 percent in 1998 to 2.5 percent in 2006, according to the most recent federal data.

But few colleges have recognized the three-year degree as an official goal or have done much to help students attain it.

“If you’re running a school, it’s in your interest to keep them there for four years,” said Stephen Trachtenberg, president emeritus of George Washington University. “And five years is even better.”

Critics say a three-year degree would disrupt the classic model of liberal education, leaving students too busy to reap the benefits of campus life. Even four or more years of college often fail to produce literate adults. Federal data from 2003 rated 31 percent of college graduates “proficient” in reading prose.

Some reformers say the goal should be to deliver an advanced degree in four or five years, rather than a bachelor’s in three, for a select population of students capable of acceleration. A growing number of universities, including Georgetown, GW, Marymount, Howard and U-Va., already offer accelerated master’s degrees.

“People are going to need to continue their education,” Trachtenberg said, “whether they do a BA in four years or three years.”

Daniel de Vise will be online Tuesday at 11 a.m. to take questions, comments and your ideas about education reform at washingtonpost.com/magazine.
Revive the core curriculum

*Generations of Americans went to* college to learn a common core of human knowledge: Plato’s “Republic.” Darwin’s “Origin of Species.” “The Iliad” and “The Odyssey.” The rise and fall of Greece and Rome. Enough Latin to read the school motto and enough Shakespeare to drop quotes at cocktail parties.

The core curriculum all but perished in the 1960s, under assault by several converging trends: a rising consumer mentality among students, the evolution of college professors from educators into researchers pursuing ever-narrower specialties, the expanding global knowledge base and a changing academic culture that looked beyond the teachings of dead white men.

Today, only a handful of prominent institutions — including Boston and Columbia universities, the University of Chicago and quirky St. John’s College — attempt to teach students the fundamentals of their intellectual heritage.

“The first two years, we want kids to follow our program. And we’ve spent decades working on this, fighting about it,” said John Boyer, dean of the College at the University of Chicago.

To ask whether the core curriculum should be revived is really to ask why students go to college: Is it to learn essential knowledge, such as Shakespeare and Milton, or essential skills, such as how to think critically and engage with the world?

Advocates of the core curriculum say the academy has abdicated its responsibility to prioritize human knowledge. Defenders of the prevailing system say the academy’s goal is to teach thought, not facts. Students are presumed to have surveyed their
intellectual heritage in high school.

The prevailing model of “general education” requires students to take one or two courses each in several broad academic fields, such as cultural studies, quantitative reasoning and natural science. Course choices can number in the hundreds.

Students are free to pursue their own itinerary of essential knowledge. Many students satisfy “distribution requirements” with uninspired survey courses or with courses too esoteric or peripheral to rate as essential. At the University of Maryland, for example, students may satisfy their Social Sciences and History requirement with courses on the history of sexuality, advertising or sports.

“It’s an educational program with neither design nor purpose,” said Robert Zemsky, a higher education scholar at the University of Pennsylvania.

College presidents say they cannot get faculty committees to agree on what a core curriculum should include — or, more precisely, what it should exclude. Academic departments have grown siloed and competitive; in curricular decisions, no one wants to be left out.

There’s broad agreement that the general education system is flawed, and some presidents are calling for stronger core requirements. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni in Washington has led the campaign; its 2010 report What Will They Learn? gives Harvard a D and Yale an F for failing to require such basic subjects as mathematics and U.S. history.

The core may be making a modest comeback. A growing number of colleges are building required courses and texts into new first-year experience programs, senior “capstone” projects, honors colleges and other school-within-a-school initiatives.

A core curriculum does not necessarily mean dead white men. The new first-year program at Trinity Washington University, a majority-black women’s college, might ask students to read Toni Morrison or Alice Walker en masse, said Patricia McGuire, Trinity’s president.

“You, that doesn’t mean we don’t also read Shakespeare,” she said.

Both trends hold true across public and private institutions of greater and lesser selectivity. Grade inflation became so pronounced that in 2004, Princeton leaders decreed that no more than 35 percent of undergraduate grades could be A's.

Some experts have suggested students are getting better grades because they are smarter, as evidenced by rising SAT averages at selective schools. But researchers say the SAT cannot wholly explain the rise.

There’s mounting evidence that less study means less learning. An influential new book, “Academically Adrift,” uses data from the Collegiate Learning Assessment to suggest that 36 percent of students make no significant learning gains in college.

Students may spend less time studying because more of them hold real jobs. Another factor is technology: It is quicker to research and write a term paper with an Internet-connected laptop than with a typewriter and a
stack of reference books. But most of
the decrease in study time occurred
in the 1960s and 1970s, before the
personal computer age.

There is another theory. Over the
decades, the quality of classroom
teaching has counted ever less toward
a professor's career trajectory, while the
quantity and quality of research output
have counted ever more.

Research "may be drawing faculty
away from assigning work," said
Alexander McCormick, whose National
Survey of Student Engagement has
yielded some of the best data on study
time. "If I assign students a lot of
papers, I have to grade them."

The rising consumer culture of
college in the 1970s created new
incentives for professors to go easy
on students. Consider the modern
course evaluation, a tool that
consistently punishes — with low
ratings — professors who assign lots of
homework or give low grades.

Some researchers liken the current
climate to a mutual nonaggression
pact between faculty members and
students. "Each one says, 'I won't ask
too much of you if you don't ask too
much of me,'" McCormick said.

The general rule in higher ed is that
students ought to expend two hours
of study for every hour of class time.
Fifteen hours of weekly class time
would spawn 30 hours of homework,
or 45 weekly hours of total study time.
Students approached those numbers in
1960. Today, the ratio is closer to 1:1.

Faculties could boost rigor simply
by assigning more homework. Colleges
also could promote "high-effort"
practices across the curriculum,
such as challenging freshman
seminars, writing-intensive courses,
undergraduate research assignments,
service learning and long-term
"capstone" projects. Research links
these "best practices" to higher
retention and stronger performance on
learning assessments.

"The more students do these, the
more they stay in school, and the better
they do on measures of their actual
learning outcomes," said Carol Geary
Schneider, president of the Association
of American Colleges and Universities.

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Tie public funds to finishing college

In 2009, President Obama invoked Sputnik-era patriotic angst in announcing his American Graduation Initiative, an agenda targeting community colleges but with the broader purpose of regaining the world lead in college completion by 2020.

The Obama initiative arrived amid a veritable wave of college-completion goal-setting: philanthropy heavyweight the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2008 pledged hundreds of millions of dollars to double the number of low-income students who complete degrees or credentials. The Lumina Foundation that year proposed 60 percent completion by 2025. Several other nonprofits and industry associations have weighed in.

The notion that most Americans should finish college is comparatively new. As recently as 1970, 11 percent of adults held bachelor’s degrees and barely half had finished high school.

Newer still is the pervasive societal fear that we have lost the world lead in college completion. A 2010 report by the nonprofit College Board shows America ranking 12th among 36 industrialized countries in the share of young adults, 40 percent, who hold at least an associate degree. Canada is the nation to beat, at 56 percent.

Catching Canada may be the least of our worries. A new wave of data and research, triggered by a change in federal law, has unearthed alarming disparities in college completion among students of different racial and ethnic groups.

The latest data show 60 percent of whites, 49 percent of Hispanics and 40 percent of blacks seeking bachelor’s degrees attain them within six years of enrollment. The overall six-year graduation rate is 57 percent.

College completion already tops 60 percent in the more privileged sectors of higher education, including nonprofit four-year colleges and the more selective public colleges. Policy leaders have naturally turned to the groups with the lowest rates of success. In public community colleges, the Obama administration’s focus, fewer than 30 percent complete associate degrees or credential programs. (Finishing any postsecondary program counts toward the national goal.) Among Hispanics, the fastest-growing racial or ethnic category in higher education, only one-fifth of adults hold degrees.

The Hispanic Scholarship Fund has set a goal that someone in every Hispanic household hold a degree. The Gates Foundation and Obama administration have thrown their weight behind community colleges, where new approaches could yield the 5 million new community college graduates the president seeks.

Several groups have collected examples of “best practices” ripe for replication. Schools with high minority completion tend to track students relentlessly from enrollment to graduation, with reams of data and an “intrusive” brand of academic counseling.

“You really have to start paying attention to these students before they enroll, and you don’t stop paying attention to them until you hand them their diploma,” said Kevin Carey, policy director of the think tank Education Sector.

That may not be enough. Jamie Merisotis, chief executive of Lumina, suggests that at least 10 percent of public funding to colleges be awarded on the basis of completion, particularly among low-income, minority, adult and first-generation students. States typically fund public colleges based on who enrolls, not who graduates.

Accreditors, the chief accountability agents in higher education, could also pressure schools to address graduation disparities, said Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust.

“There frankly are no real consequences for colleges right now that large numbers of their students don’t make it,” she said.
Cap athletic subsidies

**Intercollegiate athletics** undoubtedly add to the collegiate experience. But how much, and for whom?

Nine public universities in Virginia charged students more than $1,000 apiece in athletic fees this school year to cover the costs of their programs. The average fee has nearly doubled in 10 years.

Athletic costs are soaring as universities race to build bigger programs with higher profiles. A nationally televised football team is a mighty tool for extracting money from alumni and applications from wealthy out-of-state students.

Critics say the top division of the nonprofit National Collegiate Athletic Association increasingly resembles for-profit entertainment, with million-dollar coaches and ever-lengthening seasons. Some schools have only a small percentage of students engaged in athletics, and athletes only nominally engaged in education.

“You’re not providing students with the opportunity to play sports. You’re bringing students in to pay money to watch sports,” said Margaret Miller, a professor in the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Virginia.

Ninety-seven schools in the Football Bowl Subdivision spent an average $84,446 per athlete on their athletic programs in 2008, while spending $13,349 per student on academics, according to a 2010 report by the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

The notion of a profitable athletic program is largely a myth. A 2010 analysis of 99 public bowl-subdivision schools by the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, a
Washington think tank, found 13 that broke even without subsidies. That analysis found the average athletic “tax,” mostly levied in added tuition or fees, increased from $395 per student in the 2004-05 academic year to $506 in 2008-09 among those schools.

“Institutions are paying coaches these astronomical salaries ... and, for the most part, drawing down dollars that could go into the academic enterprise,” said William E. “Brit” Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland and former president of the flagship state university. “And, let’s face it, College Park is one of them.”

Just-departed U-Md. football coach Ralph Friedgen earned about $2 million a year, more than any public university president.

Most colleges operate outside the bowl system, with smaller programs tailored for scholar-athletes who compete for love of the game.

But although such programs cost less, they also earn less. That means higher athletic fees. Schools with wealthy donors, including U-Va. offset the fees with private funds. Less affluent schools can’t. Ninety-five percent of revenue in the Christopher Newport University athletic program comes from fees, which total $1,147 per student.

Athletic spending follows a similar pattern at private institutions, where it is not a matter of public record.

Some reformers say colleges would moderate their own spending if the costs were publicized widely. A 2010 report by USA Today included a searchable database of programs.

Others suggest that states could bar public colleges from supporting athletic programs with subsidies that total more than 5 percent of tuition revenue. (The average among bowl-subdivision schools is 8 percent.) Or, Congress could intervene.

For Kirwan and others, the biggest problem is the bowl system, an annual championship ritual that concentrates hundreds of millions of dollars within a small group of schools. Many sports fans, including President Obama, suggest ditching the bowl system in favor of traditional playoffs, with revenue shared equally by all.

Stop re-teaching high school in community college

A staggering statistic: Three-fifths of students who enter community college out of high school are placed into remedial study, where they are re-taught all the English or math they should have learned in high school. So-called developmental courses confer no college credit and can postpone actual collegiate study by a year or more.

Less than one-quarter of students who enter developmental education have completed degrees eight years later.

Remediation is a pedagogical bottleneck, and it’s a key reason that less than half of all community college students ever finish their studies.

“What we do know is the current model is desperately broken,” said Mark Milliron, deputy director for postsecondary improvement at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has pledged hundreds of millions of dollars to reform community colleges.

One obvious target for reformers is the placement system. Most students take a broad test of reading and math skills and, based on their score, are either cleared for collegiate study or sidetracked into remediation.

Placement tests are not diagnostic: “They don’t tell you what, specifically, you need remediation in,” said Robert Templin, president of Northern Virginia Community College. Remedial students waste precious time re-learning what they already know.

Remedial courses are comprehensive, lengthy and dull, covering “essentially what you should have learned in high school math and English, but taught twice as fast, in a lecture format,” said Davis Jenkins, a senior researcher at the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Dozens of colleges, including NVCC, are experimenting with a new approach to placement, one that diagnoses specific areas of weakness for each student. Some schools are also tinkering with the definition of college readiness: a humanities major might not need the same math skills as a future engineer.

Such details wouldn’t matter much under the old lecture-hall approach. But a new generation of online education programs enable colleges to design custom lessons for each student.

Both NVCC and Montgomery College are piloting variants of the “math emporium” model, named for a successful initiative at Virginia Tech. It allows students to learn only the math they need and at their own pace, with instructors available to help.

“Instead of a student sitting in a class for seven weeks waiting for what they need to know, they walk right into that material,” said DeRionne Pollard, the new president of Montgomery College.

Research on 13 emporium-style math courses showed student pass rates rose by one-half, compared with traditional remediation, and instructional costs fell by about one-third. Templin said the model can reduce the duration of remedial study from a year to a few weeks, with a corresponding boost to completion.

Other initiatives attempt to combine remediation with college-level study, so that remedial students don’t fall further behind. One, called the Accelerated Learning Program and piloted at the Community College of Baltimore County, “streamlines” developmental students into college-level courses along with companion classes that provide extra help. Others embed remediation within college-level courses.

Such programs rescue students from the drudgery of dead-end remediation, Milliron said, by combining it “with what they came to college to do in the first place.”

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