

Commencing a new future

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 12, 2013](#) issue



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During a visit to the College of Wooster, in Ohio, Robert Frost said that if you were to love something, you could do worse than give your heart to a college. I find myself thinking about that comment every time I attend a college baccalaureate or commencement.

This year I was a speaker at one liberal arts college and will sit in the audience at another when my grandson graduates. I've been present at college graduations five times as a parent, two times as a grandparent and 13 times as a participant. Each time I've been impressed, engaged and deeply moved.

Small liberal arts colleges are national and cultural treasures. Nearly all were started by religious denominations more than a century ago in towns and villages that were outposts in the wilderness. These colleges grew out of some noble ideals: faith seeking understanding, scholarship inspired by theological conviction, faith unafraid and supportive of intellectual and scientific inquiry.

The denominational connections now vary. Some colleges affirm their religious origin and connection in their public relations and promotional literature. Some do not. Some long ago dissociated themselves from any religious affiliation, seeing it as a hindrance to recruiting students.

My Presbyterian denomination continues its relationship with 65 colleges and universities, has an Office of Higher Education and supports campus ministries at

those schools as well as at many public universities. Many of those schools have a variety of religious programming and pastoral ministries as well as a chaplain who is an integral part of the staff.

Many of these schools are regional, with most of their students coming from the surrounding area. For many, denominational financial support has declined and in some cases dried up. Each faces rising costs and the universal reality that it costs more to provide this kind of undergraduate education than students can pay. The result is aggressive fund-raising, sophisticated development operations, and college presidents who devote more and more of their time and energy to traveling and fund-raising.

Somehow these colleges endure and thrive. I love being around them. At Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, one of the Presbyterian-related schools, President James Phifer is retiring after 28 years of service to the college. This was his last graduation, and the students' affection and admiration for him were obvious; gratitude was in the air all weekend. At Coe, graduating seniors process between two parallel lines of faculty; the teachers applaud as the students walk. The same thing happens when freshmen arrive in the fall. It's the sort of thing that happens only at such schools.

On a bright, clear Iowa morning, the quadrangle was crowded with families and friends of the graduates. There were people everywhere, some with walkers and some in wheelchairs; there were infants in strollers and toddlers running to and fro. For many this was a first-time experience, and I could feel their pride. The graduates listened patiently to speeches, watched as awards and honorary degrees were presented and applauded enthusiastically for a speech by a graduating senior.

The best part of sitting on the platform was watching at close range as each graduate walked across the stage, received a diploma from President Phifer and shook his hand. More than a few gave him a hug as well. Both he and they were commencing a new future and everyone knew it. Families applauded their own, shouting and whistling in joy.

I was grateful to witness these moments and thankful that in 1851 faithful Presbyterian Christians started a college on the prairie in Cedar Rapids. You can do a lot worse than give your heart to an enterprise like this.