

# Small Schools,



# Big Payoffs

**S**mall schools, like small towns, have a very specific appeal. While they don't operate at the same pace or intensity as big schools—or big cities—they offer a distinct experience, defined by exceptional quality of life, a deep sense of community, and a chance to develop close personal and professional relationships. Most important, small schools present an opportunity for deans and professors to make a real difference in a defined world.

“If you want to have a major influence on the entire organization, be a dean at a small school,” says Danny Arnold, dean of the College of Business, Frostburg State University in Maryland.

The precise definition of a “small school” is difficult to pin down, for there are small universities that boast significant business schools and

large universities with tiny business colleges. According to the Small School Network Affinity Group associated with AACSB International, a small school is one with 35 or fewer full-time faculty, though schools with up to 45 full-time faculty members are allowed to join the group. “The number of full-time faculty basically sets the parameters for everything else you have to work with,” says Doug Grider, co-chair of the group, and dean and professor at the School of Business Administration, Lander University, Greenwood, South Carolina. “That defines the resource base, operations budgets, and the funds for research.”

While they have fewer faculty and, often, more limited resources than their larger counterparts, deans and administrators at small schools have learned how to recruit and deploy faculty, work within their regions to attract students—and mobilize their resources to achieve big goals like accreditation. In essence, they've learned to exploit all their advantages.

## Sources of Strength

Most small-school deans consider their greatest strength the close relationship that often develops between faculty and students. Because many small schools don't employ teaching assistants or large numbers of adjunct faculty, students have constant interaction with their principal instructors and feel comfortable addressing them inside and outside the classroom.

“It's much easier for faculty at a small school to imprint a program and have an impact on student performance,” says Grider. “Individual

*Small schools offer warm, close-knit communities that appeal to local students—and give professors a chance to shine.*

**by Sharon Shinn**

illustration by John Patrick

faculty members have a far more specific effect on students—not only on their current performance, but on their future careers—and they take that very personally.”

The close relationships also extend among the faculty. “Staff members operate very closely, almost as a family,” says Eon Smit, director of the University of Stellenbosch Business School in the Republic of South Africa. “It’s not difficult to obtain a clear focus on strategic issues. The sense of belonging to a family is frequently shared by our students, and mutual relationships tend to be strong and long-lasting.”

That’s much the opinion held by GERALYN McCLURE Franklin, dean of the School of Business at the University of Texas of the Permian Basin and co-chair of the Small School Network Affinity Group. “In some places I’ve been, I felt as if I were in a silo. We were on separate floors, and sometimes even the disciplines didn’t get along,” she says. “A small school environment is more collegial because it has to be. The smaller number of faculty compels them to work together more closely.”

Small schools often focus more on teaching than research, say these deans. While this can be a drawback if a school is seeking accreditation, it can seem like a benefit to a student who wants to be in a very student-centric environment—and it can be a lure to professors who feel their own strengths are in teaching, particularly recent doctorates. However, says Franklin, not all recent Ph.D.s have gotten the message.

“I don’t think small schools have done a good job of publicizing what they have to offer in terms of quality of life,” she says. “I think there are a lot of pluses to being in a small school, but I don’t think we articulate that very well.”

### Student Appeal

While some doctoral candidates might not have received the message about the appeal of small schools, students clearly have. Small schools tend to draw local students who don’t want to travel far from home, working professionals who live nearby, and students who simply appreciate the advantages of a safe, comfortable environment where the staff is eager to pay them close attention.

Small schools also offer an option for students who want a good education even if they weren’t the best performers in their high schools. “While we do get some top students here, our bread-and-butter students are in the middle range—the top third or half in their classes,” says Grider. “About 60 percent are first-generation college students.”

Many small-school students are also older, working students who are earning their degrees at night. “Sixty-five per-

cent of our classes are offered in the evening because our students work full-time,” says Franklin. At UTPB, many are also transient, oil company workers who have been transferred to the region from somewhere else, and who may have taken classes already at some other university.

Even small schools that cater primarily to traditional-aged, first-time students often make efforts to reach out to working professionals. For instance, West Liberty State College in West Virginia offers an accelerated business program on Saturdays at two off-campus locations. The degree can be earned in two years if students have some general college background, says Elizabeth A. Robinson, interim dean of the School of Business Administration.

The School of Business at Indiana University in Kokomo also courts working professionals by offering flexibility in coursework. Dean Niranjana Pati believes some students choose to attend Kokomo instead of nearby universities

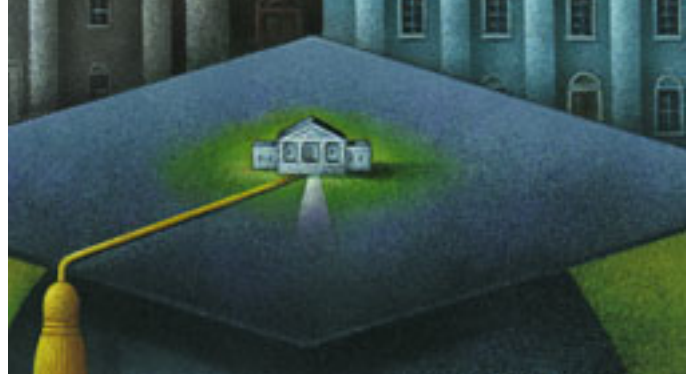
## Accent on Accreditation

For many small schools, one of the biggest challenges is attaining accreditation, which can be a labor-intensive undertaking even for larger institutions. At small schools, faculty members might find themselves stretched very thin as they serve on accreditation committees while handling their teaching and advising loads and fulfilling their obligations on university committees.

At the University of Texas of the Permian Basin, whose business school is now through its first two years of candidacy for AACSB accreditation, the first part of the process has been exhausting. “We front-loaded our accreditation plan so that we had much more to do in the first two years,” GERALYN Franklin admits. “We believed that if the faculty could see the end result, they might stay more motivated.”

Pursuing accreditation doesn’t just mean that faculty members have more work to do; it also means they have to do work that might be unfamiliar. For instance, at some small schools faculty members don’t publish on a regular basis. Not only are these faculty members unaccustomed to researching for publication, they often don’t have the funding—or the time—to get research projects done and to sustain academic qualifications while they’re doing it.

“For faculty to publish, some resources need to be available,” says Danny Arnold of Frostburg State. Faculty at larger schools might only have a six-hour teaching load, so they



because Kokomo's program, which is offered primarily in the evening, is not lockstep. Kokomo also will accommodate students who want to finish their degrees in a year. Pati believes this ability to tailor the course to the student is another advantage that small schools can offer over larger institutions.

### Finding a Niche

The makeup of the student body, as well as the resources available, dictate what kinds of programs these schools can offer. Some small schools focus on perfecting a single program, while others seek out partnerships within their larger school systems or with other schools that allow them to offer multiple degree programs to their students. Lander, for instance, offers only undergraduate programs, which Grider considers a real boon. "Because we only have to focus on one degree program, we can concentrate on doing that and doing it well," he says.

have time to write and do research, whereas faculty at smaller schools more typically carry a 12-hour teaching load. In addition, larger schools have money allocated to support faculty conducting research; many small schools don't have such funds in the budget.

Some small-school deans also see challenges posed by the standards themselves, particularly the ones recently passed by AACSB members. "Assurance of learning is going to be difficult for small schools," says Lander University's Doug Grider. "Some outcomes can be accomplished with faculty and with course-embedded goals. Others must be measured with objective performance tools, and those either must be developed or purchased—and that's another expense for small schools to bear."

Grider also feels that maintaining the "academically qualified/professionally qualified" requirements under the new standards will be more difficult for small schools than meeting the previous calculations for minimum full-time equivalents. "There is less flexibility under the new standards formula, even though the intent may have been to improve opportunities for small schools by providing options for 'participating' and 'supporting' faculty," he believes.

In fact, for some small schools, AACSB accreditation seems out of reach. "I don't think we could meet some of the criteria, including the required number of Ph.D.s on the faculty," says Elizabeth Robinson of West Liberty State College.

Administrators who have chosen to pursue international accreditation are committed to the process and the rewards. Eon Smit believes the University of Stellenbosch Business

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West Liberty State College also offers only an undergraduate degree, with 11 specializations. However, in the future the school may collaborate with another institution to offer master's degrees, as other schools within the college have done. UTPB also knows the benefits of collaboration, though mainly within the University of Texas system. While UTPB offers a

School has set itself apart, in some measure, because it has achieved AMBA accreditation from the UK's Association of MBAs and EQUIS accreditation from the European Foundation for Management Development. "The MBA market in South Africa, like in the rest of the world, is saturated with poor offerings. Unsophisticated clients and students find it difficult to distinguish the better schools from the bad ones," he says. "International accreditation is the best way we know of guaranteeing a high-quality MBA degree."

"It's an external validation of quality," Arnold agrees—but that's not the only benefit. "From a more mercenary perspective, if a school is accredited, there will be a long-term nudge upward on salaries," he says. "That's because, to stay accredited, you have to hire the faculty off the market in order to compete with other accredited schools. I also believe that the process of going from being unaccredited to accredited makes you better. Any time you have a period of self-reflection and you have to look at all these issues—how can we improve this, what can we do about that?—you will be better."

Deans of small schools that have achieved accreditation—or that are in the candidacy process—stress that they could not have done so without the wholehearted support of the faculty. "The faculty have made the commitment to meeting accreditation standards and were willing to put forth the effort to make it happen," says Grider. "I can tell you, without faculty commitment and dedication, it would not happen, I don't care who the dean is."

range of its own degrees—a BBA with four majors, one MBA, and a master’s of professional accountancy—it also participates in the statewide MBA Online program. For that, eight schools in the UT system contribute two courses each to a 48-hour online MBA. “Students have to apply to a specific campus and they get a degree from that campus,” says Franklin.

The picture is considerably different at the University of Stellenbosch, where 50 percent of the full-time student body is international, coming mostly from Europe and Africa. Evening programs are attractive to local attendees, but a variety of other program structures, some offered in English and some in Afrikaans, ensure that the school has something to offer all potential students. About 700 post-grad students can enroll in four different MBA programs, and approximately 3,000 students participate annually in executive development programs.

## Big Challenges for Small Schools

While small schools offer numerous advantages to both faculty and students, they face real obstacles as well. In most cases, these can be traced to more limited resources than their larger sister schools enjoy—which can affect the ease with which they recruit faculty and the upgrades they can install in their facilities.

Says Doug Grider of Lander University, “It’s difficult to recruit and *retain* academically qualified individuals in an increasingly competitive market. Larger, resource-rich schools can offer incentives to induce faculty members to leave small schools where they might otherwise be content to stay.”

Less money for salaries also often means less money for faculty development. At some schools—like West Liberty State College—it means concentrating on faculty members who do not have doctorates. There, two Ph.D. holders were recently hired—but, says Elizabeth A. Robinson, “we made a special effort to attract them.”

In addition, small schools that aren’t accredited sometimes can’t tempt individuals who want the prestige of teaching at an accredited school. Small schools also sometimes find it harder to recruit new faculty because potential job candidates might not be as familiar with them as they are with big-name schools.

The answer in many cases is for deans and faculty to work to make their schools more visible. For instance,

Stellenbosch has been able to position itself as an international player, but most small schools content themselves with taking on a local role. Even so, small school administrators realize that they may need to rely on an identity other than “regional school” to continue to draw applicants in the future, so many of them are developing additional niches.

For instance, UTPB is expanding its entrepreneurship offerings, a plan that resonates well with Texans. “Most of the businesses in our area are entrepreneurial small businesses, so throughout the curriculum we’re trying to show that self-venturing is an opportunity,” says Franklin. “While we touch on major corporate company issues in our curriculum, we mostly use cases that deal with medium and small firms. We know that a high percentage of our students will probably stay in this area, and we want to try to add value to the community.”

Frostburg is also strengthening its entrepreneurship pro-

Geralyn McClure Franklin of the School of Business at the University of Texas of the Permian Basin has encouraged her faculty members to be very active in professional organizations, particularly at the regional level. Franklin herself stays active, both to gain attention for her school and to inspire her own staff. She thinks the strategy has paid off: A recent opening for a finance professor attracted more than double the applicants than did an opening the year before.

Deans also emphasize the benefits of their small schools when talking to potential candidates. Sometimes they point to location and quality of life—they may be situated in an unspoiled countryside or in a picturesque small town within driving distance of a major metropolitan area. Sometimes they note that their schools are part of a larger system, as is the case with Indiana University in Kokomo, which has access to IU’s libraries, IT facilities, and other resources.

For other schools, it’s precisely the lack of those resources, particularly inadequate facilities, that can be the biggest headache. Small business schools often do not have their own buildings, and many do not have the resources to modernize their classrooms. In some cases, straitened resources mean an inability to invest in new technology.

“Many small schools are trying to play catchup in a game that is accelerating,” says Grider. “Although technology is getting cheaper, its pervasiveness and application across the academic program increases the demand and need for the integration of IT throughout the business program. Thus, you have a constant financial demand placed on limited operating budgets. Grants and outside funding provide some relief, but



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—Doug Grider, Lander University,  
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gram, but Arnold believes it will find its true niche by fulfilling the promise implicit in its new slogan of “Applied Business.” The b-school has just codified a plan that bases as many class assignments as possible on real-world projects for

external supporters fully expect a school to cover its basic ‘utility’ bills, and that’s how IT is perceived by many donors.” He doesn’t face such restrictions at Lander, where the modern building is equipped with smart classrooms and portable technology.

Even in cases when the facilities are not ideal, however, deans work to improve conditions or find innovative solutions. For instance, at UT Permian Basin, the entire university is housed in one large building, and the school of business takes up space on the second floor. When Franklin first arrived, faculty members were located on several different floors, and junior faculty had limited exposure to senior professors. Now, all the business school offices are clustered on one floor, and all the classrooms are contained on two upper floors.

At IU Kokomo, the business school does not have its own building, but certain classrooms have been identified primarily for business education use. Furthermore, these classrooms have been designed to best suit the needs of business students, with tables that can be reconfigured for lectures and small-group discussions. One of the rooms also features a financial ticker so students can engage in investment simulations.

“We feel very good about the facilities we have,” says Niranjana Pati. However, he notes that additional facilities could be rented any time the school would not be able to provide a specific environment to fill a need—yet one more example of small-school deans finding creative ways to solve difficult dilemmas.

real clients. To facilitate that goal, Arnold recently organized a forum in which about a dozen local businesspeople made presentations to faculty members, outlining project ideas that might be suited for student teams. He hopes every student will have completed ten real-world projects by graduation—and he wants his faculty to attempt something similar.

“I’ve told the faculty, ‘I want to look at your curriculum vitae over a five-year period and see three or four interactions between you and the real world,’” he says. “This means they should be working with local businesses on contract research, training, or consulting. ‘Economic development’ is in our university mission. To me, that means going out to the businesses here and making them better.”

### **Small Is Big**

Small schools not only fill an educational niche; many of them fill a business niche within their own communities and forge close ties with local business leaders. In some cases, that means the dean must be very visible. For instance, Grider gets involved in civic organizations, particularly the Rotary Club, and serves on development boards, bank committees, and the advisory board of a local technical school. In other cases, the students and faculty must be visible.

At IU Kokomo, Pati encourages his faculty to make presentations to community organizations, participate in corporate open houses, and write articles for local newspapers. IUK students participate with the Small Business Development Center to promote downtown revitalization. It’s crucial for small business schools to publicize their efforts and successes, says Pati, to make sure the public knows the educational advantages they present to the community.

While small schools have much to offer their students and their communities, Pati believes that one of their greatest advantages is hard to quantify—a “value-added” metric that is not judged in any current ranking system. “We add value to the learning experience,” he says. “Students are at certain levels when they come to our schools, and we need to look at how much we have added by the time they get out. We can use inputs like the quality of the student when he enters and the cost of his tuition. On the output end, we can look at the learning experience he has had over time at the institution. What is the rate of return on such an investment? That doesn’t appear in any rankings.”

In the same way that not everyone is cut out for life in a small town, not every student or faculty member is suited for existence at a small school. But for those looking for close relationships and the chance to make a true impact in a community, small schools offer a big opportunity. **Z**