

# Access, Academic Freedom, and the Private Two-Year College — A Case Study

By Lee Maltby

In 2004, *Global Chicago* was published with the support of the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (Madigan, C., ed.). The book is a fine introduction to the qualities that now make Chicago one of three global cities in the United States. In addition to describing the incredible amount of money, materials, and business services that now flow into and around the seven county area, the book explains how Chicago's history, geographical position, and longstanding openness to immigrants contributed to its current position in world affairs. This openness to immigrants and the growing connections with other countries and cultures continues to both enhance and complicate Chicago's ability to compete in the world economy. Education, particularly higher education, serves an essential function in integrating immigrants and their children into their new society.

Two of the most important challenges that Chicago faces are its poorly functioning education system and an economic system that cannot ensure that an entire class of people (immigrants and their children, and people left out of the traditional educational track) will not be left behind economically and socially. Global cities need educated people who can run the city and earn the wages that allow them to live where the jobs are. Yet many of the same people who will be responsible for the future of the city are not being well-educated. The educational needs of immigrants, their children, and many low-income people are high, but they are not being met by the typical institution of higher education in the Chicago area.

In terms of higher education, *Global Chicago* naturally focuses on the more prestigious institutions: DePaul's work in international relations, the Kellogg School of Business at Northwestern University, the University of Illinois and its programs in technology, and of course the incredible influence of the University of Chicago in economics and the sciences. These schools, while important to the global economy, do not meet the needs of low-income or immigrant populations. Because of its broad strokes, the book cannot mention every contributor to the process of globalization in Chicago. Yet under the radar has been a small private college that early on recognized the magnitude of the Hispanic population in Chicago and its international proportions. This school, St. Augustine College, can continue to play an important role in maintaining Chicago's position as a global city if it survives in this age of state budget cuts and dwindling revenue, competition from larger and more politically influential schools, and declining resources to support faculty.

In 1980 the Illinois State Board of Higher Education granted operating authority to St. Augustine College; in 2007 the college will undergo re-accreditation. Since its inception, the college has been operating essentially as a two-year private community college. Beginning with classes in English as a Second Language, the college expanded to offer associate degrees in business, early childhood education, respiratory therapy, culinary arts, liberal arts, computer science, etc. The mission of the school expanded in 1998 with the addition of a baccalaureate degree in social work, but the character of the college has remained primarily as an associate degree granting institution. Its open admission process and dual language transitional program is unique in the Midwest. The dual language (bilingual) program allows students to take college level courses in Spanish while learning English.

During the past 25 years, thousands of students, mostly Hispanic, but also from many other countries and cultures (Africa, Asian mainland and subcontinent, and East European), have come to St. Augustine College to gain entry into a system of higher education that was closed to them. By improving their English and taking general education courses that are linked with the Illinois Articulation Initiative, hundreds of students have earned associate degrees and many have moved on to four year degrees. From the BSW program, which graduated its first students in 2000, around a dozen have earned their MSW or MS in education. As bilingual professionals they have no difficulties finding a job, and earn a higher salary than their monolingual colleagues.

One of the truly great aspects of academic life at St. Augustine has been the College's ability to attract faculty who are bilingual and who earned degrees in other nations. Faculty born in Argentina, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Mexico, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Peru, Chile, Spain, and other countries, with graduate and doctoral degrees, have taught at St. Augustine. This global body of knowledge has been invaluable for the students. As an institution that serves a non-traditional student body (with an average age of 32 and knowing little to no English), the faculty have worked very hard over the years to support and promote the value of a college education for the students.

The profound international flavor of the College is a quality that most institutions of higher learning can only dream about. In recent years, however, the college has experienced threats, both internal and external, to its very existence.

The survival of the two-year private college is under assault. Financial strictures and the relative value of an associate degree in the 21<sup>st</sup> century call into question the mission of these schools. Yet for colleges which serve a non-traditional student population, governmental support for these schools is declining. Even as K-12 programs strive mightily to prepare students who are ready for college, there are still many students who need more pre-college preparatory work and other options (e.g., open admissions, classes in Spanish) for attending college in order to compete with their better educated peers.

Historically, Illinois has been considered to be in the top tier of states that support higher education. This ranking was due in part to the support that was available to private institutions. It is clear that public institutions continue to receive the lion's share of direct taxpayer support. Private institutions receive government support through an indirect process by attracting students who find some benefit at a private school and these students use their money to attend those schools. High-profile private schools with huge endowments are able to compete effectively against public schools using an array of methods (grants, work study, etc). Small private schools, however, are more vulnerable to governmental policy and the economic pressures of the day.

The two-year private college is under increasing pressure as revenue from Pell Grants and the Monetary Award Program (MAP) awards declines. Governor Blagojevich's 2005-06 budget reduces funding for the Illinois State Assistance Commission and provides "only level" funding for the Monetary Award Program (see the report from the IBHE, February 16, 2005). At St. Augustine, over 90% of the students rely on these grants to attend school. Yet, in order to make it financially feasible for students to enroll, the College has not increased tuition which of course, does not increase revenue. Because of the lack of support from the government (state and federal) and the need to keep tuition within reach of its students, the College is being squeezed financially. This financial pressure then serves as a convenient explanation for the College not to invest in faculty, which is the primary (and some would say the best) resource that the College possesses.

The federal budget for 2005-06 has implemented a new formula for calculating Pell Grants. Under the new guidelines, most students (over 5 million) will continue to receive federal aid as in the past. However, some estimate that under the new formula up to 90,000 students may lose aid. The funds available for Pell Grants become even tighter if (as predicted) more students will apply for the Pell Grant.

The real reductions in governmental support were studied by the Education Policy Institute. In January 2003, the institute issued *Retaining minority students in higher education—A framework for success*. (Swail, W.S., Redd, K.E., & Perna, L.W., 2003) The report cites the following as barriers to financing a college education: 1) the reduced purchasing power of need-based grants, relative to increases in college costs, 2) more grant aid from state and institutional sources rather than the federal government, 3) the shift in federal aid to student loans and tax credits, and 4) the shift of institutional and state grant aid from need- to merit-based criteria. For the private two-year college, the implications are clear—tighten your belt, do more with less, and of course, keep full-time faculty numbers low, and hire more part-time faculty.

The financial strait jacket that small schools find themselves is complicated by another trend in higher education. This trend is the limited ability of these schools to raise funds from private donors. According to an article in *Business Week* (12/20/04), top-tier universities are working very hard at raising incredible

amounts of cash for their latest projects and endowments. The consequence is “that for the most part, the wealth of the private sector is likely to flow to those that already have the most. Such aid helps the country’s top schools continue their global leadership. The majority of American students, meanwhile, will be left further and further behind.”

Thus, at the same time that Governor Blagojevich is not increasing funds for the Monetary Award Program that helps poorer students, he has approved \$5 million for “buildings” at Northwestern University and \$6.7 million for the University of Chicago, respectively. (Neither of these projects was recommended by the IBHE.) Yet even as the Governor approves these projects, the National Association of College and University Business Officers ranks Northwestern and the University of Chicago endowments at fourteenth and fifteen respectively, with endowments at \$3.67 billion for Northwestern and \$3.62 billion for the University of Chicago. (An interesting ethical question would be to ask if the richest institutions of higher education have a moral obligation to assist poorer institutions. And if so, how?)

The issue goes beyond money, however. Not only do larger and more prestigious schools have more money, but they have more political influence to obtain money from the governor’s office. As the book *Global Chicago* notes, these two schools have international reputations, with programs ranked among the best in the United States (and by inference, the world). The issue for the smaller schools, and especially the private ones, is how can they survive and provide access to higher education (and a diploma), when the local high schools are struggling to educate their students, and only the very best get into schools such as Northwestern and the University of Chicago. (See also the American Council on Education, July 2004, 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the *Minorities in Higher Education Annual Status Report*, available at [www.ace.edu](http://www.ace.edu))

Internal threats at St. Augustine College are a longstanding denial of basic academic freedom for the faculty, institutional failure to invest in full-time faculty, and the inability to improve organizational effectiveness and programming in academic affairs and other departments. In fairness, the problems noted above long pre-date the present administration. Because of these internal problems, however, the college is unable to compete with other institutions when considering salaries, teaching loads, and faculty development.

The full-time faculty have been pushing for greater recognition from the current president Dr. C.Z. Brennan and the Governing Board for two years now. Progress has been slow. For the past several years economic constraints (including debt financing) has led to a freeze on hiring full-time faculty. Full-time faculty are hired on a yearly basis, and the concept of tenure exists only in the minds of the faculty. No faculty manual worthy of the name exists. Full-time faculty teach around 20% of all classes, and part-time faculty are paid at a lower rate than other institutions. (Needless to say, the lack of full-time faculty does not help the College with retention and recruitment.)

At this point in time the College continues to wobble ahead, caught between diminishing external support and internal pressures. If the College is going to survive in the future, it would appear that it needs to become a full four-year degree-granting institution. To do that however, would mean increasing enrollment, more full-time faculty, and physical capacity, i.e., classrooms, labs, etc. But the College does not have significant physical capacity to increase its enrollment during its schedule of class offerings. As long as enrollment remains flat, the monies will not exist for expansion. While Dr. Brennan continues to build bridges in the community, she is unassisted by a Board that cannot find funds from its upper-class connections (yet the Board has no problem urging the faculty to do the same with their upper-class connections).

At the same time that the lack of financial resources is stretching the budget to the limit, morale among the faculty appears to be mixed. As a group, the faculty love teaching, they love helping the students, and they have special affection for the mission of the college and the ambience of classrooms filled with an eager and diverse student body. But the lack of job security and other fundamental rights of academic freedom that faculty deserve have put some faculty in a difficult position economically and vocationally.

Higher education finds itself competing for funds with other deserving social needs. Funding for education from kindergarten to high school needs to be increased. Health care dollars are in short supply.

Caseloads for social workers striving to protect neglected and abused children are increasing. And the opportunities for less educated people to obtain a college education are decreasing. Higher education (whether public or private) can be monolithic, inaccessible, and not user friendly to the poor or the less-educated or the immigrant among us. There is a place for the small private institution that is adaptable, affordable, flexible, and friendly. Or, there used to be.