In October, David L. Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU), came to speak to the Saint Leo University Board of Trustees and a select group of faculty and staff. Dr. Warren validated for us the university’s mission and business strategy. He told us that independent colleges and universities are in a unique position to thrive as the population of students seeking advanced degrees is predicted to change over the next decade. And—even in this difficult economic climate—Saint Leo University is poised to do better than most.

Dr. Warren also told us about a lurking sentiment in Congress that oversight of higher education should no longer be left to educators; rather, colleges and universities should be regulated by the federal government. Debate will begin soon after the discussion of health care subsides and will become increasingly heated as candidates and incumbents lobby for votes leading up the 2010 elections. During these discussions, Saint Leo University will need your outspoken support more than ever, but first you need to understand why.

The changing face of college students

A century ago, college education was reserved for the rich. Students were expected to emerge with a broad view of the world, a considered philosophy for life, and ready to enter an established profession or a family business. After World War II, the first G.I. Bill enabled returning soldiers (many of whom did not even have a high school diploma) to attend college in unprecedented numbers, to join professions previously out of their reach, and to become part of America’s expanding middle class. Then the baby boom, the civil rights movement, and the women’s rights movement further increased the number of students seeking higher education. Often idealists, this generation of students studied by-and-large to prepare for service work as teachers, doctors, and lawyers. By the 1980s, students sought a college education less often to learn for learning’s sake and more often as a stepping-stone to a better life. In the last 70 years, the picture of who seeks higher education and why they seek it has undergone a dramatic change.
This year, President Obama made access to higher education a national priority. His goal is for America to “have the highest proportion of students graduating from college in the world by 2020” as a means “to better prepare our workforce for a 21st century economy.” In the last 70 years, the picture of who seeks higher education and why they seek it has undergone a dramatic change. And significant changes are still taking place.

Who will be attending college over the next decade? More and more students who are the first in their families to seek a college degree, who are working full time, who have families and other demands that will compete with their time to earn a degree. Saint Leo University already welcomes these students in large numbers: 12,595 over and above the 1,744 traditional students at our main campus.

The role of independent higher education

With the rise of public colleges and universities since the first G.I. Bill of Rights was passed in 1944, independent institutions like Saint Leo University have been labeled as elitist havens open only to children of the wealthy, white, and well connected. The fact is that Saint Leo University and other private schools offer affordable educational opportunities to a diverse population of students—students who have a better success rate than those at public institutions.

NAICU offers on its website a short but important publication titled “Twelve Facts That May Surprise You About America’s Private Colleges and Universities.” In it, NAICU describes specifically how private colleges and universities are no longer educators of the privileged few. Instead, these schools are affordable, diverse, successful, and they meet the needs of students who find that public institutions are not the right fit for them.

Saint Leo University fills a niche for students seeking programs tailored to their specific interests—specialized programs such as sport business, homeland security, middle grades education, theology, and international hospitality and tourism management. Here students find a level of personal attention that helps them succeed academically. We offer a place for students who wish to be educated at an institution with a set of core values that reflects their own and where those values are woven into the coursework. Pioneering students (traditional age and adult) who are the first in their families to seek a college degree choose Saint Leo for these very reasons.

Currently, a majority of Saint Leo students are not traditional-age students who attend school full time. They are working adults with families—often they are single parents—who attend classes in the evenings or on weekends. They are members of our nation’s armed forces who attend classes online, sometimes while deployed in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. They are professionals who seek to improve their earning potential and chances for career advancement by earning an advanced degree.
Before World War II, the landscape of higher education in America looked very different. There were far fewer colleges and universities than we have today and a majority of them were private. Their administrators bragged about the number of students who washed out of their rigorous academic programs. Today institutions like Saint Leo University instead offer a supportive culture of learning. Our students choose Saint Leo University because of our small class sizes and the personal support we offer, whether in a classroom, face-to-face, or online.

**Pioneering a new concept of classroom**

The number of students entering college straight from high school is declining. Again, that means if America is to meet President Obama’s goal, more and more college students will be working adults with families. Higher education’s traditional pedagogy model must change to meet their needs with tailored course work and flexible programs. And we must continue to meet the changing expectations of our technically savvy traditional students who will be looking for more dynamic and interesting ways to meet their degree requirements. Students who have never known life without computers and the Internet will be looking for innovative classroom alternatives where lectures, textbooks, discussions, and coursework can be accessed through mobile phones or other PDAs. In the same pioneering tradition that led our founders to establish Saint Leo College in central Florida in 1889, Saint Leo continues to forge new ideas about how college courses are taught, what a classroom looks like, and when students can attend.

We partner with our nation’s armed forces to provide degree programs for active-duty service members and their families on military bases, online, and through distance learning programs. We partner with community colleges throughout Florida to offer bachelor’s degree programs where students already find it convenient to attend classes. And we are leading the way in private, non-profit higher education online, offering flexible alternatives to meet the needs of our students.

The number of **for-profit** colleges and universities offering online degrees is growing (companies such as University of Phoenix). Yet, Saint Leo University is established as one of the leading, **non-profit**, accredited universities offering degree programs online—and we’ve been doing it for 10 years. Non-profit schools that are just now exploring the possibility of offering online programs may have missed the opportunity for any significant share of this market, but Saint Leo University is ahead of the curve and growing. We have a depth of expertise in the online field.

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Academic freedom and the federal government

If, as Dr. Warren said, “education is the ladder of social and economic reform,” then the future of our nation depends on the academic freedoms guaranteed by the Supreme Court. The notion that higher education should be regulated by the federal government, or standardized in any way, runs counter to the principles of independent higher education guaranteed by the nation’s Supreme Court in Sweezey v. New Hampshire (1957). In essence, the opinion authored by Justice Felix Frankfurter defined the right of colleges and universities to decide who is admitted to their schools, what will be taught, who will teach, and how the teaching will be done—the very decisions that make independent institutions able to provide the diverse and tailored programs that will be demanded by students over the next decade. The issue is one of free speech and first amendment rights.

To meet the Obama administration’s goal of becoming the most educated nation in the world, we need the federal government to continue its student financial aid programs for students at independent colleges and universities. Now with the global financial crisis, students will need continued federal student aid even more so than they have in the past decade. If Congress makes an effort to link that aid to federal oversight of higher education, private universities like Saint Leo will be forced to use their resources to meet federal standards, rather than to develop innovative academic programs to serve the changing needs of college students.

What you can do

Saint Leo University needs your help. To continue our mission we, the educators, need to determine how best to serve our students by tailoring academic programs to meet their educational goals and by continuing to offer innovative alternatives to traditional classroom learning.

Our success in keeping these freedoms—so critical to the mission of Saint Leo University and all of higher education—will depend on you. Not only will we need your continued financial support, but we will need your voices. We need you to understand the value of independent colleges and universities. We need you to sing our praises to your legislators and other community members as the debate rises. We need you to share the vision of Saint Leo University to educate those students who seek the kind of personalized and flexible academic programs that we provide.

Look for more information from Saint Leo University as this issue is brought before Congress.

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