



## 'Jumping' to New Ideas

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For a college president, Michael Schneider of McPherson College spends an awful lot of time talking about horsing around on playground equipment.

It's not because he's immature, though at the age of 37 he is one of the youngest college presidents in the country. It's because "jumping off swings" is Schneider's metaphor for entrepreneurship -- students shouldn't be afraid to take risks, just like they did as children -- an idea he hopes will seep into every corner of McPherson.

But unlike other institutions run by champions of entrepreneurial education, teaching courses and minors in entrepreneurship, or located in startup hubs like Silicon Valley, Boston, or New York, McPherson is not a multifaceted research university with a business or engineering school. It is a small, private, liberal arts college in Kansas.

For a long time, entrepreneurship was not common parlance at institutions such as McPherson, but Schneider is hoping that will change. He sees entrepreneurship, in all its forms, as the practical application of the traditional liberal arts education, and liberal arts colleges as the best places to develop the right mindset to take risks and innovate. He sees an opportunity for colleges like McPherson to reassert their strength and value to their states and their country.

To help foster this new spirit, the college has created a fund to help students carry out entrepreneurial ideas and a competition to foster innovative ideas; next fall it will offer three courses and a minor in entrepreneurship. Schneider is pushing all faculty members to explore the real-world applications of what they are teaching.

McPherson has always been more focused on the real-world application of knowledge than a lot of other liberal arts colleges. It has several courses and programs one might not find at similar colleges, including courses in public relations and journalism, as well

as the country's only bachelor's degree in automotive restoration. But its strength and main focus has always been tying these topics into a more traditional liberal arts education.

Schneider hopes that this longstanding focus on career preparation, combined with the new entrepreneurial push rooted in the liberal arts, will not only prepare students for an uncertain workforce, but also help the college stand out in a crowded market that hasn't been kind to small private institutions in recent years.

"What better time to have a liberal arts degree?" he said. "Employers aren't necessarily looking for specialists or technologists. They're looking for people who can think, be innovative, understand complex issues and are willing to take risks. And that's how we're going to lift up the liberal arts in a new way."

### **Liberal Arts on the Rocks**

Even before the recession that began in fall 2008, a lot of small private liberal arts institutions were struggling to maintain enrollments and balance budgets. Because they often don't have large endowments, state backing, or sources to diversify revenue, these colleges are heavily dependent on tuition revenue, which can fluctuate. The recession made things worse for many colleges.

The situation for the 19 private colleges in Kansas is worse than in a lot of other states, said Schneider -- a sentiment echoed by Doug Penner, president of the Kansas Independent College Association. The state's college-going population is shrinking in size. A lot of those who are going to college are have been drawn to the large public universities that offer a broad array of programs, lower sticker price, and larger student bodies. "The publics, frankly, have been kicking our butts," Schneider said.

That's why he decided that McPherson needed to develop a more distinct identity. When he took over in 2009, he began talking with friends who worked for the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, which focuses on entrepreneurship and education. When he told them about the type of education that McPherson offered, they said it sounded a lot like what they were teaching entrepreneurs.

So Schneider spent time going around to places that taught entrepreneurship. "I realized that this training was the same set of skills we were trying to instill in a liberal arts graduate," he said. "They both need to be expressive, creative, critical thinkers, and understand risk."

### **Enterprising Backgrounds**

Part of the reason Schneider believes so strongly in the role of the liberal arts in fostering entrepreneurship has to do with his own experience. After graduating from McPherson in 1996, he worked for various companies and got involved in numerous

startups before returning to his alma mater as an administrator. He credits the type of education that colleges like McPherson offer with helping him take career risks.

"Most liberal arts schools are smaller and don't have the breadth of offerings you'd find at larger institutions," he said. "Because of that, you might have to take a class you're not comfortable with. You have to take Bio 1, and it's not easy biology, it's the same Bio 1 that the bio majors take. You have to get out of your comfort zone and just do it. The liberal arts education comes with a built-in idea of risk that's fostered from the student experience."

While it looks like most other liberal arts colleges, McPherson's history of focusing on career preparation and handful of unconventional programs help it stand out from the crowd. Most notable is its automotive restoration program -- McPherson's program is the only accredited one at any four-year institution.

While some might scoff at what is commonly viewed as a vocational field being offered at a liberal arts institution, faculty members said the program is as rigorous and academic as any other subject. Students spend time in the garage, but they also study the history of automobiles, their role in society, and the skills and mindset necessary to engage with the kind of clientele who buy and own the types of cars being restored. Many look at the program as akin to an art major.

"You would never turn over your Van Gogh to be restored by just anyone down the street who can paint," said Garrick Green, a professor of technology at McPherson who helps run the program. "You're dealing with a clientele who is interested in the person working on their car, which they view as a piece of artwork. They don't just want any grease monkey."

The program is the darling of automobile collectors across the country, and Jay Leno, a noted automobile collector, funds two scholarships.

Because of the automotive restoration program, McPherson has been able to attract groups of students who might not otherwise consider a liberal arts education. In contrast to many liberal arts colleges where women make up more than 60 percent of the student body, McPherson's student body is 45 percent male. Green said the students attracted to the program have always been fairly entrepreneurial, and many go into business for themselves once they finish.

### **'Leaping Off Swings'**

Schneider said that while the liberal arts lay a foundation for entrepreneurship, he wanted to give students more exposure to entrepreneurial thinking while in college to see how the two relate.

The first major entrepreneurial endeavor for the college was [Horizon Fund](#), which awards gifts of \$500 or less to students or groups through a competitive grant process

judged by faculty members. Since October 2010, the fund has awarded money for 39 ideas, including a Christian record label, an automotive-photography business, a fundraiser at a local elementary school, and a campus program that gives reusable bags to students. "Sometimes students have a really good idea and the only thing keeping it from getting over that hump is a few hundred bucks," said Adam Pracht, coordinator of development communications at McPherson. "This can help them get over that hump and get the ball rolling."

The college also jumped full-force into Kauffman's global entrepreneurship week and held a [weeklong competition](#) to develop an entrepreneurial venture for Haiti. Six teams of five students competed to create an idea within the week's time. The winning team went to Haiti to implement their idea.

"What ended up happening when they got down there is what sometimes happens with entrepreneurial ventures," Pracht said. "They realized there were more immediate needs on the ground before they could even begin their immediate plan, so they worked on those." Instead of creating a marketplace, the team ended up working on a fish farm.

Schneider said he was worried when he first began such plans that students who had come to McPherson expecting one type of education might not take to a new way of thinking. But he said he has been proven wrong by the number of students who have taken to the program.

He readily admits that not all faculty members and students have flocked to the entrepreneurial initiatives. "You're always going to have some people who sit back and say it's a fad, or because you now have a person with an entrepreneurial background running the college, those are just the ideas he's going to focus on," he said.

Schneider said he wouldn't have moved forward with the entrepreneurial push had there been too much faculty resistance. "I threw it on the table and said if you're not going to go for this, there's no way it will work," he said.

But most faculty members have signed on to the idea, especially when they were given a hand in crafting the programs and the entrepreneurship minor, said Kimberly Stanley, a poetry professor and chair of the department of modern languages. She is one of the faculty members who judge Horizon Fund proposals, and she said she believes the fund gets students more committed to the college and classroom. "Anything that gets students motivated, thinking creatively, and working together enhances the academic experience," she said.

"The thing that really won the faculty over was that this was not bringing in more business, but really something that can work with any of our majors," said Becki Bowman, a professor of communication whose class came up with the college's new "Freedom to Jump" marketing campaign. She said there has been no outspoken opposition to the entrepreneurial push.

The college recently received a [\\$1.2 million gift](#) to further its entrepreneurial efforts. It is also in the middle of a search for a new executive director of entrepreneurship who will coordinate entrepreneurial endeavors, develop new ideas for the campus, and work with faculty members to bring more entrepreneurial ideas into the classroom.

Betsy Gatewood, a business professor at Wake Forest University, is currently serving as the first entrepreneurial fellow for the college. She met Schneider when he visited Wake Forest to explore the university's [Program for Entrepreneurship in the Liberal Arts](#). In this role, Gatewood, who has run entrepreneurship and small-business programs at a number of universities, serves as a coach and resource for faculty members and administrators who want to learn more about entrepreneurship. She is also helping connect Schneider to entrepreneurship-education resources.

Gatewood said one of McPherson's strengths in its entrepreneurial endeavor is its size. "Because it's so small, it doesn't have to worry about silos," she said. "It is much easier for the faculty there to work together to develop a new program."

This fall the college will launch a new advertising campaign based on the idea of "Freedom to Jump." It will also begin offering courses in entrepreneurship that lead to a minor, which will include three courses on entrepreneurship. The rest of the minor will consist of courses intended to stimulate entrepreneurial thinking, such as "social problems" and "biomedical ethics."

Schneider said he's not worried that the focus on entrepreneurship will detract from the liberal arts core of the college. Instead he sees the entrepreneurial activities as augmenting the traditional education. "We're just placing the liberal arts in a different context," he said. "We're giving the liberal arts meaning today instead of focusing on its meaning 10, 15, 20 years ago."

Since most of the initiatives are still less than a year old, officials said it is too soon to evaluate how well the transition is paying off. But outside observers said the college has already done much to set itself apart from others.

"In this day and age a school can't afford not to have a distinctive brand," said Penner, of the Kansas Independent College Association. "Plain vanilla education is no longer enticing. McPherson has done a great job distinguishing themselves."

— **Kevin Kiley**

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