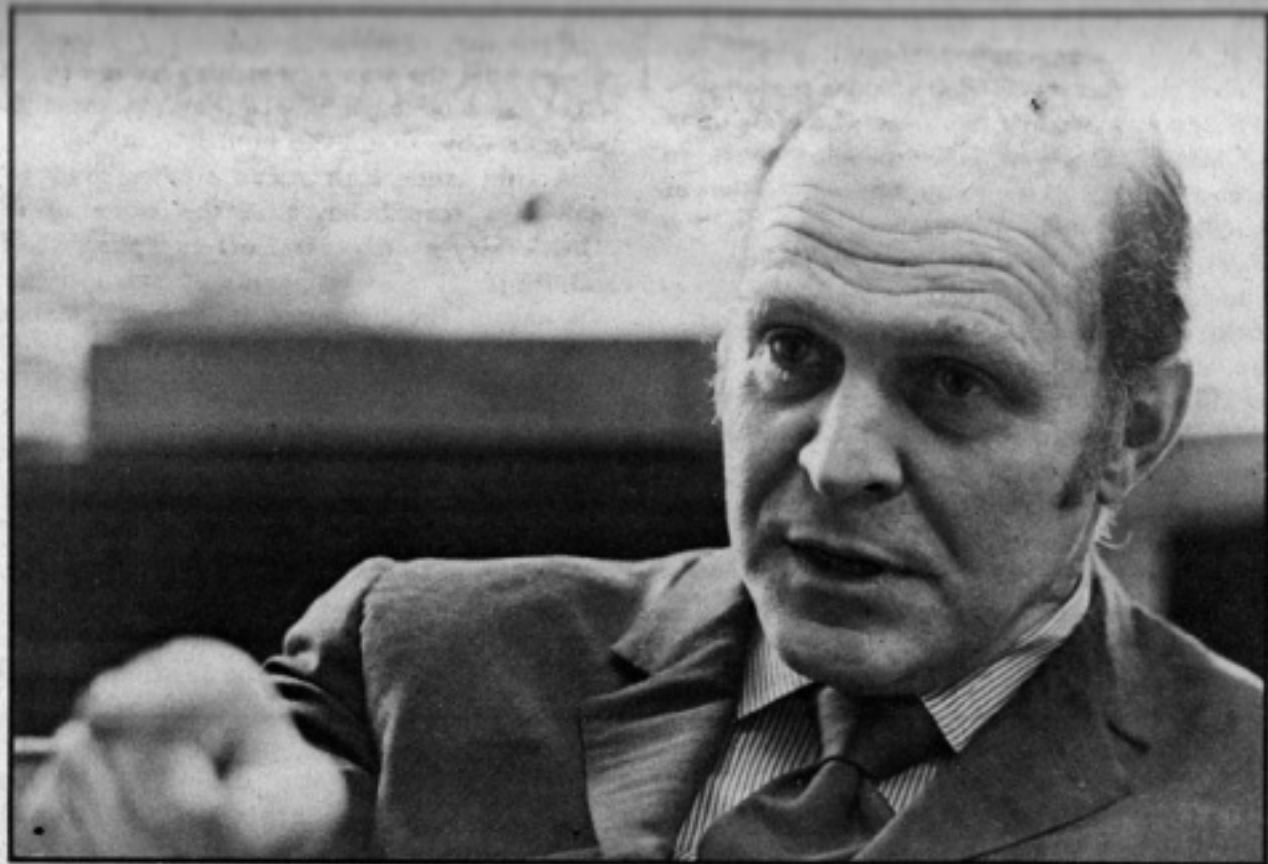


The plight of private colleges

Andy Craig '76



Several thoughtful articles on higher education have appeared recently in the Utica Daily Press. Compiled by the paper's education writer Craig Brandon, they dealt with such sensitive subjects as coeducation and the economics of maintaining private colleges. The first of a two-part article by Mr. Brandon is reprinted with permission of the Utica Daily Press.

Dr. Thomas A. Bartlett, outgoing president of Colgate University, says that if private colleges are to survive in the 1980s it will take a combination of government support and tremendous effort on the part of the colleges.

Bartlett, who will leave Colgate this summer to become president of the Association of American Universities in Washington, D.C., said that in light of reduced enrollments, all colleges will be forced to retrench.

"There are going to be closings," he said, "but that doesn't necessarily mean independent colleges. The challenge is to make sure

that as institutions are cut back and merge and reorganize that we do it on some basis other than political muscle in the legislature. There has to be an educational and economic rationale for what's going on."

Bartlett compared the plight of private colleges to that of Sisyphus, the mythical Greek who was condemned to push a rock up a mountainside for all eternity, only to have it fall back again as he neared the top.

"Private institutions have to push that rock up every single year," he said, "and the fact that you did it brilliantly the year before doesn't mean it will be any easier the next year. Every year is going to be a struggle.

"Institutions that cannot deal with their problems now are really in trouble," he said. "Because these are, in some sense, the good days." He said he expects the going to get tougher in the next decade.

"The question in the future will be is it still possible for institutions to do well, and that's all

they can ask is that it be possible," he said. "The determination will depend largely on factors outside the college's control: public policy and economic climate."

Bartlett said state and federal governments will be making decisions in the next few years which will fundamentally affect the future of private colleges. These decisions, he said, will revolve around financial aid and the closing of colleges.

The percentage of financial aid for students at private colleges, Bartlett said, is the power that the government has over how many students attend private instead of public colleges. At present, he said, financial aid from state and federal governments makes up about six to eight percent of the private college's cost.

"That six to eight percent is a terribly important margin," he said, "because it makes a huge difference in where the students go."

Bartlett suggested that governments use this percentage as a control to preserve both public

and private colleges. When too few students apply at private colleges, the percentage should be increased a few points. It could also be lowered if too few students attended public colleges.

"The best bargain that the state government can get is to put small subsidies into the private sector," he said. "If they're talking about the most results for their money, they can pay eight or ten percent of the budget of an independent college instead of paying 90 percent of the cost to educate students as they do in the state colleges."

Colgate's tuition for next year has been set at \$4,095 while the tuition at state university centers such as Binghamton is \$750 per year for freshmen and sophomores and \$900 per year for juniors and seniors. Out-of-state students must pay \$450 and \$600 more.

In spite of this difference in tuition, Bartlett said private and public colleges spend about the same amount of money per student for education. The difference, he said, is that the government subsidies to public colleges mean they can charge less for tuition.

Bartlett cautioned that the demise of the state's private colleges would ruin the economy of the state.

"If the independent colleges were to close down and all students were to go to public colleges," he said. "I think the financial requirements would bankrupt the state. It would be astronomical."

Also to be considered, he said, is the money that the colleges bring into the state, both through out-of-state students and research grants.

"I suspect that the money we bring into the state outweighs the subsidies we receive," he said. "In effect we are a net economic asset to the state."

When considering the future of private colleges, Bartlett said, it is important to consider the economic situation as well as the educational one.

"If you have a strong economy, private colleges feel it at every point," he said, "and if the economy goes sour, we are one of the first to feel it."

The reason for this, he said, is that private colleges depend on the "discretionary wealth" of alumni and other philanthropists for a large percentage of their income.

"We feel very sensitively shifts in economic activity," he said. "When income gets hurt, the first thing people cut back are the gifts that they used to give to things like colleges."

Besides the loss of gifts, Bartlett said parents tend to send their children to public rather than private institutions when the economy is slow.

"It's important for us for people to feel that they have money," he said. "They have to have enough to match their standard of living, plus the extra discretionary wealth. That's one of the questions for the 1980s."

Bartlett has been president of Colgate since 1969, coming from the presidency of the American University in Cairo, Egypt. He served on Governor Rockefeller's Task Force on Financing Higher Education and was chairman of the committee which picked the successor to State Education Commissioner Ewald Nyquist. □