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The “Little House” That Can

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Thanks to the Association of American Colleges and Universities, I have recently been given the wonderful opportunity to direct a project that brings together both regional and specialized accreditors to reflect on some of the challenges to American higher education as they busy themselves with revising their standards and processes. It seems to me that we have some grounds for being optimistic about the “little house,” as we’re calling undergraduate colleges, but there will be two or three intermediate steps in reaching that conclusion.

The first challenge, I think I’ve learned, is to be very clear about the difference between earning a degree and getting credentialed in something or other. The major difference between these two, as very well explained by Judith Eaton at CHEA, is general education. So, secondly, degree programs will be more what they ought to be and thus perhaps more successful the more they emphasize general education and a major together, rather than the major alone. That will require (third step) a highly integrated approach to student outcomes, curriculum design, and faculty responsibility. Finally, there will result a deeper and wider appreciation for those institutions that can do this best. And I think—to mix the metaphors shamelessly—that undergraduate colleges definitely have a leg up on this approach to higher education.

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