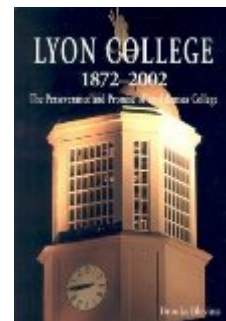


**Brooks Blevins.** *Lyon College, 1872-2002: The Perseverance and Promise of an Arkansas College.* Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003. xviii + 363 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55728-742-7.



**Reviewed by** W. Bruce Leslie

**Published on** H-Education (September, 2003)

The Strange Career of a Liberal Arts College in the Ozarks

How odd for a college history to begin by describing the death throes of a neighboring college, where a tornado delivered the *coup de grace*! To paraphrase a cliché, collegiate histories are written by the survivors, especially prosperous ones. By reminding us of collegiate mortality, Brooks Blevins highlights the astonishing, even bizarre optimism that drove Americans to found colleges in unpromising places and circumstances. And reviewing a commissioned history of a small denominational college in rural Arkansas also seemed unpromising. How wrong I was. This excellent institutional history chronicles a type of college that rarely receives scholarly attention, and thus offers valuable insights into American higher education.

The book details Lyon College's unpropitious founding, near-death experiences, changing missions, and recent transformation into a wealthy liberal arts college. The seeds for Lyon College ("Arkansas College" until 1994) were sown on barren ground. This Southern Presbyterian college

slowly grew in one of the least Presbyterian regions of one of the least Presbyterian states in a small town in the foothills of the Ozarks in northern Arkansas. Its motto, "Perseverance conquers all, God willing," was prophetic.

Since social, demographic, and economic forces made founding a Presbyterian college in Arkansas risky, and in Batesville foolhardy, only very persistent individuals could give the unlikely venture life. South Carolinian Reverend Isaac Long arrived in Batesville as a missionary surveying the dire circumstances of Presbyterian institutions in the postbellum South. The residents convinced him to stay on as minister. Long first founded, with his sister-in-law, Batesville Male and Female Academy and then, in 1872, he added collegiate classes. Although "Arkansas College" owed its birth to Presbyterians, survival depended upon local non-Presbyterian supporters (including a Jewish merchant). Surprisingly, the college was co-educational from the start; all students followed a conventional classical curriculum, lived under strict *in loco parentis*, and had literary societies as their approved outlet.

For almost four decades Long and his son led the institution through short fat years and long lean ones. The former came when donors underwrote modest expansion and the regional economy was sufficiently prosperous to keep college enrollments above one hundred. The latter came with regional depressions, natural disasters, and institutional mistakes. Music, education, and more science were added to the curriculum. The old triumvirate of literary societies, YMCA, and athletics dominated the student life, with the latter growing in influence after 1900.

World War I surprisingly restored Lyon College to prosperity via several gifts from Arkansas Presbyterians and local boosters; a SATC unit more than compensated for the loss of male students. The 1920s saw considerable adaptation to emerging national norms. A new curricular structure of general education followed by a major required more highly educated faculty. A traditional student life based on literary societies and the YMCA and YWCA lost out to fraternities, sororities, debating and other clubs, and an inter-collegiate athletic program whose new competitiveness was symbolized by replacing the peaceable lamb mascot with the more threatening panther!

For decades colleges in Arkansas remained on the sidelines of mainstream American higher education. Then, in 1924, the accreditation of the first two Arkansas institutions by the North Central Association drew Lyon College toward national norms. The preparatory school was eliminated in 1925 and "Carnegie Units" became the measurement of high school attainment for admission. Courses in shorthand, typing, and home economics disappeared from the curriculum and a modern administrative staff was hired. But accreditation was denied due to insufficient endowment and library.

Soon the depression and World War II made survival an issue again. G.I. Bill students offered a brief reprieve by raising enrollment to four hundred, but by the early 1950s an unsupportive Syn-

od wanted to merge Lyon with another struggling college. Local pride, a dynamic new president, and 1950s prosperity staved off this threat to Lyon's existence and accreditation was finally granted in 1958. Having sailed through the 1960s, buffeted only by gentle ripples from the waves crashing on better-known campuses, the national demographic and economic decline of the 1970s nearly submerged Lyon. Then an unexpected 1981 bequest gave little Lyon College the largest endowment in Arkansas. Admissions standards were raised significantly, liberal arts was restored to the center of the curriculum, and ratings in *U.S. News and World Report* and *Money Magazine* followed.

But continued status creep in the 1990s backfired. Determined to reach a higher Carnegie category, Lyon cultivated an elite image that alienated its traditional local clientele while only attracting a few of the targeted students from metropolitan suburbs. When Lyon finally attained the desired rating it was a pyrrhic victory because the Carnegie Foundation stripped the category of its elite connotations. Despite an endowment of over \$500,000 per student, Lyon had to retreat from the purely liberal arts model by re-introducing some professional majors, ending "needs-based" admission, and attempting to repair its local image. Despite its new-found prosperity, Lyon College's ambitions continued to be frustrated by the limitations of location.

Some of the trends described by Blevins confirm our expectations. The overriding theme is convergence with national norms. After WWI, the local and denominational traditions increasingly blended with national models. >From the 1920s, the professional culture fashioned in research universities shaped the image of the desired faculty. Seeking accreditation from the North Central Association and fulfilling the demands of foundations influenced institutional strategies from the 1920s through the 1950s, by which time Lyon College had lost much of its uniqueness and increas-

ingly resembled other small colleges. The availability of Federal funds from the Great Society and later from state programs reduced differences between public and private colleges; by 1981, 30 percent of Lyon's income came from public sources. In the 1980s and 1990s, *U.S. News and World Report* rankings and Carnegie Foundation categories channeled aspirations. Thus, this book adds to the recent bumper crop of histories of higher education in the South depicting colleges and universities drawn toward models previously developed in the East and Midwest, a centripetal force reinforced by foundations and eventually the Federal government.

Although the process of convergence with national norms is predictable, Lyon's history also contains complexities and ironies that defy linear trajectories of modernization. The persistent attraction of the small liberal arts college model powered cyclical emulation. In bad times, Lyon repeatedly added career-oriented majors, even non-collegiate courses, to the curriculum; every return of stability restored the small liberal arts college model. The cycle continues to the present. In the 1970s Lyon became a "comprehensive" college. With the enhanced endowment after 1980 it re-embraced a strictly liberal arts college model, and after problems in the 1990s it restored some professional programs. Some Lyon leaders wanted to concentrate on serving local clientele, but they only got a hearing during financial exigencies. As Blevins points out, liberal arts colleges depend on academically talented affluent students who do not demand immediate job skills; they have always been in short supply around Batesville, Arkansas.

The formal religious affiliation remained strong, though its nature evolved. Trustees, once primarily local clerics, increasingly were Presbyterian laymen from across Arkansas. In the 1970s, when many church-related colleges were loosening denominational bonds, Lyon gave the local Synod veto power over trustee selection. Rather

than distancing itself from its denomination, Lyon often sought more attention from a reluctant synod. The gifts that underwrote Lyon's soaring endowment were inspired primarily by Presbyterian connections. Every president has been Presbyterian or worked in another Presbyterian college.

Ethnic identity has grown, or been invented. To establish a clearer identity in the 1940s, Lyon College adopted Scottishness. Scotch-Irishness would have been more historically accurate, but had less appeal. On the athletic field the "Panthers" became the "Scots," the campus newspaper became the *Highlander*, and a women's singing group called "The Lassies" became the college's best-known ambassadors. This identity was re-emphasized in the 1980s when Lyon established a Pipe and Drums group as its trademark, staged Highland Games, and established a Scottish Heritage Program. When the college resolved to drop the name "Arkansas College" in the early 1990s, it was only prevented from becoming "Aberdeen College" by legal objections from the Scottish university of that name. Colleges are masters at inventing traditions to sustain an imagined community!

The sixties only distantly affected Lyon; it was on the periphery of the civil rights and student movements that suffused life at research universities and elite private colleges, and dominated media coverage. However, the perceived threat from "outsiders" caused Lyon to retreat from geographical diversity. After enthusiastically wooing Easterners in the early 1960s, it ceased recruiting "outsiders" in 1967 and by the mid-1970s had returned to a primarily Arkansas student body. The token racial integration of the mid-1960s morphed into a student body that reflected the area's racial make-up a decade later. By an ironic twist, local blacks became more desirable recruits than out-of-state whites.

This book triggers several thoughts about writing college histories. First, we need scholarly histories of a wider variety of colleges. Most col-

lege histories chronicle liberal arts colleges that have long been prosperous and now serve academically and socially elite students. Lyon does not fall into that category. But this volume's appearance does not offer a formula for preventing poorer private and public colleges' histories from disappearing into the memory hole. Only colleges with a healthy endowment are likely to commission a professional historian like Blevins to write their histories and to provide a sophisticated college archive. Without Lyon's recent windfall, this book would probably not have been written.

On the other hand, the luxury of being commissioned entails well-recognized dangers for a historian. Blevins negotiates these well. He is honest about controversy, even labelling Lyon's Scottish identity "contrived" and noting the joy some felt when a recent president departed. He discusses conflicts that shape institutional mission without detailing personal scandals or petty rivalries, a reasonable compromise.

A few issues could have received more attention. Surprisingly for a southern private college, Lyon was co-educational from the beginning, a decision that was apparently never revisited. That deserves more explanation as do the synodical politics that bedeviled Lyon's denominational relationship. And students disappear in what becomes a "presidential history" for recent decades.

But listing omissions feels perverse when reviewing a doorstep-sized volume. Few outside the Lyon College community will read this lengthy book. Blevins opens each section with an interesting anecdote, but offers few other concessions to readers. In true Presbyterian fashion, this excellent study tests readers' discipline. The prose is very readable, but the length and organization will deter scholars.

It is difficult to write for a college community and scholars simultaneously. He successfully structures a narrative written for the Lyon College community around issues of regional and national significance. Blevins's dual vision and judi-

cious scholarship produces a volume that will reward scholars who dip into a few chapters.

Predictions a few decades ago that institutions like Lyon were doomed could not have been more wrong. Indeed, most small liberal arts colleges, church-related and not, are thriving. To employ an overused phrase, Blevins tells "a very American story" of denominationalism and localism that fostered a type of institution with few parallels in other societies. Like minor league baseball, liberal arts colleges survived the perils of the 1970s and now flourish by offering a sense of identity and community in a world dominated by bigness. For many potential students and their parents, "small is beautiful." Daniel Webster must be gloating.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-education>

**Citation:** W. Bruce Leslie. Review of Blevins, Brooks. *Lyon College, 1872-2002: The Perseverance and Promise of an Arkansas College*. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8190>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.