

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND for A WINGSPREAD CONFERENCE ON THE NEW AMERICAN COLLEGE

In 1991 a group of ten chief academic officers from private, comprehensive liberal arts colleges and universities across the nation formed an informal association to explore common academic issues of mission, identity, distinctiveness, and excellence at our institutions. More than two years, several lengthy meetings, and numerous position papers later, we (now about fifteen institutions) have not only come to realize that we have many defining characteristics in common, but that our institutions may represent an answer to society's call for greater accountability, quality, and productivity in higher education (as reflected most recently in An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education, the report of the Wingspread Group on Higher Education). Our interactions over this period with Ernest Boyer, including mutual recognition that we address many of the concerns expressed in his widely discussed works such as College: The Undergraduate Experience in America (1987) and Scholarship Reconsidered (1990), have led to the conclusion that our type of school may constitute a new and vitally needed model for higher education: in Boyer's words, a "new American college," perhaps more definitively the "new American comprehensive college."

The 1990's have seen higher education experience pressures other business sectors are facing due to increasing competition, rising costs, concerns about quality, and public demands for greater consumer responsiveness. These demands for improved efficiency and effectiveness in meeting societal needs inspired both the Wingspread Group on Higher Education and the growing self-consciousness of the private comprehensive colleges. Although not uniform in their institutional histories and characteristics, many of these schools have descended from small and well-regarded (but often poorly endowed) residential liberal arts colleges, which exploited their often suburban locational advantage during the 1970's and 1980's to attract large numbers of adult and transfer students and to develop pre-professional undergraduate and graduate programs in such areas as business, management, and computer science. Other private comprehensive colleges have a longer history of program and student diversity and varied locational circumstances, but all of these schools share many key characteristics, starting with a careful emphasis on undergraduate education.

In the process of diversifying their student bodies and in some cases more than doubling their enrollments, comprehensive colleges have experienced significant institutional transformations. While maintaining the strengths of their liberal arts heritages, they have taken on some of the best features of large research universities. Avoiding weaknesses of both established models -- e.g., resistance to change, tendencies toward overspecialization, declining focus on undergraduate students -- the emerging private comprehensive colleges have developed adaptive, "valued-added" characteristics responsive to societal concerns. True to their liberal arts heritages, they offer highly personalized, student-centered education in small classes taught by faculty whose primary commitment is to teaching. At the same time, somewhat akin to the large university, these faculty have developed diverse forms of scholarship which augment their expertise, inform their teaching, and benefit the larger community, often within curricula that uniquely blend liberal learning and pre-professional studies. Consequently, the private comprehensive colleges are uniquely positioned to provide value-centered, collaborative learning for ethical leadership equally applicable to the worlds of work and democratic citizenship.