

## **Hidden Curriculum: The Intangible Value of a Small School Education, Part 4 of 5**

by Tommy Curtin

Dear Parents,

I presume every Holy Spirit Prep parent understands that a small school provides the personal attention that helps students get the most out of their education. That is certainly true, and it is noteworthy. However, as it is also universally accepted by our community, please allow me to take the balance of this letter in a different direction.

I graduated in a class of 60 students in Wichita, Kansas before heading off to the University of Notre Dame with its 8,000 undergraduates. Did attending a smaller high school make for a harder transition to college? In a way, but let me explain.

A lot of things about college life were unfamiliar to me. The binge drinking was new, as was the hook-up culture - yes, even at Our Lady's University<sup>1</sup>. The superficiality and fickleness of college friendships also took me by surprise. I watched dorm mates exhibit a chameleon-like ability to change themselves to achieve popularity among equally insecure groups of complete strangers. All this made me feel pretty uncomfortable, and I have to admit, my small, family-oriented school didn't properly "prepare" me for it.

Like Holy Spirit Prep, my school prepared me instead for responsible decision-making and genuine friendship, and its smaller size forced me to be authentic in my relationships with peers. As a result, I felt out of place in the college social scene. So I left it alone. When I did, I found truly satisfying friendships and pursuits. Granted, I had to look just a bit harder for them because they weren't hanging out of dorm windows shouting at me as they did during Freshman Orientation. Fortunately, patience is the midwife of success.

Today, I experience a certain disappointment whenever someone tells me they believe a larger school will prepare students better for the bigness of college. Certainly, larger schools can sometimes offer programs a smaller school cannot. Still, bigness itself is not a virtue to tout but a challenge to overcome. Teenagers need to be known, truly known, by the adults and friends in their lives. Unless they believe they are truly known, they will never believe they are fully accepted. Teenagers don't always desire to be known though, because it can result in uncomfortable transparency or the dreaded "awkwardness." They'd prefer to share themselves through a Twitter account or Facebook status update, because these media ask nothing in return and don't call students out for being inauthentic.

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<sup>1</sup> N.B. The drawbacks I share about the University of Notre Dame are drawbacks that will be experienced at almost any college and are not intended to prejudice the reader against my alma mater. Rather, we must accept that today, even at Catholic universities, the virtue of our graduates will be severely tested. A successful high school prepares them for this challenge not by exposing them to the same vices ahead of time, but by offering compelling models of a more rewarding lifestyle.

Ultimately, a preparatory school such as HSP should not aspire to prepare students simply for college, but for real life. What makes a person successful in real life? Self-knowledge, leadership ability, trust, constancy in friendship, confidence, and a servant's heart, to name a few. These are all traits a student inherently develops by attending a smaller school, especially when the student remains in the community for several years.

Think about a few examples of those small school moments and the character they build in young men and women:

- “It’s weird here. Everyone knows everything about me.” Hidden lesson: *I can’t pretend to be someone I’m not.*
- “Michelle and I had a fight. It stinks, cuz we still have three classes together.” Hidden lesson: *I can’t run away from challenging relationships.*
- “The principal asked me to host a shadowing student today. It’s going to be so awkward! But what was I supposed to do, say no?” Hidden lesson: *I guess I have to step up and contribute just like everyone else.*

These are just a few of the lessons the hidden curriculum of a small school teaches students. You can imagine how these lessons might not be learned in the bigness of a larger school. In such an environment, students can more easily pretend to be someone their not; discard normal, challenging friendships for new; and only receive the leadership opportunities they proactively seek out.

I could write a great deal more on this topic, but I will end with this thought. The hours of my life today are given mostly to two small communities: family and work. I imagine it is the same for most parents reading this letter. Long gone are the college days of 8,000 undergraduates, 400 dorm “friends”, a prepaid meal plan, responsibility only to myself, no babies for miles around, and my own opinion driving all my decisions. Long gone is the unreality of college.

That time ended and real life began. Now my friendships are fewer, but truer. My days are harder, but better. I’m so glad my smallish high school prepared me for it. And I’m glad Holy Spirit Prep offers just that preparation for each of its graduates.

Yours in Catholic Education,  
Tommy