

(E)quality in Education - a Financial Impossibility? The Case of Liberal Arts Education in Germany

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Abstract

Liberal arts colleges could embody a broad and robust social justice agenda in higher education in at least four senses. On a curricular level, we can note the egalitarian nature of learning, weakening the teacher-student dichotomy as well as disciplinary boundaries, by offering small-scale, discussion-based seminars within interdisciplinary integrated curricula. On an institutional level, the social integration of academic learning with campus-based communities promotes the self-organization of students and the democratizations of university bureaucracies. Their general non-vocational mission shows a healthy distance towards the neo-liberal marketization of higher learning, and an alternative to a structured higher education system that tend to reproduce social injustices. Finally, the size and flexibility of liberal arts colleges often make them the ideal incubators for radical, even utopian, educational experimentation. (see McArthur “think piece” as well as: Nussbaum 2010, Roth 2014)

Though traditionally associated with the U.S., both Western and Eastern Europe have seen a surge in liberal education institutions since the 1990s (van der Wende 2011; Godwin 2013; Godwin 2015), half of them private. Yet unlike some of their US counterparts, they face a financial trilemma: without a supportive culture of private philanthropy, and lacking public support, they increasingly rely on tuition and slash financial support for students. This way they put their social justice potential at stake, and risk becoming elitist and exclusionary.

Germany is the prime example of a case where close to zero state-funding was available, yet liberal arts institutions constitute a visible part of its private higher education system (Frank 2010). We undertake a close-up analysis of five German liberal arts institutions to identify the resiliency-increasing features and strategies, both on the curricular and the institutional level, that best allow them to realize their egalitarian and utopian potential even under adverse financial circumstances. To this end we combine quantitative and qualitative approaches, looking at a range of institutional and curricular variables and contextualizing numbers through a series of interviews with key personnel. The paper to be presented contains preliminary results of our study.

Keywords

Liberal Arts, liberal education, German higher education, private universities, curriculum

Introduction

Private liberal arts in Germany

Although European universities are predominantly offering disciplinary and professional study paths, there are signs of something of a (re)emergence of more general education undergraduate curricula over last three decades. Making reference to ancient and medieval tradition of “artes liberales”, and its broad modern reinterpretations – especially in the US (Kimball, 1995, 2010; Rothblatt, 2003)– programs pursuing more interdisciplinary, or multidisciplinary education have been labelled „liberal (arts) education”.

A movement towards liberal education started in Europe in mid-1990s, especially in post-communist countries in Central-Eastern Europe. While first descriptions of the range of interdisciplinary innovations do not describe them in terms of “liberal

education” (Dahrendorf, 2000; Darvas, 1995), the term has soon been adopted for a range of programs across Europe and is now used by both scholars (Becker, Kortunov, & Fedchin, 2012; Detweiler & Axer, 2012; Gillespie, 2001; Lundström, Beckman, Borgert, & Tholin, 2013; Norgaard & Hajnal, 2014; O’Connor & Wilczek, 2011), journalists (Attwood, 2009; Holdsworth, 2000; Luxmoore, 2015; Redden, 2009, 2013; Woodard, 2002) and organizations, for example “Artes Liberales” Association (1996-2000) and Consortium of European Colleges of Liberal Arts (ECOLAS) established in 2006 (Abrahám, 2012; Gazette CEU, 1998; Kritika and Kontext, 2003).

The phenomenon was first systematically approached in a study by Marijk van der Wende (2011), and later some European examples were included in an edited volume on liberal education in developing countries (Peterson, 2012). Kara Godwin (2013) conducted an exploratory and comparative study of liberal education outside the U.S., describing 52 programs in Europe. According to the same criteria – self-identification or a combination of core curriculum, interdisciplinary requirement and transdisciplinary skills – the number in 2016 might well be over 70.

Clearly inspired by traditional American undergraduate degree offered in residential collegiate setting through curriculum combining breadth of disciplinary exposure with a major/concentration, European liberal education programs are largely original and diverse in terms of both ends and means. Their sudden growth starting at the last decade of 20th century has been credited to curricular innovation, political transformation and the shifting higher education frameworks due to the Bologna Process (Godwin, 2015a; van der Wende, 2011). Such generalizations blur considerable differences between private and public liberal education programs, time of inception, language of instruction, U.S. affiliation as well as unequal distribution among countries. For example, the biggest growth to date happened in the Netherlands (now including 9 liberal arts bachelor programs offered in similarly organized university colleges which are parts of public universities), while France and southern countries have long been void of original developments. Ukraine has now closed all four individual interdepartmental “colleges” (inspired by Polish examples), and in the UK, after first liberal arts program was opened only in 2010, new programs are now mushrooming and might soon overtake the Netherlands.

The biggest European higher education system, Germany, provides a complex picture that has not yet been described by scholars. Two institutions offer (differently shaped) liberal education programs as part of public higher education, therefore with relatively stable financing. Aside of them, there are also at least five older programs (which typically do not identify as “liberal arts”, although they meet Godwin’s criteria) which are private, independent and much less financially secure. In a country with strong disciplinary tradition, limited international orientation and scarce culture of private educational philanthropy, private liberal education programs are fighting an uphill battle for survival. Common challenges include accreditation, attracting students and managing financial pressure to sustain their holistic development and often social justice mission in a setting of peculiar educational institution.

Significance

Our research has social, administrative, and methodological relevance.

First, on a societal level, identifying resiliency-increasing features of European liberal education initiatives can help them realize their innovative and egalitarian potential. Liberal arts colleges could embody a broad and robust social justice agenda in higher education in at least four senses. On a curricular level, we can note the egalitarian nature of learning, weakening the teacher-student dichotomy as well as disciplinary boundaries, by offering small-scale, discussion-based seminars within interdisciplinary integrated curricula. On an institutional level, the social integration of academic learning with campus-based communities promotes the self-organization of students and the democratizations of university bureaucracies. Their general non-vocational mission shows a healthy distance towards the neo-liberal marketization of higher learning, and an alternative to a structured higher education system that tend to reproduce social injustices. Finally, the size and flexibility of liberal arts colleges often make them the ideal incubators for radical, even utopian, educational experimentation. (see McArthur “think piece” as well as: (Finn Jr & Ravitch, 2007; Grant & Riesman, 1978; Nussbaum, 1998; Roth, 2014). By offering insights into how such institutions can meet financial challenges we hope to contribute to these worthy social goals.

Secondly, it will be practically relevant to university administrations, founders, owners, and, in the longer run, all other stakeholders of these universities, especially in financially difficult situations. Our research is especially relevant to private liberal education (according to Godwin, 50% of all European programs, in 2013). Without state-funding (as in the Netherlands) or a culture of private philanthropy (as in the U.S.) private liberal education often had to rely on tuition, thus risking elitist exclusivity. Of the European countries that fall under this category, only Germany has been the host to a series of successful private liberal education institutions. Yet the larger European trend of an increase in liberal education initiatives

seems bound to continue, and insofar as the general conditions are similar we submit that our research might offer relevant insights for future liberal education initiatives in countries such as Austria, France, Poland.

Thirdly, this study would also contribute to the methodological discussion on defining liberal education outside the U.S. context. Existing approaches (curriculum, organization and learning outcomes-based) are mostly based on American examples with their tradition of non-vocational undergraduate curricula. We provide studies of different liberal arts curricula as they negotiate their institutional identity and educational mission in the European higher education landscape of the early 21st century, which will help us better understand the internal diversity within the liberal education movement.

Study design

Research question and criteria

The following study focuses on the last question: how do German private liberal education institutions cope with financial pressure? It offers a close-up analysis of five German liberal arts institutions to identify the resiliency-increasing features and strategies, both on the curricular and the institutional level, that best allow them to realize their egalitarian and utopian potential even under adverse financial circumstances.

In the German context, “liberal education” or “liberal arts education” are not commonly used words to describe institutions or ideas in higher education; therefore there is a need for operationalized set of criteria to select matching programs. Scholars often find themselves choosing between Scylla of authoritative, non-defined list (European Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences, n.d.; van der Wende, 2011) and Charybdis of highly complex criteria (Godwin, 2015b). For the purposes of this study, “liberal education” would refer to German higher education institutions offering undergraduate programs with the following characteristics:

- 1 curricula with distribution requirements in at least two different areas of knowledge and
- 2 some general education protocol (academic courses required from all students at the institution), with
- 3 element of engaging, small-scale pedagogies, (first three criteria based on (Godwin 2015, with changes);
- 4 some evidence of non-entirely professional/vocational aim of education,
- 5 founded and primarily accredited as German institutions (rather than branch campus).

This yields the following sample: Bard College Berlin (formerly European College of Liberal Arts), Bucerius Law School, Jacobs University Bremen (formerly International University Bremen), University of Witten-Herdecke, Zeppelin University.¹

Methodology

The study design is based on semi-structured, exploratory, qualitative interviews with key informants, including senior administration, faculty members, and students, and including people formerly associated with the institutions. Each of those institutions have been approached by one of the investigators with an invitation for participating in the study and naming their representative, and independently some of the key informants have been identified through snowball sampling and approached directly. The interviews have been conducted in English, recorded and transcribed, and the participants were anonymized and confirmed in written their informed consent. So far, over 30 interviews with members of the five institutions have been executed. Additionally, websites of the institutions and relevant literature have been consulted to harness basic data about the programs, curricula, press releases and marketing materials. Given the difficulties with obtaining data from private entities, in the following version there are no references to internal documents of the institutions.

Prior to conducting the fieldwork, the following variables have been identified as of interest for the study:

- Institutional variables: size of student body, student diversity (national backgrounds, socio-economic mobility), faculty (size, tenure vs adjunct), number of degrees offered, tuition charged, type and extent of financial aid offered, average class size.

¹ Touro College Berlin and NYU Berlin do not meet the fifth criterion. Studium Individuale at Leuphana University Lüneburg and the Freiburg University College of Liberal Arts and Sciences meet all five criteria, yet are part of public universities and have therefore been excluded from the sample, since different funding conditions obtain.

- Curricular variables: number of contact hours, co-teaching, tutorials / academic advising scheme, financing undergraduate research, opportunities for vocational training, extent of distribution requirement, extent of general education protocol, other innovative features.

The interviews always included, in approximately this order: a question about the nature and duration of the affiliation of the interviewee with his or her institution, questions about the extent and duration of financial pressure, questions about the institutional and curricular state before, during, and after increased financial pressure (where applicable), a meta-questions about the questionnaire, and a question about further potential interviewees.

From our institutional variables we hope to learn: What kinds of institutional partnerships, if any, are most conducive to financial stability? Did financial stress cause the institutions to reduce their offerings and size or to expand? Did they aim to consolidate and cut costs or did they aim to grow to create more revenue and distribute costs better? What institutional reforms proved helpful to cope with financial stress?

From the curricular variables we hope to learn: Did financial stress cause the institutions to adopt more mainstream, less innovative curricula or did they try to increase a competitive advantage by sustaining or expanding the innovative features of their curricular? Did they have to compromise on educational vision and looked for a safe bet or did they seek to sharpen their profile and bet on their unique selling points? What curricular features showed the best balance between innovation and financial resiliency?

From the pilot interviews it appeared that Bard College Berlin provides the richest example of financial pressures and curricular restructuring to meet the new demands, and will form a core of our analyses. Where relevant, references to other institutions included in the sample have been made. A separate section deals with features that were not present at Bard College Berlin, yet might be treated as good practices for private liberal education in Germany.

Sample

In this section we first offer a brief comparative overview of all five programs that meet our criteria, discussing basic institutional and curricular features and situate them in their larger geographical and historical context. Table 1 presents some basic institutional figures² of five such universities, which are in the focus of this study and Table 2 shows their geographical location. We then proceed to a more detailed analysis of one particular institution, Bard College Berlin, and how financial pressure affected its development at different moments of its history. Finally, we offer a discussion of these findings also in regard to preliminary findings from other institutions.

A study conducted by McKinsey and the German Association of Foundations for Science (Stifterverband für die Wissenschaft) found in 2010 that private universities make up 25% of all German universities. However, only 5% of all the students are enrolled in one of them (Frank, Hieronimus, Killius, & Meyer-Guckel, 2015). Half of them have been founded after the year 2000 and the numbers of students at private universities, though still small, has quadrupled between 2000 and 2010. The vast majority of these private universities (91%) focus on continued professional education, professional first degrees (eg MBAs), or applied sciences. They are legally often not accredited as Universitäten, but as Fachhochschulen (usually translated as: universities of applied sciences; *ibid.*), conduct very little research and offer teaching with a very narrow focus. Only a handful private institutions try to compete with the larger public universities and attempt to create innovative impulses in research and education.³ The first of those, and for a long time the only one, was the University of Witten-Herdecke. In the early 2000s more universities with similarly high and broad ambitions were created. In some cases one can truly speak of a second generation here: the founders of Zeppelin University, for example, are all alumni of Witten-Herdecke.

² We hope to soon add numbers also on the share of international students.

³ Frank et al. distinguishes five sub-categories of private higher education in Germany. The ones analysed in this paper fall under two of them: 1) “specialists”, defined as “private higher education institutions who aspire to conduct research and teaching on an academic level,” focusing on subjects like economics, law, or public policy” and who “have or aim to achieve the right to award PhDs”. 2) “Humboldtians”, who “work on a comparable academic level like the specialists, but, differently from those, place the emphasis on multi- and interdisciplinarity, with the goal of developing transdisciplinary competences in research and teaching.” (Frank et al., 2015, p. 6).

Table 1: Basic institutional figures of five German liberal education initiatives: Bard College Berlin (BCB), Bucerius Law School (BLS), Jacobs University Bremen (JUB), University Witten-Herdecke (WH), Zeppelin University (ZU).

Name	Founded	Location	Main language of instruction	Sticker price (w/o living costs) p.a.	Students (approx.)	Research & teaching staff (approx.)	Number of programmes
BCB	1999	Berlin	English	17,325€	150	46	BA: 2
BLS	2000	Hamburg	German	12,000€	650	150	LLB: 1 LLM: 1
JUB	2001	Bremen	English	20,000€	1200	270	BA: 15 Master: 10
WH	1982	Witten	German	4368€ - 6510€	2300	520	BA: 5 Master: 8
ZU	2003	Friedrichshafen	German	7800€ - 9200€	1200	270	BA: 4 Master: 4 Exec. Master: 6

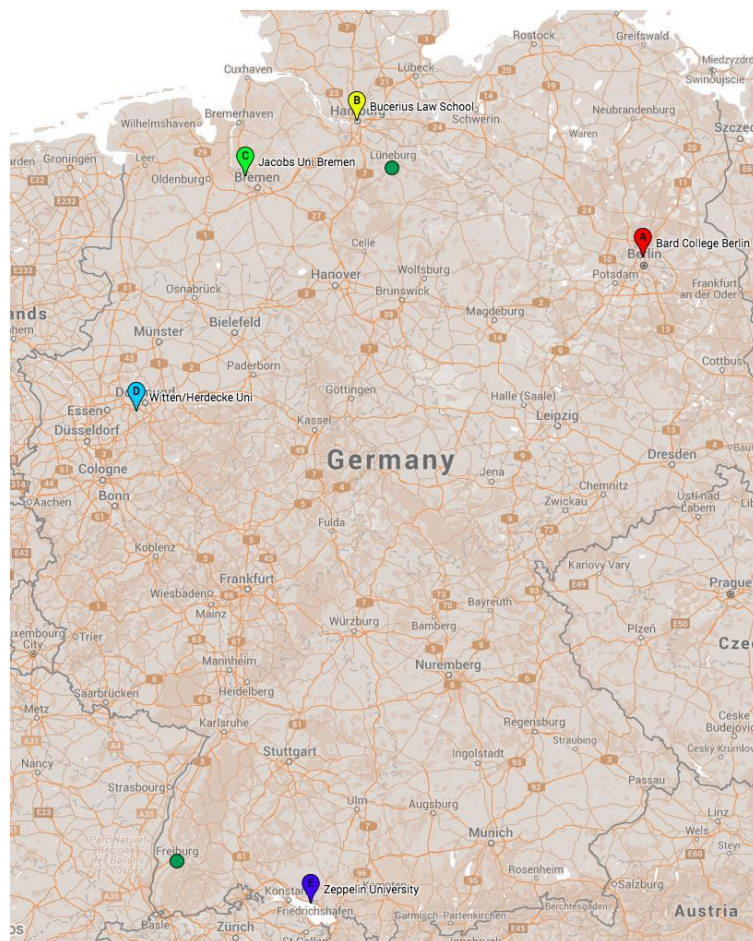


Figure 1: The five universities are located in Berlin (A), Hamburg (B), Bremen (C), Witten (D), and Friedrichshafen (E). The green dots mark liberal education programmes at public universities in Freiburg and Lüneburg.

There are several noteworthy facts to highlight here. Bucerius Law School is, as the name says, a law school and hence a professional school. Yet we have included it because they do not only do research but because they also have a general education protocol integrated into their curriculum. Their LLB includes a mandatory *studium generale*, which can include subjects such as “philosophy; history, politics & society; art & culture; nature & technology”. One afternoon per week is set aside, for all undergraduate students, for this broader liberal learning. Students also have the option of getting a certificate in philosophy, and courses in business and economics are also mandatory for all LLB students. A coaching & mentoring programme (*studium personale*) and internships (*studium professionale*) further complement the degree. That’s why we include them in our list of innovative private German higher education institutions.⁴

Witten-Herdecke is by far the oldest of these institutions in Germany and the only one which has no residential campus. All the others sport residential campuses as a distinguishing feature and selling point. Not all of them are set in big cosmopolitan centers. Witten itself is a small city of about 100.000 people (although it is in close proximity to the densely populated Ruhrgebiet region). Friedrichshafen is about half that size. Nevertheless, with the exception of BCB, which was deliberately founded in an underdeveloped part in the north of former East Berlin, all these institutions are based in some of the most prosperous regions of West Germany. Hamburg and Bremen especially have a very high per capita average income and the Bodensee region, where Friedrichshafen is located, is one of the richest in Germany (Betzner & Schlicht, 2016).

Bard College Berlin is an outlier in terms of size. With around 150 students it has less than 25% of the number of students at BLS, the second smallest of these institutions. ZU and JUB are almost exactly the same size in terms of students and total research and teaching staff employed. WH is almost twice as big in these terms. Yet it has only about as many programmes as ZU, and JUB has about as many programmes as the other two together. Maybe add info about the number of international students and the language of instruction.

Bard College Berlin

We would now like to look into one particular case, Bard College Berlin, in a more detailed manner and present some preliminary findings. Despite its being only 17 years old, we can distinguish already three periods in its history corresponding to different legal forms, funding structures, ownership, and curricular designs. Founded in 1999 as an association (Verein), the founding generation developed it until 2002, first as a summer school and then as a one-year programme, with the support of seven German foundations. From 2003 - 2011 it was funded by an American foundation, which helped the place grow and eventually start its first B.A. programme, as well as receive state recognition. Since 2011 it is part of Bard College, Annandale, in upstate New York.

Historical overview

1999 - 2002: It was founded in 1999 under the name of European College of Liberal Arts, as a Verein (‘association’), by a group of German intellectuals / entrepreneurs, some of whom had encountered the liberal arts model at Stanford University, had afterwards met while working at the consulting firm McKinsey. Dissatisfied with the German higher education landscape they saw in American liberal arts education the true heir to Humboldt’s vision. Through the reintroduction of this vision to Germany they hoped to reanimate what they saw as an ossified higher education landscape.

They held a first summer school in 2000 and in 2002/03 offered a first one-year programme. They were funded by a group of German foundations and supported by a range of well-known intellectuals from Germany and elsewhere, who also taught in the summer schools (including Robert Pippin, Jan-Werner Müller, Terry Eagleton). However, in 2003 it became clear that the foundations’ support would not allow the college to grow into the “Harvard of Germany”. A new donor was found, who broke, however, with the founders, bought the institution and refounded it as a gGmbH (non-profit Limited) and initiated a generational change.

The new donor, an American foundation financed the place alone for these years and very generously. Admission was need-blind and name-blind and most students were on full scholarships. A second one-year programme was introduced, the campus moved from the far outskirts of East Berlin to a somewhat more central (though still decidedly suburban) neighbourhood, still in the former East. Young faculty were hired to start building and developing the institution academically and to design an innovative liberal arts curriculum and some experienced administrators were brought in to help with the organizational and managerial side of things.

⁴ Cf.: <http://www.law-school.de/?id=77#c2668>.

The initial founding generation had envisioned to grow the place to a few thousand students, to be about equally dedicated to research and teaching, and to give space to natural and social sciences as well as the humanities. They never got to fully realizing this vision. The new administration, on the other hand, decided from the outset to keep the place deliberately small to preserve its character as an intimate learning community that would offer a personalized learning experience, and also to focus almost exclusively on teaching, rather than research, by designing a highly innovative liberal arts curriculum with courses mostly in the humanities and social sciences.

In 2009 the college started to offer its first full four-year B.A. programme in Value Studies – a new approach to liberal arts that combined some aspects of traditional Great Books degrees with problem-based approaches and was built on the central idea of creating a sustained and common reflection on pre-disciplinary value questions – what, how, and why do we value? – through small-scale, discussion-based seminars and a focused engagement with core texts and artworks (Norgaard & Hajnal, 2014). In 2010 they achieved state recognition as Universität, which was crucial for obtaining student visas for international student. So far, Bard College Berlin only offers undergraduate programmes but the recognition as university comes with the condition that it starts offering graduate programmes at some point in the near future.

In 2011 the foundation announced that it would search for an academic partner to take over the project and subsequently transferred ownership to Bard College, Annandale, NY, which also has campuses in St Petersburg, Jerusalem, and Bishkek. In 2013 the name was changed from European College of Liberal Arts to Bard College Berlin. It now offers two B.A. degrees: one in Humanities, the Arts, and Social Thought (which grew out of the old Value Studies B.A.) and one in Economics, Politics, and Social Thought, and they continue to offer year-long standalone programmes and semester-long exchange programmes.

Bard College does not have an endowment and therefore depends on a continuous inflow of donations. Since 2011 money was therefore tight compared to the very generous funding provided by the foundation in the previous years. Hence, we want to focus here on the challenges that new financial realities brought about, how it influenced the curriculum and the general institutional development.

Where financial pressure had an effect and what was done about it

Since it entailed a fiscal tightening we focus here exclusively on the transition from the second period (2003 - 2011) to the third period (2012 - present). We could identify noteworthy changes – or noteworthy absences of change – in relation to increased financial pressure in six different but interconnected areas.

First, in the cost of study: In the years after 2012 the sticker price rose from 12.500€ to 20.500€ per academic year, and the cost for room and board, which is included in the sticker price, rose from around 2000€ in 2010 to around 4000€ in 2013 to around 7000€ in 2016 per academic year. In the past many if not most people were on full scholarships that also covered room and board (quite sure but let me check this again). There are still some full scholarships and there still is a need-blind admission process. However, room and board are currently not included in these scholarships. Thus, the de facto minimum cost of attending the programme equals living costs in Berlin, which we can estimate to lie at a minimum of approximately 550-600€ per month.

Secondly, student demographics: Not unexpectedly perhaps the changes in the cost of studying have led to some changes in student demographics. The cost of study is still quite low compared to many American colleges and the merger with Bard College has meant an increased exposure to the US market. Thus, the college continues to be financially attractive for many American students and the university tries to attract (mostly) American exchange students, who bring in comparatively large sums of money: on average 2 exchange students bring in as much as 3 full-time B.A. students. In the past, the biggest share of students came from Eastern Europe. Then as now many nations (usually around 40) are represented in the student body, including developing countries. But the relative sizes of the cohorts from different countries have shifted, with developing countries or Eastern European countries often being represented by only one or two students. German law requires at least 50% of students qualify for a German degree, which means either German students (a constant but small minority) or holders of small number of Abitur-equivalent secondary degrees. While there is a lot of national, linguistic, and gender diversity, and some racial diversity, too, there seems to be less diversity in terms of class / socio-economic background (in 2014 85.4% students had at least one university educated parent).

Thirdly, research: One might think that research would suffer from financial pressure since it is comparatively more expensive than teaching and that one might be tempted to cut it. Or, conversely, that an attempt to do more research and bring in more research grants might be a way to get additional funding. However, in this area things seem to have been quite constant in that research was never a big focus of the college. The reason for this is that professors have mostly focused on teaching and on institution building at this rather young institution, as well as curricular development. Recently the pressure to do research has somewhat increased but that seems to be mostly for reasons of accreditation, rather than financial reasons.

The next four findings are more immediately connected to responses to financial pressure and mitigating strategies.

Fourthly, institutional growth: Student numbers have almost doubled over the last 4 years, from around 80 students in 2012 to 150 in 2016. An initial plan after the merger with Bard College was to grow the institution even more to between 300 and 400 students. This would have allowed for a better distribution of costs and increased revenue. However, the infrastructure imposes some limits. To have considerably more than 150 students would take investments in buildings for teaching space, and also dorms and cafeteria facilities – if, and only if, one wants to retain the residential character of the college. If one would give up on having a campus with dorms and a cafeteria then it might be comparatively easy to acquire affordable new teaching space. Yet having a residential character is one of the most important differentiating factors between the college and other public Berlin universities and an important selling point. Furthermore, real estate prices in Berlin are rising, steadily and not so slowly, and hence there is an incentive also from that side to hold on to the land on which the campus is built.

Fifthly, curriculum: There was initially a very strong focus on teaching in the liberal arts tradition but with an innovative twist, the Value Studies approach. There was an extensive common core component, which took up almost 60% of the degree at some point and which involved a lot of co-teaching. Co-teaching is, of course, a very expensive mode of teaching. The core has been cut down in recent years to about 20% now of each B.A. degree respectively and it is still largely co-taught. However, the motives for this were not entirely financial. The transdisciplinary nature of the Core implies that professors are teaching in a range of areas, often outside their speciality, which is unpopular among some of the faculty members and also some of the students. Hence these developments often also occurred for internal reasons, not only because of financial pressure.

New degrees were introduced to attract new students: B.A. in Value Studies was renamed B.A. in Humanities, the Arts, and Social Thought, and a B.A. with a focus on economics was introduced as the B.A. in Economics, Politics, and Social Thought. On the other, there are attempts to capitalize on the flourishing Berlin art scene and to offer many more courses and shorter exchange programmes in the arts (including practicing arts, art theory and history, and classes on the social and political side of art). It might be noteworthy, finally, that the hard sciences have continued to place a minor role.

Sixth, fundraising: During the year 2003 - 2011 there has been close to zero fundraising since the foundation simply paid for everything and people very busy building the institution, designing the curriculum, etc. In retrospect this has been deemed unwise by some. Since the merger with Bard there have been many attempts to connect stronger with other Berlin institutions (universities, art spaces, etc.), notably through shared courses or co-organized conferences, in order to make the college more visible in the Berlin and German higher education landscape and to establish it as a recognized player in this field. In doing so the current administration is also adopting a vision close to that of the founding generation again, who very much wanted to integrate the college in the German higher education landscape.

Another way of making itself more attractive to donors has revolved around the term “civic engagement”: students are getting money for doing socially engaged projects and the university tries to brand itself as a very civically conscious institution, also with the aim of thereby making itself attractive to donors. Recently they have acquired scholarships for four students from Syria and one from Greece, for example.

Discussion

Where BCB is an exceptional institution in many regards – size, curriculum, institutional setup – other institutions included in our sample were more mainstream: bigger, less directly focused on liberal education, less internationalized. This makes up for a solid ground of targeted close-up analysis.

BCB also provides a good example of how financial pressure remodels private liberal education in Germany. The shift from “money is not an issue” to “money is tight” was as radical as it can be. The corresponding changes in curriculum, organization and strategy were gradual but distinct. Of six areas analyzed - tuition, student demographics, research,

institutional growth, curriculum and fundraising - only one remained largely unaffected (research). Rising tuition, dwindling financial aid, and limited fundraising success might have had an effect on a stable shift in student demographics. While there is still a lot of national and linguistic diversity at BCB, social diversity has been under pressure. Especially regarding internationalization and access to student body the accents and relative shares have shifted. Institutional growth in terms of student numbers, and the development of new, more “marketable” programmes, has been one strategy for securing financial survival, but came at the cost of somewhat compromising the initially very radical educational vision. BCB still follows a need-blind admission process, but can no longer give financial aid to cover living costs, which makes access to a potentially very interesting higher education option considerably harder for certain demographics. Curricular changes, with resulting small shifts in pedagogy (reduction of co-teaching, increase in the average class size) show the utopian features of previous incarnation, especially in an environment where liberal education is not well established in the higher education landscape, and possibilities to build endowments almost non-existing.

The fact that both nationally and regionally liberal education has little visibility (which can be observed in small number of candidates, but also lack of strong partnerships and networks between institutions) further limits development perspectives and put institutions on continuous pressure. There have been various attempts a cooperations but no stable long-term partnerships between the institutions that we look at have yet been established. All of the universities were successful in establishing cooperations such as exchange programmes with other institutions abroad, however, and some are also well connected with businesses, academic, cultural, and economic institutions in their area. How exactly is that affecting liberal education curricula and accessibility in various programs should be a theme of a separate series of evaluative studies.

We can observe there some interesting strategies that BCB did not try. The tool of the Umgekehrte Generationenvertrag (UGV, lit: inverse generational contract) merits special attention here. The basic premise of this financing tool is that students do not pay tuition fees while they study but rather pay a percentage of their income for several years afterwards once their income exceeds a certain amount. This money then finances the studies of the generations after them, and so on. Witten-Herdecke and Bucerius Law School have implemented this financial tool with great success. Jacobs University Bremen has tried it in the early 2000s but given up on the idea, because, unlike Witten-Herdecke, many of their alumni returned to their non-EU home countries and were hard to reach in cases of default. Given the changed geopolitical situation and the rise in connectivity brought about by the internet age, we think that the UGV, rightly designed, might be a promising financial tool to ensure wide accessibility of liberal education and that it deserves more scholarly attention. On top of that, Witten Herdecke, due to its longer history, big student numbers, well-positioned leadership and tightly knit community of economically successful students, was able to raise an exceptional 1.2m euros from just around 1000 alumni to support their operation. Analysing their alumni relations policies and fundraising strategies thus seems promising as well.

Conclusion

This study is not yet completed, as there are more interviews to be conducted with representatives of the institutions. Financial pressure is a delicate topic for current administration, but also a topic that some former employees are able and willing to discuss at lengths. Common background, which is the condition of private liberal education in Germany, allows also for collecting interesting information on an institution at another one that might be seen as a competitor. That said, small size and limited visibility of institutions included in our sample make them more of competitors with programs abroad, both liberal and “normal”.

Some leading questions for final analysis include: what specific solutions are available for German liberal education in general, as compared with other countries hosting considerable number of liberal education programs (the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Poland)? What are specific pressures for private liberal education in Germany, and do they respond similarly? What trends can be observed in financial accessibility and curriculum design over last three decades? With an expanding liberal education market in Europe, are the existing institutions growing as well? Do we observe isomorphism or de-differentiation - and at what levels (Huisman & Vught, 2009)? If financial pressure is brought up as the rationale for change, who gets to make a decision on the direction and scope of the changes? To what extent “liberal education mission” is affecting the decision-making process? Do we see a growing “administrative bloat” and expanding student services at the expense of budget share for teaching? Or is more “academic” than US liberal education?

Reasons for closure of liberal education programs in Europe to date were either political (Belarus, Ukraine) or legal (negative accreditation decision Academia Vitae in Deventer). A growing optimism [source] within supporters of liberal education across Europe, cheering up the advent of new countries and programs, might preclude serious evaluation of what is happening within older programs due to financial difficulties.

The tension with often lofty goals of social justice might lead to an impression that liberal education can be a better solution if implemented within public higher education system, a trend observable during last decade across Europe. On the other hand, the United States has predominantly private sector of liberal arts colleges that are at the forefront of curricular and mission debates, and are to some extent followed by all undergraduate curricula. Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have segregated secondary education, with liberal education programs recruiting mostly from the top-tier institutions; Eastern European liberal educators seriously consider whether what they offer “is for everybody” (Axe, 1997)? How are common distinctions (continental vs. Anglosaxon, Western and Eastern-European, public vs. private, liberal vs. neoliberal, national vs. international) reflected how liberal education institutions adapt to changed financial regimes? Last but not least, how are the macro rationales / trends in higher education policy and governance affecting what is being offered as liberal education? Those are some of the most pressing questions that need to be addressed by further studies

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