I want to thank Richard Ekman, Georgia Nugent and everyone with the Council of Independent Colleges for inviting me to this conference: I’m really, really flattered. Above all I’m grateful that on this and so many other occasions over recent years, I’ve been prompted or asked to reflect on the value and meaning of college, because I can’t even say that word without feeling a storm of the best emotions: nostalgia for the four years I spent in Chapel Hill, N.C., in the mid-1980s; excitement about the four years that my many nieces and nephews have just begun or are about to begin; enthusiasm for what those four years—or, sometimes, five or six or seven years—represent. College is the final hinge into adulthood; the broadest unfurling of the world of ideas; the most accelerated discovery of self; the most accelerated discovery of one’s place in society and one’s debt to it. I’m not sure that there’s a period in life—or a noun in our vocabulary—imbued with as much magic and possibility. For all our hand-wringing about the changes and new challenges that confront it today, college hasn’t lost so much as a glimmer of its luster.

I’ve been lucky, over the last year in particular, to visit an array of colleges, sometimes as a reporter, sometimes as a speaker. I fondly remember one such visit last June. It was to a campus in New York City—my home—and this campus was just about 11 miles as the crow flies from my apartment on the Upper West Side. But until I went, I had no idea it was even there.

One of its faculty members, an English professor, picked me up on my street corner. We drove north up the West Side Highway, into the Riverdale section of the Bronx, which is gorgeous, with lush land that rises steeply from the banks of the Hudson River. We took a left turn toward the river. We went through a set of gates, more or less. And there before me—utterly new to me—was one of the most gorgeous college settings I’d ever seen, 70 acres of brilliantly green fields, towering trees and fancifully detailed buildings overlooking and edging up to the water and facing, across the water, the majestic stone palisades of New Jersey.

Some of you may recognize the school by that description: It’s the College of Mount Saint Vincent. It’s among the CIC’s 600-plus members. It was founded in 1847 by a religious order for women, the Sisters of Charity, many of whom still work there. I met several during my short visit, which by sheer coincidence was on a day when I’d published a column castigating the Catholic Church for its marginalization of women and questioning Pope Francis’s description of himself as a feminist. I kind of held my breath as the sisters approached me. I reflexively flinched. I needn’t have. To a person, they said, “Good for you,” and they didn’t even do that in a whisper.

Although beautiful, the College of Mount Saint Vincent isn’t a fancy place. Its acceptance rate is over 80 percent. More than 85 percent of its students receive some kind of financial aid; many of those students are on Pell Grants. It doesn’t have big-time sports teams. Its facilities are modest, scaled to an undergraduate population of under 1700 students, fewer than half of whom live on campus.

But there was something special there: a sense of community, a web of close-knit relationships. As the professor who’d driven me there showed me around, we kept running into students she knew, and she really knew them, telling me what courses they
were taking, what internships they had, what careers they wanted. She introduced me in particular to two students who had taken several classes with her and had impressed her mightily, and it was clear that she’d made the decision—the vow—to do whatever she could to guide them into the professional lives they craved. It was equally clear that they were thriving because of that investment, because of her confidence in them.

Enough students showed up for my remarks that we didn’t have enough seats. When the question-and-answer session came, hands immediately went up, and I couldn’t get to all of them, and what these students asked and observed was as smart as what students anywhere have asked and observed. These students were thoughtful. They were hopeful. And, above all, they were engaged.

I was struck by that. And as I listened to them and learned more about them, I was even more struck by something else: They might not be experiencing this particular engagement at any other school. They might not be getting a college education but for this school. Many were New Yorkers who needed a local institution without the tariffs and barriers of entry that Columbia or N.Y.U. or, for that matter, Fordham has. Or many were from elsewhere but needed a school in a city with the sorts of employment opportunities and internships that were necessary in order for college to make sense for them, financially and practically. And many, no matter where they were from, needed the direct access to faculty, the small class sizes, the sense of intimacy that a college of Mount Saint Vincent’s scale pretty much guarantees. Its particularities, its quirks and its charms suited them, worked for them and might just be creating the brightest future possible for them.

I was asked to talk today about “The Vital Role of Independent Colleges,” and their most important role is illustrated by a school like Mount Saint Vincent: to enrich the higher-education landscape with such a diverse garden of options that any and every student can find the flower he or she needs. That can’t happen if he or she has only large schools of 5,000, 25,000 or 50,000 students to choose from. That can’t happen if he or she has only public universities to consider.

That can happen only when the landscape teems with possibilities, surprises, discoveries and secrets like Mount Saint Vincent, where the motto I spotted on the website couldn’t be more apt. It said: All Dreams Welcome.

There are many kinds of dreams and just as many kinds of dreamers, and there must be many kinds of schools to accommodate and nurture them. Those schools can’t be cut from the same cloth or stitched into the same pattern, because students aren’t the same, and they don’t learn in the same ways. In higher education as in apparel, one size doesn’t fit all, and one style doesn’t flatter all.

Let me give you an interesting example of that. I have to go back about two months to a story that appeared in my newspaper, The Times. It was about a development at Elliott Management, which is an extraordinarily successful hedge fund in New York that was founded and is steered by the billionaire Paul Singer, who also happens to be one of the most influential donors in the Republican Party. The Times reported that for the first time in the $27 billion investment firm’s nearly four-decade history, Singer was formally sharing the reins with someone: a longtime colleague named Jonathan Pollock. The Times provided a bit of background about, and a bit of an introduction to, Pollock.
It didn’t tell readers where he got his bachelor’s degree, and I later learned a little something about that. Apparently he’d been asked only last-minute, just before the story was to be “put to bed,” as we sometimes say in the newspaper business, about his alma mater, and when he didn’t name one of the usual finance-industry suspects—Princeton or Harvard or U-Penn—the information wasn’t deemed essential to the story. It wasn’t included.

So where did he go to school? Curry College, in Milton, Mass. It has an undergraduate student population of just over 2,000. It’s a CIC member. And why did Jonathan Pollock go there? From what I was told, it was because he had a learning disability; sometimes struggled with his reading; took in information much, much better by listening, by hearing; and at that time, in the mid-1980s, Curry was far ahead of other schools in providing students with access to a trove of audio books.

In other words, Curry had something particular—something special—that larger schools didn’t, and it was the precise something that Pollock craved, and could benefit from, the most. It obviously worked out for him: Now in his early 50s, he has a career in finance that most other men and women in his profession can only envy. And Curry, by the way, continues to be a leader in educating students with learning disabilities, especially disabilities that are language-based. Its Program for the Advancement of Learning is specifically designed for them, and such students constitute about 20 percent of the freshman class every year.

I didn’t know about that, or about Pollock’s story, when I wrote the college-related book of mine that was published last March, Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be. I didn’t know about the College of Mount Saint Vincent then. But in the book I present examples of the many compelling, original, unduplicated programs you get when you have a robust diversity of schools and when those schools have the independence to develop their own personalities, to hone their own strengths.

I noted that a professor of behavioral psychology at Monmouth University, in West Long Branch, New Jersey, had at one point taken her own children to the Six Flags Great Adventure amusement and safari park in that state and had realized that trainers’ testimonials about animal behavior had significant overlap with her campus lectures. So she developed a behavioral psychology course that took place largely among the land and sea mammals at the park. It included weekly meetings with trainers at Six Flags and fieldwork with the animals.

I noted that St. Lawrence University in New York had a dormitory of yurts? Yes, yurts, those cylindrical Mongolian tents. I’m stretching by using the word dormitory, but not by much. St. Lawrence offers a program every fall called the “Adirondack Semester,” and it’s for a small group of students who elect to live in a yurt village in Adirondack Park, about an hour’s drive from the campus. There’s a lake and a thick canopy of pine trees, but no wireless. No electricity. No Chipotle. The students learn survival skills and make their own meals, largely with provisions from a nearby farm. And as they adapt to the wilderness, they contemplate its meaning and man’s stewardship of it through a menu of courses on such topics as environmental philosophy and nature writing.

At Denison, in Granville, Ohio, there’s an academic concentration in bluegrass music, designed by a professor with an upstairs-downstairs history of fiddling. He
performed frequently with the Columbus Symphony; he has also repeatedly won the Georgia State Fiddle Championship.

DeSales University, a Catholic school in Center Valley, Pennsylvania, established an internship program with the Vatican that sends as many as six students to clerical and communications positions there every year. The Vatican.

St. Norbert College, in Wisconsin, maintains a close relationship with the Green Bay Packers football team, including regular visits to the campus by players and internships with the Packers organization for students.

Webster University, near St. Louis, has so many residential campuses in so many different countries, including Thailand and Ghana, that a student can study in a different place with a different language and culture almost every semester. It also had the top-ranked collegiate chess team in the United States in each of the last three years.

The story of these independent colleges isn’t just one of unique programs and facets; it’s of distinctive personalities and proclivities that other schools don’t precisely replicate and that make these schools essential, inimitable options in the marketplace of higher education. For instance Luther College, a school in Iowa that’s affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, has proven to be a surprisingly sturdy cradle for winners of some of the most prestigious academic prizes. Although it has an endowment of only $116 million and just 2,500 students at a time, it has produced eight Rhodes scholars.

I don’t know what it is about Iowa, but the state is also the location of another school that came up several times in my conversations with smart, creative college-placement counselors, who called it a terrific choice for strong high school students who aren’t necessarily at the top of their class but have enormous potential, if given an environment of calm and of intimacy in which to till it.

I’m referring to Central College, a campus of 1400 undergraduate students—99 percent of whom receive some form of financial aid—in Pella, Iowa. Every four years I spend a bunch of time in Iowa, and I’m about to do so again in a few weeks. So I’ve been to Pella, along with dozens of other Iowa towns, and I can tell you that it strikes me as a pretty ideal place to go to school: picturesque, friendly, not at all un-sophisticated and just 40 miles from Des Moines, a city of considerable charm in a state with the kind of heightened political consciousness that a college student in particular would benefit from being exposed to. Once college-placement counselor was telling me about the way a B+ student he’d sent there did so well that he went on, afterward, to medical school at Duke; meanwhile, the valedictorian from his high-school class, who got her bachelor’s at Northwestern University, never found her groove there and had so little success with medical-school applications that she had to sit out a year, wait, and apply again, to institutions less competitive than Duke.

Different students do best in different climates and even microclimates. You all observe this daily at your own schools. You know it in your bones. But I can reassure you that as an outsider, with a vantage point unlike yours, I see this, too, and I see it clearly. I’ve also probably spent more time over the last two years talking to high-school guidance counselors and college-placement counselors than many of you have, and I can assure you that they see it too, and are grateful for what this country’s independent liberal-arts colleges and universities offer.
There’s something else I’ve done a bunch of over recent years, again because of my book, which contends that we attribute more career- and success-making magic to Ivy League and Ivy-like schools than they deserve. Whenever I read about a fascinating person who’s done distinctive things, I keep an eye out for the information about where he or she went to college, or I search for and find that information myself, as I did with Jonathan Pollock, the Curry College graduate.

One of the publications I’m fairly faithful to is *The New Yorker*, and back in September, one of the stories I dove into, and even got all the way through, was about a woman named Judy Clarke, who’s the best known, best respected, most successful death penalty lawyer in the country. She defends “the worst of the worst”—that was the title of the article—with the aim of keeping them off death row. She feels passionately that a civilized society shouldn’t execute people, and so she represented the Unabomber and she represented the Boston marathon bomber and she represented many mass killers before him. She said she owes a debt of gratitude to her clients for—and these are her words—“the lessons they’ve taught me about human behavior and human frailty, and the constant reminder that there but for the grace of God go I.”

She said she sees herself as being as much on the side of the angels as someone doing legal work can possibly be.

I’m not sure I agree with that last part. But as I learned more and more about her, paragraph after paragraph, I thought how glad I was, at the least, that her perspective, her passion and a human being of such individuality and distinction was in the mix. I became increasingly curious about the circumstances—the education—that had forged her. And I became surer and surer that the school that would be revealed to me wouldn’t be one of the usual suspects.

Indeed it wasn’t. It was Furman College, in Greenville, South Carolina—now Furman University. It’s an independent, liberal-arts institution. It’s a member of the C.I.C. She majored in psychology there, and made a deep enough connection with campus life, and found a deep enough involvement, that she led a successful campaign to change the name of the student government to the *Association* of Furman Students, on the grounds that the group lacked genuine governing authority and to call it anything more than an association was misleading, an exaggeration, a font of false hopes. You can see her legal mind taking shape.

Clarke’s example, like the story of Jonathan Pollock, is an anecdotal validation of the kind of education offered, and acquired, at an independent liberal-arts college like those in the C.I.C. But there are additional validations that are more than anecdotal.

In doing the research and reporting for my book, I looked in various places and in various ways for information about college outcomes. My specific interest was in seeing what confirmation or what challenge there was to the notion that a selective college left its graduates in better stead: more successful, more fulfilled, more content.

But I happened upon findings that had to do with aspects of college other than exclusivity. I discovered some powerful suggestions that smaller liberal arts colleges like many of those in the C.I.C. serve their students particularly well, leaving them especially satisfied.

I’m sure many of you are familiar, for example, with the Gallup-Purdue Index, an ongoing survey of American college graduates of all ages. It’s the most ambitious such
survey ever; more than 60,000 graduates to date have filled out questionnaires, and that number will continue to grow by tens of thousands over coming years.

The index doesn’t judge success in dollars and cents, which is the dreary yardstick used by many college ratings, like those done by Money magazine, and even by the federal government in its College Scorecard, published for the first time last year.

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The Gallup-Purdue researchers are mainly trying to figure out whether there are big differences between profit and not-for-profit schools, between public and private ones. But at my request they’ve broken down a few of their findings in particular ways, yielding more granular results.

For example, I wanted to see if there was a notable uptick in contentment among graduates of selective schools—I told the researchers to isolate U.S. News & World Report’s Top 50 national universities and, separately, its Top 50 liberal arts colleges, which is the category in which many CIC members would be found, the category that smaller colleges dominate.

Among graduates of all types of colleges and universities, 10 percent described themselves as fully thriving across all categories of existence, from health and community to professional. Among just public-school graduates only, it was 10 percent; among private school graduates, 11 percent, and among national universities ranked in the Top 50, 11 percent. But among liberal arts colleges ranked in the Top 50, it was 13 percent. Higher.

Not by much, but there was more of a difference when the researchers looked at which college graduates pronounced themselves fulfilled by their careers. Thirty-nine percent of all graduates did. Thirty-nine percent of public-school graduates did. That ticked up just one point, to 40 percent, for private-school graduates. And for graduates of Top 50 universities, it ticked up only another point, to 41. But it rose another six points, to 47 percent, for graduates of Top 50 liberal-arts colleges.

In October, in his weekly “Common Sense” column in The Times, my colleague James Stewart joined in the criticism of ratings based on graduates’ incomes, not just because money isn’t all a college is supposed to lead to but also, and even more so, because, as he wrote: “There is no way to know what, if any, impact a particular college has on its graduates’ earnings, or life for that matter.” That’s because you can’t separate out the ambition, talent, family connections and privileged rearing of the person who entered the college from the college’s influence on his or her likely trajectory. Many Harvard and MIT graduates do brilliantly because they were destined to even before Harvard and MIT, which saw those markers, those omens, and admitted them for that reason. In other words: Did Yale turn George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush into presidents, or was it just one emblem and facet of lives pointed in that direction all along?

Stewart worked with a scholar at the Brookings Institution to see if they could crunch information about the earnings of graduates of different schools in a particular way. They made a guess about what a person might be expected to earn based on his or her characteristics (such as test scores and family background) before entering college. Then they looked at whether that person fell short of, or exceeded, those expectations.
Then they looked at where he or she went to college, to determine if the institution made a difference and how much.

Before coming up with a list of the colleges that yielded the biggest positive difference, they edited out science-focused schools whose graduates across-the-board bigger earnings skewed the whole concept. What resulted was a ranking of what they called “value-added” colleges. The top 10? Colgate University, Carleton College, Washington and Lee University, Westmont College, Kenyon College, Wagner College, Marietta College, Manhattan College, St. Mary’s University and Pacific Lutheran University.

You’ll notice that none of the most venerated large universities, private or public, are on that list. You’ll notice that half of the schools on the list are CIC members. And you’ll notice that the other half are schools much like those in the CIC: independent, medium-sized or smaller, focused on the liberal arts.

I think it’s inarguable that a school is enriched, and the educations of its students improved, when more of them travel abroad for study, widening their worldviews and then returning to campus with those broader perspectives, with stories about their adventures, with a new sophistication. So which sorts of schools send the highest percentages of their students abroad? It turns out that U.S. News & World Report, for all the awful stuff that it does, tracks this information, and here are the 10 schools that excel most in that regard, as measured by the class of 2014: Goucher College, Soka University of America, Arcadia University, Centre College in Kentucky, Goshen College, Carleton, Pitzer, Susquehanna University, Lee University in Tennessee and Calvin College. The majority of those are CIC schools, and the ones that aren’t have a similar spirit.

In doing the research for my book, I looked at the winners in 2013 and 2014 of MacArthur “genius” grants, to see where they’d done their undergraduate work—to check my assumption that it wasn’t going to be a lineup solely of institutions with acceptance rates of under 15 percent. And in the process of working with me on that, the people at the MacArthur Foundation became so intrigued that they combed through their files and examined the backgrounds of all 918 winners of the grant from its inception up through 2014. They sent me the list—and, with it, some reflections from Cecilia Conrad, a senior official with the MacArthur Fellows Program, who was previously a professor and dean at Pomona, and who also published these thoughts in the Huffington Post.

Conrad wrote:

“MacArthur Fellows graduated from both private and public universities, from engineering schools, specialized colleges in art and music, and a school of theology. Fifteen graduated from either historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) or tribal colleges and 44 from women's colleges. Forty graduated from religiously affiliated institutions. The 918 MacArthur Fellowship recipients attended 315 diverse post-secondary institutions.”

But here’s the particular part I wanted you to her.

She continued:

“Our data provides one clue as to the educational environments most conducive for creative minds to develop: A relatively high number of fellows graduated from liberal arts colleges. Liberal arts colleges are distinctively American institutions, typically small,
that focus on undergraduate education. Less than two percent of U.S. college graduates graduated from a liberal arts college, but 14 percent of MacArthur Fellows did.”

She wrote, of schools like those in the C.I.C., “It seems unlikely that (they) admit more creative people than other colleges and universities. They rely on the same admissions criteria . . . . It is more likely that private liberal arts colleges have produced more than a proportionate share of fellows because of the educational environment at those institutions. Something must be more likely to happen to a student at these institutions than at other institutions that allows creativity to flourish. I argue that something is a true liberal education.

A true liberal education. I worry that this isn’t valued the way it once was, and I worry about that because of the way the Federal Government tabulates its new College Scorecard, and because of Marco Rubio’s plea during a recent Republican debate that more young people study welding and fewer study philosophy.

He’s right that there are more openings out there right now for welders than for professional philosophers, and that those who teach philosophy don’t make a mint. He’s wrong about why people should and do study philosophy, which is the same reason they do and should study anthropology or, for that matter, English and American literature, which was my focus during college. These studies help explain the world. They refine a person’s curiosity. They help a person see information and events in context and to process them critically.

Please explain to me how that won’t be useful in a career, any career. Please explain to me how that doesn’t make someone a wiser, more thoughtful citizen—which is absolutely one of the goals of higher education. And please know that in championing the liberal arts, including philosophy, independent colleges are championing and safeguarding democracy itself.

A true liberal education is one of two phrases, or passages, from Cecilia Conrad’s assessment that most caught my eye; the other was her hypothesis that something must be more likely to happen to a student at these institutions than at other institutions that allows creativity to flourish.

It brought to mind someone I interviewed at length for my book. He was a student in the late 1990s at Kenyon. He hadn’t been a high school star, but he felt like his best days—his full stride—was ahead of him.

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“I was decimated,” he remembers.

The professor who’d taught the student’s introductory class took note of his reaction. The student recalls: “Without me even saying anything to him, he invited me to his house. He sat me down. He poured himself a glass of Scotch. He poured me a glass of seltzer water. And he told me I was a good writer, ‘a solid B-plus writer,’ as he put it. And then he told me that the stories I told before class and on breaks were really, really good, and if I could figure out a way to write the way I told those stories, I could have a life in writing.” The student’s problem, the professor suggested, was that he was trying too hard to be lofty and literary; he wasn’t writing from emotion, in a true voice.

This advice was precise, and it was pivotal.
The student now says: “I needed someone to tell me that I had potential, but I also needed someone to tell me why I didn’t get into that class.” The professor did that, and today, decades later, the student still occasionally revisits a particular photograph from his graduation ceremony at Kenyon, and the reason isn’t the way he looks in it but the fact that the professor can be seen in the background, watching over him and smiling.

This alumnus of Kenyon loved it. He did a double major in English and religion, and he said that some of his classes were as small as four students total.

He took a class devoted entirely to James Joyce’s masterpiece *Ulysses.*

He took a class on Islamic history.

He took a class on Jesus in which he learned, in his words, that “the idea that there were sons of gods wasn’t in any way uncommon in the first century. That wasn’t the radical idea. The radical idea was that Jesus of Nazareth was the son of God. And that just blew my mind.”

He relished his excursions into nineteenth-century British romantic literature.

“‘There’s something magical about that time,’’ he says, and most magical of all was the permission to sit still, to think. He says: ‘Spending six hours on a Sunday reading *Jane Eyre* and *Jane Eyre* criticism is by far the best use of your time.’ He wishes he’d done more of that.

And while he could have done it at any number of schools, he’s convinced that many of them wouldn’t have served him as well as Kenyon did, because he relished—he needed—its specific touch. Its personal touch; because that writing professor was observant, and generous enough to tend to him; because one of his religion professors would invite him over for evenings when various professors recited poetry, and that rekindled his love of words—Kenyon was and is all about the love of words—and he started writing again.

He attempted a new short story his senior year. It was about a recently ordained Lutheran minister who travels home to perform a wedding and ends up also overseeing a funeral. He showed it to the religion professor, who, he recalls, “treated the story with total respect and encouraged me to finish it. I still remember his comments. He said, ‘This is a very promising story. The funeral went on too long. But funerals generally do.’”

Of this religion professor and the writing professor, the student says: “I do think that those relationships were more available to me than if I’d gone to Harvard.” Maybe that’s wrong. Maybe that’s right. But I myself can’t shake the feeling that this young man, John Green, who would go on to write *The Fault in Our Stars* and become perhaps the most celebrated author of young adult fiction of his generation, was the specific product of a certain kind of college, and of Kenyon, which was his ideal match. It was cozy enough to cushion his early fall. It was modest enough not to daunt him. It was attentive enough to register his particular needs. And it was flexible enough to let him explore different contours of his intellect.

I believe in strongly in public education. I believe, to be candid, that there are some ways, some circumstances, in which a smaller independent school can’t match a larger one, like my alma mater, Chapel Hill. I spend quite a bit of time in Austin, and I find myself fantasizing about traveling back in time so I can go the University of Texas.
But that’s me. That’s not someone else. And I believe even more strongly that we need another group of institutions that aren’t slave to the political winds and government funding trends that have severely strained so many state schools over recent years and that will never stop challenging them. I believe that just as we treasure the boutique over the chain store, local farmers over produce flown in from Chile, and the artisanal over the mass-produced, we must treasure independent colleges that don’t try to be everything to everyone and thus wind up being more special to someone.

What matters in college?
Engagement—and an environment that can foster that. And there’s irrefutable evidence that this country’s independent colleges provide precisely that environment for students who couldn’t flourish any better—and might not flourish at all—somewhere else.

Thank you.