The Perils and Promise of Midwestern Studies

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Abstract
As I reflect on the eight-year history of Midwest Studies (renamed the Midwest Initiative, then Midwest Matters; here I will use the term MSI, for Midwest Studies Initiative) at Monmouth College in west-central Illinois, two relevant news pieces from the community of small, private, liberal arts colleges circulate around me. The first, that of Iowa Wesleyan College throwing overboard faculty, staff, and academic programs in an effort to stay afloat, is actually more than a year old, but it was refreshed on our campus by a recent IWC visitor who explained its painful repercussions. The second, the startling announcement of the closure of Sweet Briar College in Virginia, was referenced during a faculty meeting discussion of new strategies for student recruitment and has reverberated since then in hallway conversations around campus. Our Director of Admissions pointed out, rather ominously, that the business of attracting and keeping students has changed dramatically in the past four years, and colleges must be nimble and acutely aware of trends among young college seekers and their parents. Colleges like ours have never had it easy, but the pace of school closings, sales, and mergers has quickened since the economic downturn of 2008, fostering an "all hands on deck" mentality among survivors.

The Midwest Studies Initiative was born in just such an atmosphere of alarm and innovation. It survives today, but enthusiasm for its usefulness to our scholarship and to the identity of Monmouth College is waning. Its two purposes—generating excitement for the College among prospective students and donors and stimulating innovative, interdisciplinary studies of the Midwest that could contribute to the welfare of the region—were intertwined from the start. But, also from the start, the College has had difficulty keeping them from working at cross-purposes. Put another way, the tension between marketing and academic integrity has become a burden, and to rid itself of that burden, Monmouth College appears poised to jettison the Midwest Studies Initiative altogether.

What follows here is a short history of Midwest Studies and a defense of the scholarly utility of the initiative.

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