

Sweet Briar 1977: A Challenge to the Alumnae

By Paul B. Hood, Director of Development

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Paul Hood, a graduate of Pennsylvania State University, has been director of Development at Sweet Briar College since 1964. Here, he presents a view of primary importance to alumnae of the College.

LAST December the news of a proposed merger between Vassar and Yale was widely reported to the public press. These accounts stimulated some spirited cocktail conversation over the holidays; but they also raised some very serious questions. If vulnerable Vassar with over 1,600 students, forty million dollars of endowment, and a proud tradition dating back more than five generations is considering such a portentous step, what has the future in store for a youngster like Sweet Briar? Are the days of the small, independent woman's college numbered?

In Sweet Briar's case, this is not a question of survival per se. By gradually lowering its academic standards, this College could probably exist indefinitely as a fashionable southern finishing school. Such a course, however, is repugnant to the board, the administration, and the alumnae. The question, then, is not can Sweet Briar survive, but rather, can Sweet Briar survive as a first-rate, independent, liberal arts college?

GRANTED a concerned, active governing board, and an enlightened administration, the essential ingredients of a first-rate college are good student, good teachers, and proper facilities. Thanks to its hard-won reputation for scholastic excellence (and, in a large measure to the energy, persuasiveness, and charm of the Alumnae Representatives on Admission) Sweet Briar is blessed with a wealth of well-qualified applicants. If the present demand for college admission nationally continues and if this college's present high standards are maintained, there is every reason to be optimistic about Sweet Briar's ability to attract good students. Such recent additions as the Mary Reynolds Babcock Fine Arts Center, the Memorial Chapel, the Connie M. Guion Science Building, and the Charles A. Dana Library Wing have provided physical facilities which are more than sufficient for the foreseeable future.

The key to Sweet Briar's survival will be its ability to provide sufficient financing to recruit and hold teachers of the quality of its present fine faculty. Mr. Hechinger, in his December 17 *New York Times* article, said, "The reason Vassar might want to join forces with Yale is... that the independent and relatively isolated liberal arts colleges, whether co-educational or not, find it increasingly difficult to compete for faculty talent with the universities." In Sweet Briar's case these difficulties are compounded by the fact that this College is seeking a particular kind of

faculty member – one who is becoming a rather “rare bird.” While independent scholarship, research, and publication are encouraged, the Sweet Briar College faculty is primarily a teaching faculty; and the College seeks the man or woman whose first love is teaching undergraduates, who is concerned with the personal development and intellectual growth of each individual student.

To such as person there is much about this College which is attractive. Such things as highly motivated, intelligent students; the serenity and beauty of this rural campus; the absence of big-city, big-campus pressures; and no “publish or perish” policy are difficult to evaluate but play a part in faculty recruitment. The first consideration, however, is financial compensation – salary plus benefits – and it is here, I believe, that Sweet Briar ultimately will either stand or fall as a first class college.

OVER the past ten years faculty salaries at Sweet Briar have doubled. In 1956 the minimum yearly salary of a full professor was \$5,000; today it is \$10,000. Ten years ago some instructors were receiving as little as \$3,000. Today, no member of the Sweet Briar faculty earns less than \$6,000. In addition to “take home pay,” for every faculty member the College pays all of or contributes to: a) TIAA-CREF Retirement plan, b) Major Medical Expense Insurance, c) Total Disability Income Insurance, d) Group Life Insurance. A low cost group hospital and surgical plan is offered to those who wish to subscribe. Other benefits available to faculty members include sabbatical leaves, sick leave, subsidized laundry, research grants, faculty home loan plan, and college tuition grants, for faculty children.

All this costs a great deal of money. Out of a total operating budget of \$1,636,000 (excluding room and board) last year nearly \$700,000 went to faculty salaries and benefits. To keep pace nationally, it is not unrealistic to expect that Sweet Briar will be required to more than double that figure in the next decade.

THREE main sources of income make up the College’s educational dollar – *tuition* accounts for almost 83 cents; *current gifts and grants* another 10 cents; and *endowment income* about 6 cents. (The remaining penny comes from “other sources.”) Because of its relatively modest endowment of less than seven million dollars, Sweet Briar has had to rely heavily on tuition income to underwrite the educational program. However, with a comprehensive fee of \$3,100 beginning September 1967, there is a danger of pricing Sweet Briar beyond the means of students the College would like to have. It is, therefore, essential to reduce this dependence on fees by vastly increasing income from *endowment* and *current gifts and grants*.

The Master Plan Committee, in its November 20, 1965 Report to the Board of overseers had as its First Recommendations “That priority be given to increasing the endowment of Sweet Briar College from its present market value to \$30,000,000 by 1976.” The Committee’s Second

Recommendation was, "A concentrated effort should be made to increase unrestricted 'Annual Giving' from its present level (about \$96,000) to \$300,000 by 1976." These measures, together with other steps recommended by the Committee, would go far toward providing the financing the College must have for future faculty recruitment.

The answer to the challenge presented to Sweet Briar by the Vassar-Yale marriage, I believe, lies in this College's ability to find, hire, and hold top quality teachers.

The financial means of achieving such a goal constitutes a challenge to all those who concern themselves with Sweet Briar.