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For a Va. college, its tiny size, isolation are assets



HEATHER ROUSSEAU FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Sweet Briar College is promoting its spacious campus as the perfect place to have a safe, in-person college experience this fall.

BY SUSAN SVRLUGA

SWEET BRIAR, Va. — At the entrance to the sweeping Sweet Briar College campus, where meadows full of wildflowers bloom, trails wind through old-growth forests, and the Blue Ridge Mountains shape the horizon line, the sign said: “Welcome home.”

Sweet Briar, the private college in rural Virginia, will reopen to students in August. It’s marketing itself as a safe haven in the midst of a pandemic — and officials even hope that pitch might help shore up its future.

Across the country, debates are raging over whether universities can house students and resume in-person classes without worsening the spread of coronavirus. The debate is only intensifying as cases spike in Arizona, Texas, Florida and elsewhere, and as college athletes return to campuses, where hundreds have already tested positive.

But Meredith Woo, the president of Sweet Briar, contends that the biggest challenge for fall opening for any college is not testing or medical facilities — it’s keeping students apart. And Sweet Briar, a small women’s

college, is a place that has never had stadiums packed with fans for football games, 700-person econ classes, or parties spilling out of fraternity houses.

“We are one of the only colleges that can maintain social distancing,” she said. “We can be as safe as home — if not safer than home.”

Convincing students and parents that that’s true will be essential for Sweet Briar and other schools like it. For small private colleges, dependent on tuition revenue from new and returning students, the pandemic



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Lower Lake is used for outdoor classes and hosts a cardboard regatta for engineering students.

is an existential crisis. And Sweet Briar, like many women's colleges and rural schools, has struggled to attract enough students for years.

But suddenly its isolation and under-enrollment looks like an asset: With more than 3,200 acres and just a few hundred students, classes can easily be limited to small groups. Meals can be eaten in shifts, with students seated at opposite sides of large tables. And with dorm space to spare, no one needs a roommate.

"We paraphrased Virginia Woolf," and her metaphor for women's creativity and independence, Woo said. "We said to our students they can all have a room of their own."

Ready to pivot

At the University of California at San Diego, officials plan to offer recurring testing of students, faculty and staff, whether or not they have symptoms. Penn State University plans to use its 223-room Nittany Lion Inn, which has been closed since March, to quarantine students who become ill with the virus.

That's the upside for large universities: They can draw on academic medical centers, expertise, and hefty budgets to craft plans

during the pandemic. But small colleges have their own advantage, said Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges: Flexibility. "They can be nimble and creative."

Beloit College in Wisconsin is splitting its fall semester, offering two classes in one block and two in the next, so that they could swiftly transition from in-person to online

Sweet Briar is marketing itself as a haven in the midst of a pandemic

classes if needed. At Bowdoin College in Maine, they're planning to have only their new students and a few others on campus this fall, with mostly virtual classes for all. Roger Williams University in Rhode Island is offering students multiple choices, including living on campus or learning remotely, taking classes around a work schedule, and, with faculty guidance, earning credit for an internship, volunteer work, or research.

With only about 500 people on campus — including students, faculty and staff — it's easy for Sweet Briar to pivot, Woo said. And at a school that has already faced an existential crisis, she knows just how much is at stake.

Five years ago, the school's president abruptly announced that the more-than-century-old school would close at the end of the spring semester — forever — because of "insurmountable financial difficulties." Enrollment had fallen, from 760 10 years ago down to fewer than 600 students.

The news left students and faculty stunned, and it spurred alumnae to organize feverishly, raising money and mounting legal challenges. They raised more than \$28 million in just over 100 days, lined up a new board and president, and yelled the school cheer when a judge approved a legal settlement that would allow the school to remain open.

The school had no students, faculty or staff when a new president, Phillip Stone, took office in July 2015. Stone and the alumnae volunteers — whom he compared to Patton's army — were able to rehire people, restore insurance, bring back programs, and



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The student commons courtyard at Sweet Briar College, where deposits from students committing to attend this fall are up 20 percent.

lure enough students to reopen the campus for the fall semester. He hoped enrollment would, in time, reach 800.

But they were starting from zero. Last year, the school had 353 students.

And then the pandemic hit.

Back to life

Like most schools, Sweet Briar held classes online this spring. But the education is designed to be experienced in person, from the small classes to the vast campus to the rituals and traditions that bind alumnae to the place.

Many universities are now considering holding classes outside, to reduce the spread of the virus. At Sweet Briar, that's always been a thing: Students study the butterflies that float around the campus and the bees busy in the school's apiary, its bright beehives painted pastel colors. Engineering students compete in a cardboard regatta at a lake on campus, using duct tape and cardboard boxes to design boats that can get from one landing to another without sinking. Students can study sustainability at the school's giant new greenhouse, where,



Phillip Williamson, a riding instructor at Sweet Briar College, makes his way past the stables on the 3,250-acre campus.

on one recent afternoon, basil, lettuce and cherry tomatoes were poking up out of their dirt beds. That produce will be used for students' meals, donated to needy families, and sold to people in the community who want

to eat local food.

Many of the school's pastimes can be pandemic-friendly. Students ride horses, as part of the school's nationally known equestrian program or just to enjoy the 18 miles



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A show room for a two-person dorm at Sweet Briar College, which is offering individual residence hall rooms, even if located in a two-person dorm room, at no additional cost.



The construction of a new twenty-seven thousand square foot greenhouse is planned for completion this summer at Sweet Briar College.

of trails. (When they're seniors, they get a day to ride anywhere they like, even right up to the president's house, said Mimi Wroten, director of the riding program.) They paddle around near the boathouse. They wander campus, past the Georgian brick buildings, the pink roses that first inspired the Sweet Briar name, the vineyard, the forests of oak and chestnut and tulip poplar.

On a loop around campus, there's one stretch in the woods where "the trees are so tall, it's almost like perfect peace," said Tatum Wallis, a junior from Denver. "The whole campus tends to be like that — you look around and you feel safe. You feel home."

So even as they're making changes — reopening the health clinic on campus, planning daily symptom checks, revamping cleaning protocols — the essence of campus life, school officials hope, will remain much the same.

Some traditions may not work this fall. Cramming a dozen or 14 friends around the tables at lunch and dinner is a big part of daily life at Sweet Briar, Wallis said. She was having trouble, too, imagining move-in day without being able to run up and hug friends.

But when she heard that the school planned to reopen, she cried with happiness. "There are little things we're going to have to be more cautious about," Wallis said, "but Sweet Briar is a special place, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make it work."

Abigail McAllister, who recently graduated from high school in Richmond, chose Sweet Briar in part because she wants to

study engineering and environmental science, two strengths of the school, but also in large part because of the times. "The virus definitely made me want to choose a place that was smaller," she said, and her dad was happy with her choice.

It wasn't just safety; she loved the vast campus and its greenhouse. "I really like the whole connecting-to-nature bit," she said. "I felt I would really enjoy that after being cooped up in my house for several months."

In a summer when surveys predicted drops in enrollment, Sweet Briar's deposits from students committing to attend are up 20 per-

cent. They hit their enrollment target of 150 new students.

"No college will know until people show up," Woo said. They don't know if international students will be able to travel. They don't know if the recession and job losses will keep some students away.

"This is the worst crisis in higher education in anyone's memory," Woo said. "I myself don't know what to think about it. We're hunkered down prepared for the worst."

But, she said, "There's something that tells me we're going to be fine."

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The campus of Sweet Briar College is seen from Memorial Hill.