

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

Leadership & Governance

[Home](#) [News](#) [Administration](#) [Leadership & Governance](#)

'At a Tiny College, an Epic Battle Over Academic Authority - Leadership & Governance' has been sent to sehockenbury@gmail.com.

February 25, 2010

At a Tiny College, an Epic Battle Over Academic Authority

By Don Troop

"To serve rather than be served" is the motto of Shimer College, a fiercely independent liberal-arts institution where professors and their students use dialogical tools to dismantle arguments like kids pulling the innards out of old alarm clocks.

So it probably came as a surprise four years ago when a deep-pocketed philanthropist offered to serve Shimer in a big way, by making a large donation that would partially offset the cost of moving the financially beleaguered college from Waukegan, Ill., to the south side of Chicago, where it would rent space from the Illinois Institute of Technology. The gift came with a condition: The donor would remain anonymous.

"Nobody beyond the president and a couple of other people knew for at least a few years" who the donor was, says Daniel Shiner, an alumnus of the college who has served for 14 years on its Board of Trustees and who otherwise refused to discuss the donor. Indeed, even after the identity of "the anonymous donor" was revealed to Shimer insiders by a recent graduate who learned it sleuthing thorough tax records that are publicly available on the Internet, many still avoided uttering his name aloud.

Unveiling a Donor

That changed last Friday, the first day of a contentious two-day meeting of the Board of Trustees, when students began posting handbills throughout the Shimer premises that declared: "Barre Seid is the 'anonymous' donor."

Barre Seid, who did not return telephone calls from *The Chronicle* on Wednesday, is the owner of two companies, Trippe Manufacturing Company and Fiber Bond Corporation, and a generous philanthropist.

Through the Barbara and Barre Seid Foundation, he gave \$825,000 to Shimer College over two years, according to tax documents filed in 2007 and 2008.

The foundation actively gives to many conservative or libertarian causes related to higher education. From 2002 to 2005, tax records show, the Seid Foundation gave \$30,000 to the Collegiate Network, a group administered by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute that supports conservative activist journalists on college campuses. From 1998 to 2005 it gave \$55,000 to the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, a group that reports annually on liberalism on college campuses. In 2005 it gave \$100,000 to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

It also gave \$70,000 from 1998 to 2001 to the Center for Individual Rights, \$650,000 in 2004 and 2005 to the Palmer R. Chitester Fund, and \$1-million from 1998 to 2007 to the Heartland Institute, a think tank that has supported climate-change skepticism, among other causes.

In 2008, Shimer's Board of Trustees hired as the institution's new president Thomas K. Lindsay, a deputy chairman for the National Endowment for the Humanities who directed the agency's "We the People" program, which seeks to strengthen Americans' understanding of their history and culture through education.

With 110 students and 10 full-time faculty members Shimer is small. For the past 60 years, it has followed the Great Books curriculum emphasized by the University of Chicago leader Robert Maynard Hutchins. Students meet in discussion-intensive seminar classes numbering no more than 12 students to discuss readings with their professors, who draw them out using Socratic questioning.

The college's endowment is minimal, and it survives largely by charging tuition of about \$24,000 a year. Its professors are not tenured, though they can obtain senior faculty status, which one professor describes as "similar to tenure." No one is paid more than about \$65,000 a year.

Trustees' Ties

Mr. Shiner, the alumnus and trustee, says that among the goals set forth for President Lindsay was to expand Shimer's name

recognition, along with the size of the college's Board of Trustees. Mr. Lindsay, who did not respond to e-mail messages or a telephone call seeking his comment for this article, seized that role with vigor.

In the past year, he increased the size of the 22-member board by recruiting 13 new members, many of whom, it has emerged, have deep financial ties to Mr. Seid. Charles A. Lang is chief financial and operating officer of Trippe Manufacturing. John Marienau is president of Fiber Bond. Michael McDonald is a founder of the Center for Individual Rights. Joseph L. Bast is president and chief executive of the Heartland Institute. Bob Chitester is founder and president of the Palmer R. Chitester Fund. And Dennis Katz is rabbi of the Congregation Shaare Tikvah B'nai Zion, to which the Seid Foundation gave \$200,000 in 2007 and 2008.

But simple politics isn't really what's dividing Shimer right now, most people with a stake in the college agree. Albert Fernandez, a professor who serves on the Board of Trustees, says that while a left-right division is an element of the dispute, it is not the most important one. The real battle, he says, is over Mr. Lindsay's top-down management style versus Shimer's traditional shared governance.

At Shimer, he says: "We're not PC. In the classroom, we believe in argument. There's far more to it than just influences from the right." What's missing, Mr. Fernandez and others say, is a dialogue.

Conflict Over Mission Statement

Don P. Moon, who served as Shimer's president for 26 years before retiring to teach at the college in 2004, says that Shimer's students and faculty formed an alternative administration to keep the institution from shutting down for good in the 1970s. The campus rallied, money was raised, and Shimer was allowed to continue. Since then, the Assembly, as the body is known, has been in charge of the college's ethos and identity. The Board of Trustees has been its legal authority, and the faculty has been its academic authority. Mr. Lindsay, his critics say, appears to be trying to shift the balance.

Shimer's Assembly—whose voting members include the college's faculty, administrative staff, and students—voted overwhelmingly this month to retain the college's mission statement after Mr.

Lindsay had proposed changes to it.

The college's faculty subsequently drafted a letter to the Board of Trustees saying that while the president said he merely wanted to clarify the college's mission, he asked the board to vote on an entirely new version that he had drafted.

"More trying still," the faculty letter stated, "President Lindsay presumes to use his mission statement as a test of the faculty's continuing commitment to the college. He has indicated to us that if the board adopts his statement, he would ask us individually to confirm our support of it. The implied alternative was to seek employment elsewhere. Let us be clear: We reject with one voice such tests of our loyalty to Shimer College or to President Lindsay."

The trustees voted 18 to 16 to adopt Mr. Lindsay's redrafted mission statement.

The Assembly is meeting in an emergency session on Sunday to consider two measures: One would deny the legitimacy of the mission statement adopted by the board. The other would express no confidence in President Lindsay's leadership.

Mr. Moon says that while students, faculty, and alumni have varying theories on what is happening behind the scenes at Shimer, he fears that the new trustees simply don't understand how the college has long operated. "It looks to us like some kind of power grab without a deep understanding of the history of the college and the constitution itself," he says. "Academic authority rests with the faculty and shouldn't rest with the trustees."

At Shimer, he says, that's not how things work.

Paul Fain contributed to this article.

Copyright 2010. All rights reserved.

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037