By PORSIA TUNZI

The United States has one of the highest college dropout rates in the world. A recent study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development found that in 2010 the United States finished last out of 18 countries for the percentage of students who completed college once they started.

Prior to 2010, Loren Pope, a former New York Times education editor, knew this was a problem. “Too often college choices are made based on false perceptions, misinformation, or a lack of information — and these uninformed choices have led to higher dropout, transfer and failure rates in higher education,” states www.ctcl.org, the website for the nonprofit organization that was inspired by Pope's book, Colleges That Change Lives: 40 Schools That Will Change the Way You Think About Colleges.

In 1996, with the hope of creating a new dialogue around choosing the right college, Pope wrote Colleges That Change Lives, which included 40 schools he believed shared a holistic perspective of what an undergraduate education should look like. “Since its first publication, the book has refuted the commonplace notion that Ivy League schools and mega-universities are the best schools for undergraduates,” Hilary Masell Oswald, author of the 2013 edition, told NCR.

Pope was searching for communities of learners. Through his own investigation, he discovered 40 schools in about 20 states that incorporated the values he was seeking in an undergraduate education. He focused on finding small, liberal arts colleges with low student-to-faculty ratios that fostered collaboration and engaged learning.


The nonprofit has taken Pope's philosophy and broadened it into an organization that conducts 28 national programs in various states every year, executive director Martha O'Connell told NCR. These programs welcome students, parents and high school counselors to ask questions about undergraduate education and find resources that ensure a student is doing everything she can to pursue a college experience that will be a good fit for her.

After Pope's death in 2008, his family continued his legacy by hiring Oswald to write the fourth and newest edition of Colleges That Change Lives, published in August. Oswald added new interviews and four new colleges to the list, paying close attention to "how students are educated, who is teaching and what opportunities are available to [students] during their time as an undergraduate."

Students who apply to these colleges and/or universities are seen as more than just a SAT score or grade point average, but as a person who has potential to succeed if given the opportunity, Oswald said. To Oswald, education goes beyond a checklist and regurgitation of information in order to earn a degree. To educate means "helping students wrestle with the biggest ideas in human history and then develop their own big ideas and test them in sup-

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St. Mary’s of California on updated

—to be continued...
list of life-changing colleges

Students on these campuses are hopeful about their futures; they are, as one student told me, ‘ignited,’ “ Oswald said. St. Mary’s College of California, which is celebrating its sesquicentennial this academic year, was named in Oswald’s new edition of Colleges That Change Lives. Tucked away in the hills of Moraga, St. Mary’s College of California is a prime example of the type of small, liberal arts college Pope was looking for in the very beginning of his search, with a student-faculty ratio of 13:1 and an undergraduate enrollment of around 2,600.

St. Mary’s collegiate seminar, a four-semester series that covers nearly 3,000 years of human history through written works of Western civilization, is one of Oswald’s favorite features at the college. It “forms a ‘common intellectual ground,’” she told NCR, and it “brings up the biggest questions in the human condition.”

Students are asked to read closely, formulate interpretive questions, analyze different ways of thinking, and write clearly, Oswald said. St. Mary’s is the only Catholic and only California school included in Oswald’s list.

“Across the college there is a faculty and staff committed to engaging students in a way that will encourage them to ask big questions about life and their place in it,” Michael Barram, professor of theology at St. Mary’s, told NCR. Receiving the recognition from Oswald and the nonprofit organization “offers confirmation of what we, as a college, have been doing all along,” he said.

Echoing what Colleges That Change Lives has said about the big-name schools, Barram told NCR that there is a “quantitative and qualitative difference” at St. Mary’s and other small, liberal arts colleges — you are interacting with the person with the doctoral degree directly at all times during a course, unlike many bigger undergraduate schools.

“There is an emphasis not simply on the delivery of knowledge or skills but the students actually become a part of the faculty and staff’s consciousness — students are cared for,” Barram said.

St. Mary’s “produces an intimate environment of accountability and self-responsibility,” Ryan Pascual, an alumnus of St. Mary’s, told NCR.

As the chapter on St. Mary’s reiterates in Oswald’s book, you leave a different person and receive an education that is a “mechanism of change.”

Other colleges in book include: Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga.; Clark University in Worcester, Mass.; Knox College in Galesburg, Ill.; Rhodes College in Memphis, Tenn.; Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas; and the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Wash.

O’Connell explained that these now 44 schools aren’t the only colleges out there that have the ability to change students’ lives — Pope’s list was never meant to be all-inclusive. Drawing from the examples of the schools on the list, the Colleges That Change Lives organization provides criteria that prospective undergraduates can use to identify other institutions whose mission is to serve students.

“Our goal is to empower students,” O’Connell told NCR, and to reassure them that “anything worth doing [like finding the right college] is worth doing well.”

[NCR Bertelsen intern Porsia Tunzi graduated from St. Mary’s College of California in May.]