

A Great and Lasting Beginning: The First 125 Years of St. Ambrose University, by George William McDaniel. Davenport: St. Ambrose University, 2006. xi, 284 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$34.95 cloth.

Reviewer John L. Rury is professor of education at the University of Kansas. He has written extensively about urban secondary and higher education.

The college institutional biography is an old yet little distinguished genre of historical writing. Retired presidents and loyal faculty members often do not make insightful authors, devoting untold pages to managerial minutiae or the contributions of favored colleagues. Such accounts make for deadly reading, and usually convey little, if anything, about the lived experience of a given institution. It is fortunate indeed that George William McDaniel's account of St. Ambrose University is *not* such a book.

In this case the author is an accomplished historian who also is a St. Ambrose alum, a priest, and a longstanding faculty member. He thus has a clear comprehension of the institution and the traditions and values that have sustained it for more than a century. The importance of that perspective is evident throughout the narrative. In this instance it is combined with exhaustive research and a carefully balanced exposition that denotes many aspects of life in this modest but resilient institution.

The story begins with St. Ambrose's founding in 1882 as a boys school attached to a seminary, sponsored by the local diocese rather than a religious order. Like many other Catholic institutions, it began with the idea of offering advanced instruction to a budding local moral and intellectual elite. Davenport, of course, was not Chicago or St. Louis, so it was a boarding school from the very beginning, drawing students from a region straddling the Mississippi River and state line. Lacking a substantial endowment or wealthy benefactors, recruiting students remained a persistent institutional question.

McDaniel carefully traces the institution's development as it grew slowly through the ensuing decades. The student body was predominantly preparatory (or secondary) for several decades, but college students emerged as a clear majority following World War I. A somewhat more select group was seminarians bound for the priesthood. Sorting through the demands of these various constituencies and staying abreast of the institution's evolving purposes were major tasks of the administration. The Great Depression and World War II created new trials as enrollments fluctuated and sources of financial support shifted. The postwar era brought fresh growth, especially with veterans taking advantage of the GI Bill in the late 1940s and '50s, the first waves of baby boomers in the mid-1960s, and the admission of

women students after 1968. McDaniel adroitly outlines each of these challenges and many others, including administrative responses, providing a compelling description of the issues facing smaller religious institutions throughout the twentieth century.

Blended with this organizational story, along with inevitable brick-and-mortar accounts of campus expansion, McDaniel provides a lively narrative of student life from nearly the very beginning to the present day. In this he has drawn upon a wide range of sources, including student publications of various sorts, particularly the campus newspaper. Although he does not use oral history for insights about student perceptions, he makes very effective use of the materials at hand. Throughout much of the book, McDaniel is careful to note national influences that were affecting St. Ambrose students, from the Catholic Worker Movement in the 1930s to Elvis Presley in the 1950s and the civil rights and antiwar movements in the 1960s and '70s. Indeed, he takes pains to identify a consistent thread of activist sentiment on the campus, encouraged by certain faculty members but also reflecting larger trends in student culture.

McDaniel notes national developments within higher education, but devotes considerably less attention to events in Iowa. Apart from brief discussion of occasional grants or legislation directly affecting the college, there is little mention of the state's role in higher education. McDaniel gives somewhat greater emphasis to the institution's links to local business leaders, usually in discussions of raising money for buildings or support for particular programs, such as an MBA launched in 1977. A somewhat broader question is the college's impact on the eastern Iowa region and adjoining parts of Illinois, socially and economically. The book provides only the barest impression of its influence in this regard. The use of oral history accounts might have enabled McDaniel to better address such questions.

In the end, this is a somewhat conventional institutional history, but McDaniel's considerable skills and prodigious effort make it better than most. It was published in an oversized format, akin to a picture book, but even though there are many interesting photographs, most of the book is rather dense text. Some readers may find this daunting, as I did at first glance, but the rewards of digging into the narrative are manifold. For anyone wanting to know the life and times of a small midwestern Catholic college throughout the tumultuous times of the twentieth century, I can think of no better source. For that we can thank McDaniel and St. Ambrose for a great and lasting contribution.