



# Associated Colleges of Illinois

## More Than Two Decades of Progress at McKendree University, Illinois' Oldest College

### University in Lebanon, Illinois, Innovates, Competes in a Changing World

About 25 years ago, the trustees of [McKendree University](#) had a vision to build a larger institution that would be stronger. They wanted to draw more students from throughout the country and internationally. They wanted to add an "entrepreneurial spirit" that would promote



**MCKENDREE**  
UNIVERSITY

innovation, creativity and a willingness to try new things. They wanted McKendree to be a leader, rather than follower, in higher education.

"We've accomplished some of those things," says [Dr. James M. Dennis](#), McKendree's president since 1994. "We've never been more successful than we are right now."

The university's main home for the past 190 years is in Lebanon, Illinois, just east of St. Louis in the southwestern part of the state. The school owns the distinction of being the state's oldest college. Founded by early pioneer Methodists, the school opened as Lebanon Seminary. Two years later, the board of trustees changed the name to McKendree College, honoring the first American-born bishop of the Methodist Church, Bishop William McKendree. Beginning in 2007, the college has been known as McKendree University.

Today, it has nearly 3,000 students – including 2,300 undergraduate and 700 graduate students – from 41 states and at least 31 countries. Student-to faculty ration is 14 to 1. Its campuses include the Lebanon location, and campuses in Radcliff, Kentucky, and Shepherdsville, Kentucky, Scott Air Force Base in Belleville, Illinois, and nursing bachelor's and master's degree programs at several locations in Southern Illinois. It also maintains a close relationship with the United Methodist Church and a local congregation in Lebanon, First United Methodist Church, says Dennis.

Dennis came to McKendree from a 27-year career at the University of Southern California, where he was vice president. Part of what attracted him to McKendree was his own background as a graduate of Occidental College, a small liberal arts college in Los Angeles. His father was an Occidental faculty member for nearly 40 years, giving Dennis an inside look at a liberal arts college while growing



*President James M. Dennis  
(McKendree University photo)*

up. "I got to the point near the end of my time at USC of wanting to get back to a smaller institution where I thought I might have a greater impact and achieve the goals of a liberal arts institution, like so many of our ACI schools, where we could flourish and have some success," he says.

### **Providing a R-E-A-L education at McKendree**

Much has happened. McKendree's image and reputation have grown, Dennis says, crediting the board of trustees, faculty, staff and alumni for their roles in improving public perceptions of the university.



*McKendree University was originally named Lebanon Seminary. Its name was changed in 1830 to honor Bishop William McKendree, first American-born bishop of the Methodist Church. (photo by Nathan Lubner)*

The school's enrollment is much larger, and it added graduate programs. Dennis is also proud of the university's diversity, reflected in its faculty, staff and students. "One of our objectives is to try to reflect what's happening in the global community and to prepare students for what their world already looks like," he says. According to its strategic plan, McKendree focuses on providing a "R-E-A-L" education for students: responsible citizenship, engagement, academic excellence and lifelong learning.

The president's most satisfying achievement is in the quality of the student body today. "We've been able to improve the quality of the individual student and increase our enrollment numbers at the same time, which is an extraordinarily difficult thing to do in higher education," Dennis says. "I'm very proud of that. Our institution is very proud of that. It's been very significant." More than 96 percent of undergraduates and graduates of McKendree find jobs within six months after graduation, the university reports, and many go on to graduate school.

Of course, there are challenges. Finding the resources to accomplish university goals and objectives is a common theme for many small colleges, including McKendree. Limited resources often lead to innovation, Dennis says. "Ultimately, it comes down to how well have you hired, what kind of culture have you helped to develop, how well do people buy into the vision, and how deeply do they care about students. If you're able to find faculty and staff who resonate to those themes, you have a real winner," Dennis says.

Academically, McKendree is known for business education, its largest program, and programs that combine the liberal arts and professional education in fields such as education, psychology, nursing, pre-law and pre-medicine, Dennis says. It has more than 100 study-abroad locations. Dennis says many people see McKendree as a "St. Louis school" rather than a school connected

to Chicago. "We like to think of ourselves as both. In the past 10 years, enrollment from Chicago has grown dramatically. We're attracting many more students from Chicago."

### **Top sports and performing arts teams at McKendree helps image, recognition**

McKendree has developed an unusual sports niche that has helped the university attain national recognition. Both its men's and women's bowling teams have won national championships in the past two years. This past year, the women's team won the NCAA Division I national title and was invited to the White House. Student interest, along with excellent coaching, has propelled McKendree's program, Dennis says. In November, Shannon O'Keefe, women's bowling coach, was featured in *The Wall Street Journal*. Seven former students or coaches have played on the men's and women's USA national team, says Dennis. In addition to 34 sports teams, the university has a nationally recognized debate team, and top programs in performing arts.



*The McKendree Bearcats field 34 sports teams, some of which have helped gain national attention for the university.*

Admitting to a "strong ACI bias," Dennis is a longtime ACI board member and has served as ACI's president. Strong ACI programs include opportunities to network with presidential colleagues at similar colleges and universities, training and learning opportunities for staff, and the ACI scholarship program. "It is a real grass-root movement," he says. "Those who participate are the beneficiaries. We look at various organizations we're in and think about what we're going to continue. With my senior staff, when ACI comes up, it's unanimous. We need to be part of ACI." He characterized ACI as "small enough to be very personal, yet large enough to have an impact on our institutions."

### **Forward campaign focuses on facilities, scholarships, endowments**

McKendree has improved its physical plant considerably in the past two decades, including a just-completed collaborative learning center and completion of the McKendree Metro Rec-Plex, a modern recreation complex open to the public and university community, built through a public-private partnership. Looking ahead, McKendree is engaged in a \$40 million campaign called "Forward; The Campaign for McKendree University." So far, about 80 percent of the funds have been raised for various purposes. A key piece is a significant renovation of and addition to the science facility, Voigt Science Hall. Funds will also be used to renovate the university library, to revitalize and renovate classroom facilities, to endow scholarships for students and for faculty positions and for other general purposes. Beyond Forward, Dennis says possible future projects includes things such as new residence halls, a classroom building, expansion of the dining space and perhaps, a football stadium.

Dennis is grateful for the opportunity he's had to lead McKendree for more than two decades, and late last year, the board of trustees extended Dennis' contract. "The board provided me with

a great opportunity to see if I could assemble a team that could bring their vision to fruition. What a great opportunity for a person to have that as an objective. Faculty have been key to the process," he says. "I have to admit I never dreamed I would stay this long. It's been a great run for me, and I hope, for the institution as well," Dennis adds.