No Thanks for the Memories

Once a must-have, college yearbooks have lost their popularity on many campuses

BY AMY RAINEY

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The publication was named Debris back in the 19th century, when, according to the yearbook’s lore, its founders took the word to mean “a collection of works.”

But students’ tastes have changed. Purdue’s yearbook, once a campus treasure, could soon disappear into the great landfill of history.

Last year fewer than 1,000 of Purdue’s 38,000 students purchased copies of the yearbook, which is supported primarily by sales. Last semester the university almost shut down Debris after most of the all-volunteer student staff quit, delaying the delivery of the 2005 yearbook by more than six months.

A new student editor has since taken over the yearbook, and the university approved her plan to fix the staffing problems. Although the 119th edition of Debris is scheduled to appear on time, in June, the yearbook’s future is uncertain.

“If there becomes a time when we’re not breaking even,” says Henry Kraebber, a faculty advisor to Debris, “it won’t take long before we disappear.”

Purdue’s situation is typical of large colleges across the country. At the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, the Cordburner is dead despite several attempts to revive it during the past decade. At Washburn University, in Kansas, the yearbook staff struggles to sell 500 books on the 7,000-student campus. After less than 1 percent of students at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale bought the newly revived yearbook last year, the university discontinued it again.

College yearbooks are “dropping like flies,” says Mary Kate Erickson, who is coordinator at the Associated Collegiate Press, a national membership organization for student journalists.

Ms. Erickson attributes the declining interest—in the yearbook to the many distractions facing today’s college students. He recalls a time when the residence halls were the scene of many well-attended social events. Now, he says, students are less interested in such activities.

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On some campuses, students are not even aware that the college has a yearbook. And amid budget cuts, low-selling yearbooks have been easy targets.

Many yearbook staffs have concluded that they need better marketing and fresh ideas.

“To survive, we need to look at our audience and ask, ‘What do you want?’” says Laura Widmer, adviser to the Tower, the yearbook at Northwest Missouri State University. “We need to reinvent ourselves.”

Looking Back

Last fall Purdue’s yearbook advisers and editors met with administrators to discuss how the edition had turned out. After a rough year, Mr. Kraebber says, even he came close to recommending that Purdue close Debris for good.

But Kayla Gregory, who took over as editor in chief in January, pitched a plan to save the yearbook: Pay staff members, but only if they meet their deadlines.

“No one wants to be the person in charge when the Purdue yearbook, which has been publishing since 1889, stops being published,” says Ms. Gregory, a senior majoring in advertising and professional writing. And spends up to 30 hours a week working on Debris.

Mr. Kraebber took photographs for the yearbook when he was an undergraduate at Purdue, in the early 1970s. His photos, often “artsy shots,” he recalls, depicted students hanging out in the residence halls or scenes from football games.

Back then students made a point of posing for the yearbook’s group photos and were excited when Debris came out. The yearbook used to make a substantial profit each year, helping it accumulate a sizable reserve fund—which is now being used to pay the staff.

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“There’s just less interaction, which probably filters back down to less people interested in what’s going on on campus and less people interested in a book about that,” he says. “But what will they do when they want to look back?”

Other yearbook advisers echo the same concern: Students are unlikely to realize the value of the book until years after they graduate. After all, yearbooks are the living history of an institution, told from students’ perspective.

Advisers say they often receive calls from alumni seeking old yearbooks. At the University of Mississippi, the yearbook advisers have been working to replace back copies for people who lost their possessions in Hurricane Katrina.

“I’m not convinced that students don’t care about this product,” says Regina Cassell, director of student publications at Washburn. “They just don’t care about it now.”

Some institutions have ensured the continuity of their yearbooks by building the publishing costs into student fees. But even at colleges where students are guaranteed copies of the yearbook, getting students to pick them up is a challenge. At Mississippi University of California’s Hastings College of Law can deny student-activities funds to a Christian student group that forbids gay and lesbian members, according to a U.S. District Court in San Francisco. The ruling, issued in April, is a setback for the Christian Legal Society, which has chapters at more than 80 law schools. The group has reached settlements over disputes with other law schools that have allowed its chapters to exclude gay and lesbian students and still receive funds and official recognition.

In this case, however, the judge wrote that denying recognition to the group did not violate its right to free speech. What’s more, according to the nonprofit agency that monitors students as members would not impair the group’s mission.

The law school, which had refused to settle the case with the student group and had vowed to defend its policy in court, hailed the ruling. “It’s the first case to definitively resolve these issues which have been raised by the Christian Legal Society across the country,” said Ethan P. Schulman, a lawyer for the law school.

The society plans to appeal the court’s decision, according to Steven H. Aden, chief litigation counsel for the Center for Law and Religious Freedom, the litigation branch of the Christian Legal Society. “We believe the district court . . . got a number of constitutional issues fundamentally wrong.”

—THOMAS KARLETT

Job prospects have improved for the Class of 2006.

Employers expect to hire 14 percent more college graduates in 2005-6 than they did in the previous year, according to a study released in April by the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

The report, which is based on a survey of employers, said that more than 60 percent of them plan to hire more new college graduates this year than last year, with 22.5 percent planning to hire at last year’s level.

Service-industry employers reported the most ambitious hiring goals, expecting to hire 16.4 percent more new graduates than they did last year. Manufacturers plan to hire 11 percent more, and government and nonprofit agencies predicted a 9-percent increase.

Twenty percent of employers surveyed said they had raised or planned to raise starting salaries, with 90 percent reporting increased competition for new graduates. That reflects the nation’s relatively low unemployment rate, which in March fell to 4.7 percent, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

Employers in the Northeast projected a 24.8-percent increase in hiring new college graduates, leading all other regions.


—ERIC HOOVER

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the staff holds a drive-through pickup, where students receive coupons for treats, like free ice cream, with their yearbooks. About half of the eligible 13,000 students pick up copies of the Ole Miss each year.

It helps that Mississippi publishes in the spring. Advisers say students are more likely to snap up yearbooks at the end of the academic year, rather than during the summer or fall, when many schools deliver them.

In a time of belt-tightening, however, some colleges have decided that their yearbooks are not worth saving.

The University of Idaho once financed its yearbook, the Gem of the Mountains, through mandatory student fees, and also charged buyers $20 a copy. But after years of poor sales, the university discontinued the book in 2004. Shawn O’Neal, adviser and manager of student media at Idaho, oversees a biannual, general-interest student magazine that was created after the Gem’s demise. “I have heard a couple people lament the yearbook’s death,” he says, “but they haven’t been students.”

TURNING THE PAGE

If college yearbooks are going to survive, they may need a makeover. Samir A. Husni, chairman of Mississippi’s journalism department, says yearbook staffs must forgo formulaic content and create yearbooks that reflect the day-to-day lives of today’s students.

“It’s not a matter of it losing its value, it’s a matter of the way we are creating yearbooks,” says Mr. Husni, who in March led a workshop on reinventing yearbooks at the annual convention of the College Media Advisers. “They treat the yearbook like a formula, and it ends up saying, ‘Thanks for the memories’.”

At the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, the yearbook staff has reinvented the Scrimshaw. By emphasizing interesting photography and narrative writing, the staff has produced a yearbook that is more creative and journalistic than the old model, says Jason D. Perry, editor in chief.

“One function of a yearbook is to be a historical record,” says Jamie Jacquart, the adviser. But “just because it’s a historical record doesn’t mean it has to be dry.”

A sports section in a traditional yearbook, for example, includes team photos and a recap of the season. Scrimshaw staff members try to re-create what it was like to be at the games.

“Scores you can forget,” Mr. Perry says, “but a certain moment that happened at the game, that’s something you’ll remember.”

Debris, Purdue’s yearbook, attracted sales of fewer than 1,000 copies on the 38,000-student campus in 2005.

In 2004 the University of Oklahoma split its yearbook into two publications, one for freshmen and one for seniors. Oklahoma’s original yearbook had tried to cater to all students, but freshmen and seniors were the only ones buying copies. So the staff decided to focus on the niche markets, says Lori Brooks, the yearbook adviser.

It hasn’t worked. Sales remained low, at about 2,000 books per year on a campus of 20,000 undergraduate students. The biggest problem, Ms. Brooks says, is that many students do not even know there are yearbooks at Oklahoma.

At Liberty University, yearbook-staff members determined that the yearbook could not compete with social Web sites. If you can’t beat ’em, the Selah staffers figured, join ’em. This year staff members created a Facebook profile for the yearbook. Through the profile, they have promoted the sale of the yearbook with a contest in which students voted for their favorite cover design. The online profile’s photo album shows snippets of stories and photos that will appear in the printed version of the yearbook.

“We’re really trying hard to allow technology to work with us instead of against us,” says Carrie Barnhouse, the Selah adviser. She was hired to revive the yearbook, which typically sells only 400 copies on the campus of 10,000 students, and wasn’t published in 1999 and 2000. Some advisers have considered replacing printed yearbooks with DVD versions, but switching formats, too, has risks.

“You can’t just have a DVD yearbook,” says Ms. Widmer, the adviser at Northwest Missouri State, “because in 30 years you’re not going to be able to do anything with it except use it as a coaster.”

For the past decade, the Tower staff has compromised by including a DVD supplement with its printed yearbook. This year, when Northwest Missouri celebrated its centennial, the university relied on the yearbook’s archives for many of the documents and photographs displayed on the campus. Without the yearbook, Ms. Widmer says, the university would have been hard pressed to find artifacts from its past.

“Unfortunately, there are a lot of universities that have said, ‘Oh, there’s a budget we can cut,’” she says. “But they don’t realize they are cutting access to records, history, photos, to a connection to that point in time.”