

10 Admissions Deans Who Are Shaping Their Field

By ELIZABETH F. FARRELL and ERIC HOOVER

Paul Marthers

When Paul Marthers came to Reed College five years ago, he decided to learn all he could about the campus. He read about its history, absorbed its culture, and attended classes to better understand its students and professors. He studied everything, even the coast pines, northern red oaks, and dozens of other trees that grow on the grounds.

Mr. Marthers believed that as Reed's dean of admission, he could not meaningfully promote the college unless he had lived and breathed the place. For good measure, he enrolled in Reed's liberal-studies program and later earned a master's degree.

"What's guided me is to understand what Reed is, to present Reed authentically, and assume the right kind of students will be attracted," he says. "A lot of admissions marketing is, 'Let's try to figure out what the customer wants, and let's try to think and talk like a 17-year-old.'"

Mr. Marthers has revamped Reed's viewbook, turning it into an award winner. He has encouraged his staff to present the college, with its quirks and warts, in their own words. He has developed several distinctive links on Reed's Web site about the college's rich lore, including a mock interview with a talking dog named Buster, who confirms a campus legend that after dying, some Reed alumni return as one of the beloved canines that roam the campus.

Riffs on interspecies reincarnation may not impress all prospective students, but Reed has not wanted for interest. Since 2002 applications to Reed have nearly doubled. Its admit rate has dropped to 40 percent from 71 percent, while the proportion of minority students in the freshman class has increased to 25 percent from 14 percent.

As a high-school student in Vermont, Mr. Marthers worked in a cheese factory to save money for college. When he graduated from Oberlin College, in 1982, he became the first in his family to earn a postsecondary degree. That perspective, he says, frames his view of the applications he reads each year.

"I try to imagine myself," he wrote in a recent essay, "back when I was enthralled with the possibilities available though the simple, yet seemingly risky, act of stepping up to college, when doing so was a hope far from certainty."

Mr. Marthers has published nearly 20 articles on a range of educational issues, including the SAT writing test (he's not a fan), and has won admirers for articulating Reed's antipathy to college rankings (the college has long refused to participate in *U.S. News & World Report's* data collection). He has become a national voice for the value of a liberal-arts education.

"He knows where admissions is and has many creative ideas for where it could go," says Sonya K. Smith, assistant dean of admission at Princeton University, who worked for Mr. Marthers at Reed.

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