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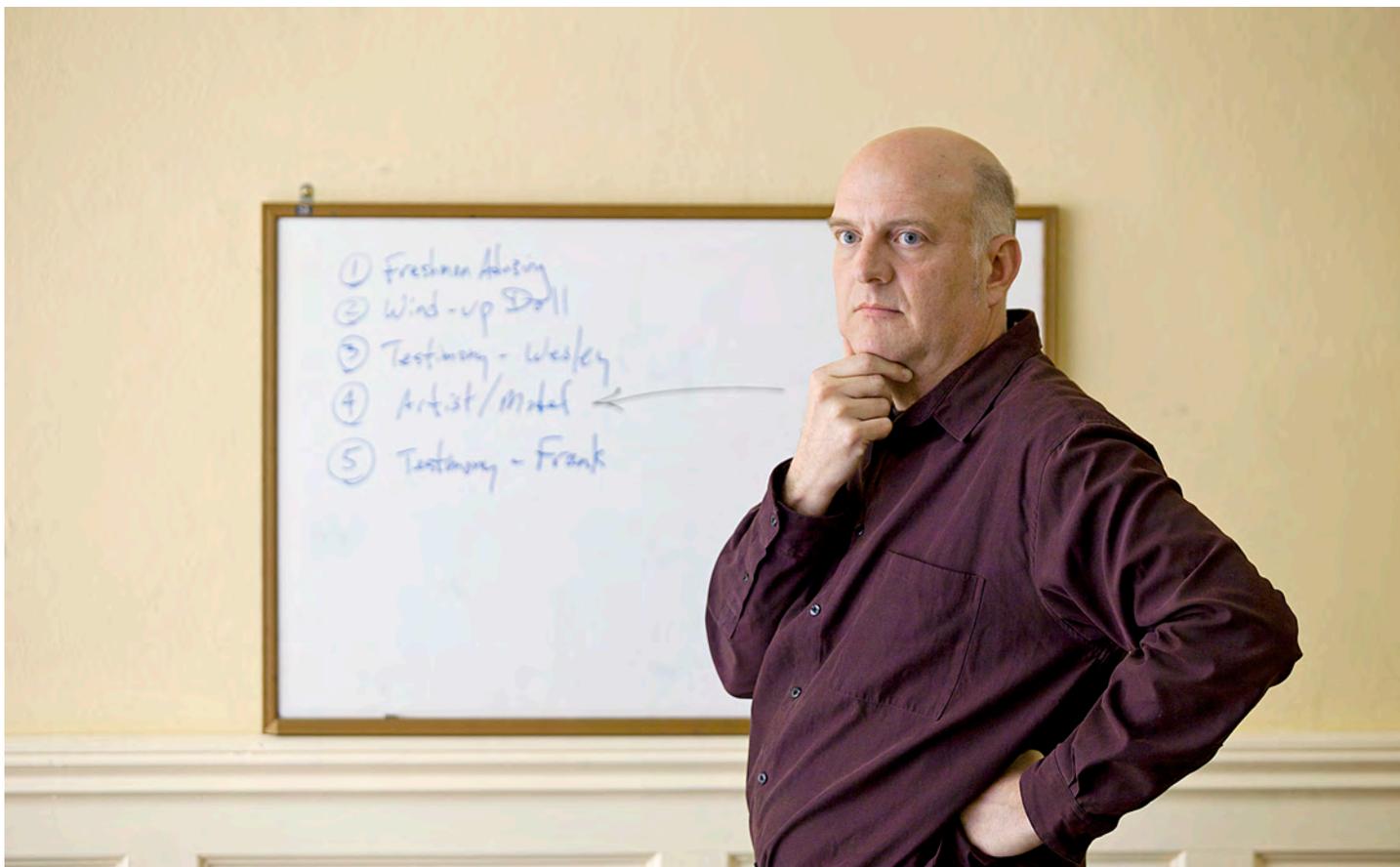
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Administration

It's His Very Own College, and Welcome to It



KEVIN COOK FOR THE CHRONICLE

Richard Liston, founder of Sphere College, has put about \$100,000 into his effort, including his retirement savings and a loan from his father.

Phoenixville, Pa.

By Joel Berg

Virginia Stewart had lost her apartment but not her sense of adventure, which is why she stopped Richard Liston one Sunday afternoon in a suburban Philadelphia coffee shop. She had heard he was starting a college, and she wanted to hear more.

Mr. Liston, a tall man with a shaved head and an inviting gaze, made his pitch: He was calling his project Sphere College. The curricu-

lum would be individualized. It would focus on helping students identify their passions and learn how to use them in the world. It would be delivered in three phases, with no set timetable. And it would be free of charge.

"That's ambitious," Ms. Stewart remembers thinking. "We're not talking small, are we?"

Ms. Stewart, 58, also remembers the idea filling her with hope after a series of personal setbacks. The following Wednesday, she and her



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Mr. Liston coined the term “funly” to describe his own teaching style. In this class session, he and students rehearsed a play meant to dramatize the college’s mission.

husband, Jonathan, attended their first class, in a bookstore in this former steelmaking town of about 15,000 people.

Two years later, only about a third of the original 20 students remain enrolled. The one other instructor who has taught regularly at Sphere has his doubts about its future. Making a success of a new college is always a long shot. But with dozens of for-profit schools saturating the market, state universities reeling from budget cuts, and liberal-arts colleges struggling to redefine their mission, Mr. Liston, 50, has not picked the most opportune time.

Moreover, he has no money. He has poured about \$100,000 into Sphere College, including his retirement savings and a loan from his father. This year, to keep paying the bills, he started a consulting business to advise high-school students applying to college. He has asked for donations from friends and former colleagues and held several fund raisers, including a creative-writing contest with a \$10 prize. The contest netted \$50.

But Mr. Liston, a former tenure-track faculty member in computer science at Ursinus College, is pressing on. “Look,” he says, “there simply is a large population of people that do not thrive in the current system of higher education. I’m saying, Let’s try to create an environment that gives them information they want in the way they want it. Let’s try it. It’s the only thing that makes sense to me.”

It’s the first time higher education has made sense to Ms. Stewart, an aspiring artist who has been trying to get back on her feet since losing her job at a small museum in 2006. Decades ago she attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, in Philadelphia, but found no one to mentor her there. In the mid-1980s, she took classes for two semesters at Temple University, but quit in order to work while her husband tried to start a graphic-arts business.

Mr. Liston, she says, has taken her seriously as an artist and a thinker. He helped her obtain a small grant to mount and frame her drawings for sale. (He has also hired her part time to help with administrative work at Sphere.)

“I just feel like it transformed me so much that I really want to stay with it,” she says.

That may be hard to do. Financial realities have trapped Ms. Stewart and other students in the first of Mr. Liston’s three planned phases. Dubbed “Self and Other,” it resembles the kind of wide-ranging, freshman humanities course that he taught when he was at Ursinus. (“Most science professors run screaming from this course,” he says. “But that’s why I wanted to teach it.”) Students read works as varied as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Theory U: Leading From the Future as It Emerges*, by C. Otto Scharmer, a senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

In the second phase, students would build their own curricula and find mentors to work with them. In the final phase, they would complete a project.

The problem, Mr. Liston says, is that there’s no money for faculty with expertise in fields students want to pursue. On Sphere’s Web site, Mr. Liston has posted this notice (in the spirit of the ad that Ernest Shackleton supposedly published when seeking men for his Antarctic explorations): “Faculty wanted: For challenging educational journey, no salary, long periods of ambiguity, constant difficulty, sane return doubtful, satisfaction and kinship in case of success.”

Mr. Liston would like to attract a wealthy philanthropist or foundation with an interest in adult education. “We don’t need \$20-million—yet,” he says. “We need about \$100,000,”

to pay a grant writer for about six months, rent classroom and office space, and hire some part-time faculty.

Sphere's remaining students have made it part of their education to help build the college. One night in February, five of them met for class in a church basement. The youngest student was a woman in her 30s who was supporting herself by cleaning houses and teaching art part time to developmentally disabled adults. The oldest was a 77-year-old retired machinist. Together they rehearsed a play intended to dramatize the college's mission.

The first scene parodied the freshman-advising process, playing up a problem that Mr. Liston sees in the current system—students with little sense of direction, and faculty advisers with little time to help them. He played a harried faculty adviser, while Ms. Stewart portrayed a hapless student.

"What do you want to do with your life?" he asked.

"I want to be a good person," she responded.

"I can't help you with that," he said.

A Winding Path

Like the students he has sought out, Mr. Liston is no stranger to midlife career changes. He grew up in rural South Carolina and began his working life as a professional trombonist, playing with the likes of Tony Bennett, Tito Puente, and Wynton Marsalis. He followed music with a stint as a software engineer, then decided he wanted to become a professor. In 2004 he earned a doctorate from the Georgia Institute of Technology and landed a tenure-track job at Ursinus. But in a pretenure review in 2007, he says, the college decided not to renew his contract. He had thought things were going well.

Mr. Liston began looking for his next academic job by designing the ideal place he'd like to teach. The criteria boiled down to serving adults who did not fit in traditional higher education; giving students greater say in running the institution; and creating a learning environment that they would enjoy—he coined the term "funly" to describe his own teaching style.

His search came up empty, so he decided to build his own college—and began blogging about it the day President Obama was inaugurated. He chose the name Sphere, he says, because he wanted an abstract concept. When someone pointed out to him that "Sphere College" sounded a lot like "Fear College," he thought that made it more interesting.

Mr. Liston was inspired, in part, by Black Mountain College, in Asheville, N.C. Founded in 1933 by former Rollins College faculty members, Black Mountain was an experimental venture that counted many notable artists and writers among its students and faculty before closing in 1957.

While the college's legacy is widely respected today, some contemporaries were skeptical. "It was always a little bit outside of the system, and some people would consider that foolhardy," says Alice Sebrell, program director of the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. "Others would think, How wonderful. It's a fresh start. It's an original way to go."

It has been relatively easy to start colleges in the United States, says John R. Thelin, a professor of educational-policy studies at the University of Kentucky and author of *A History of American Higher Education*. Much harder is making them work financially—especially among thousands of options, online and off. "You're under the gun on just about all counts," he says.

Mr. Liston has considered backing off the idea of keeping Sphere College free: "The word 'free' scares off business people. They can't imagine people would show up to free classes."

Maybe, he thinks, he could focus instead on making it affordable. But "free" is "a very powerful word for people who just don't have any money," he says.

Michael Reddy, who taught at Sphere last year and has a doctorate in cognitive linguistics from the University of Chicago, says charging money would help ensure that students were committed, did the reading, and came to class. "It can't descend to a coffee klatch where people can just walk in and out," he says.

"The idea that people need to connect with their passions and work outward from their passions is dear to my heart," says Mr. Reddy,

now a life coach in the Philadelphia suburbs. “The practicalities—and Richard is one of the more dedicated persons you’ll probably ever meet and is a brilliant guy—the practical realities of what he’s trying to achieve and how he’s going about it are, I think, difficult.”

Mr. Liston has approached nearby Cheyney University of Pennsylvania about developing a certificate program in communication skills. “We are exploring some kind of partnership, but it’s way too early to confirm a commitment,” says Jacqueline Bingham, a spokeswoman for Cheyney.

Mr. Liston’s long-term goal is to have Sphere College accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. “We’ll start that process at whatever time makes sense,” he says.

In the meantime, he talks about Sphere College to anyone who will listen, and answers

skeptics by pointing to the unlikeliness of his own career path. He has made a presentation at AT&T Labs and last year he spoke at a conference about Black Mountain. In homage to that college’s reputation for artistic experimentation, he demonstrated his commitment to Sphere by stripping down to a pair of red underwear.

Some in the audience recoiled, he says. Others were more positive.

“I also learned what it’s like to push my own envelope,” says Mr. Liston, who has no plans to repeat the performance. “It kind of makes it easier when I go into situations in the future. I know there’s no question of whether I’m going to take my clothes off or not. I survived.”

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