

# Sweet Briar Reflects on a Decade of Resilience and Looks Toward a Bold Future

*A decade after facing closure, Sweet Briar College celebrates resilience, growth, and innovation while preparing for a thriving future.*

AMHERST, VA, UNITED STATES, March 6, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- On March 3, 2015, Sweet Briar College's Board of Trustees declared its intention to close the college, citing "insurmountable financial challenges."

A decade later, this women's college is still going strong. A case study in how leadership, financial stewardship, and extraordinary support from its alumnae base can make a difference in today's challenging higher education environment.

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“Our critics said we were too small, too female, and too far from a Starbucks—and that it was impossible to raise money from our alumnae. We've shown that the impossible is just another problem to solve,” said President Mary Pope M. Hutson, the college's first alumna president. “We've shown that a small women's college can survive—and thrive – by embracing innovation while we also respect our past. We navigated the closure attempt with the support of thousands of devoted alumnae, current and past faculty and staff, hundreds of inspired students and other friends across the country.”

Since 2015, the college has:



The Sweet Briar Forever banner hangs on the Bell Tower following the attempted closure.

Developed a standalone academic curriculum based on women's leadership: Sweet Briar replaced its general education requirements with the Women's Leadership Core, 10

interdisciplinary courses that aim to cultivate leadership skills and build a generation of ethical leaders. Students learn design thinking, persuasive writing, and data literacy, as well as contemporary ethical questions, financial literacy, and environmental sustainability. Changes to the academic calendar allow for intensive three-week sessions at the beginning and end of the school year. In part, because of these moves, Sweet Briar has been named one of the [nation's most innovative liberal arts colleges](#) in the U.S. News and World Report rankings for three of the past five years.

Embraced its agricultural heritage: Once a farm, the 2,847-acre campus now boasts acres of vineyards, growing grapes for Virginia wines and providing auxiliary revenue for the college. An apiary next to a wildflower meadow produces as much as 800 pounds of honey yearly, and students can become beekeepers. A [26,000-square-foot greenhouse](#) provides farm-to-table food for the dining hall as well as local restaurants. Students can take agricultural courses and earn a certificate in sustainable agriculture.

Developed public-private partnerships in higher ed: Students in Sweet Briar's engineering program, one of two ABET-accredited programs at a women's college nationwide, can begin working on their master's degrees while still in college under agreements with the University of Virginia and Virginia Tech established in 2023. The college is dedicated to doubling the size of its engineering program. Sweet Briar has also partnered with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service to develop land conservation plans and with Virginia's agriculture and forestry departments.



Sweet Briar holding its annual rose-planting ceremony since 2015



Sweet Briar College Commitment Scholarship

Reset tuition for increased opportunities for students: Sweet Briar cut its tuition, fees, and room-

and-board costs by a third in 2017 and continues to offer far lower rates than other private colleges. In addition, the college raises money specifically to expand its Presidential Scholars program, a merit scholarship based on grades, test scores, and interviews. Its new [SBCommitment program](#) offers full tuition for Pell Grant-eligible students from Virginia who qualify for admission.

Investment in the campus and athletic facilities: Sweet Briar has invested in its century-old campus, which appears on the National Register of Historic Places, rehabilitating historic buildings and adding to its athletic offerings. The projects include updating dorm living spaces and renovating the stables that serve the college's nationally recognized, century-old riding program, adding turf fields, and rehabilitating hiking trails and the boathouse on the campus lake.

Developed a three-year enhanced strategic plan: The plan focuses on building academic excellence and the student experience, increasing financial prosperity, and stewarding the natural and built environment.

"It's remarkable to see how far Sweet Briar has come in the past decade," says Phillip C. Stone, who served as the college's president after a June 2015 legal settlement blocked the board's efforts to shutter the school. "The college has been supporting women's education since its founding in 1901, and I expect that to continue for decades to come."

In July 2015, Stone arrived on a campus with no students and a shaky financial future. Since then, enrollment has climbed steadily, increasing by 60% in the past six years. Stone and his successors, Meredith Woo and Hutson, have stabilized finances, achieving balanced budgets and clean audits with support from the \$160 million that alumnae have contributed in the past decade. Sweet Briar leaders have also continued to mentor other colleges who have faced attempted closure—including Hampshire, Bennett, and many others—to share their experiences saving and repositioning the college.

Sweet Briar's resurgence comes at a time when many small colleges are closing or merging with larger institutions. Woo points out that the college accomplished this by embracing its strengths, not discarding them. "It remained a women's college. It retained its rural character," she notes. "It renewed its commitment to educating students in small classes featuring hands-on, immersive, personalized learning—preparing its graduates to lead the world into a more sustainable and just future."

Sweet Briar is holding its annual rose-planting ceremony to mark its decade of success. A new rose has been added to the beds near the campus bell tower. The college is also conducting its March Days of Giving, an annual ceremony recommitting students, faculty, staff, and alumnae to the perpetuity of the college.

"As far as we've come in the past decade, we can't afford to rest on our laurels," says Mason

Rummel, alumna and chair of the college's Board of Trustees. "We must remain vigilant to keep Sweet Briar strong and thriving."

As Sweet Briar celebrates a decade of resilience and innovation, the College remains committed to attracting and empowering the next generation of women leaders. With small class sizes, hands-on learning, and a focus on sustainability, leadership, and STEM, Sweet Briar offers a one-of-a-kind educational experience. The past ten years' success demonstrates our community's strength and the value of a Sweet Briar education—one that prepares students to lead, innovate, and make an impact. If you're ready to be part of a legacy of bold, forward-thinking women, we invite you to explore the opportunities at Sweet Briar College. Learn more at

<https://www.sbc.edu/admissions/>

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