The Talented Mr. Spellmann

Lindenwood University's president may be a genius, a savior and a visionary. He may also be higher ed's worst nightmare.

By Jeannette Batz

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He was born in El Campo, an East Texas town with a museum of big-game trophies from five continents.

You'd think they'd struck gold. Construction's booming at Lindenwood: Above, one of the new dormitories; soon to come, the $12 million Spellmann Center, honoring the man who made it all possible.
President Dennis Spellmann personally presents a Lindenwood cap to each new student — then holds his faculty accountable for patrolling their classrooms to make sure nobody wears one indoors.

He grew up fighting with his daddy, a short, proud German who'd tried to farm and fallen ill, and had to prove himself a man somehow.

He was the first kid in town to make Eagle Scout, trudging an extra 16 miles on dirt roads to attend the meetings. "I know he liked earning all the merit badges," says his baby sister Dixie Guyer, "because he had a whole bunch of them. But mainly you got to go out in the woods, live by your wits, see how far you could push yourself."

Dennis Spellmann has been pushing himself -- and everybody else -- ever since. He headed north to Missouri Valley College in 1956, bent on becoming an executive with the Boy Scouts of America. Survived four years of the Marines and came home jumping over laced fingers to impress the five younger Spellmanns. Earned a master's degree in public administration at the University of Texas-Austin, cleaned up the police force in Fort Worth, cleaned out what locals called the "Texas mafia" in Athens. Arrived in St. Louis in 1970 wearing cowboy boots and a 10-gallon hat, explaining with a shrug that he'd had to leave Texas because there was a contract out on him.

"It's kind of like Wyatt Earp," he says now. "You hire him to come in and straighten out the outlaws in Dodge City, and then what?" Weary of East Texas' rough politics, Spellmann read an ad for three positions at Ladue's elite John Burroughs High School: business manager, grounds director and assistant football coach. "I'll take all three," he told them, "as long as I can have 50 percent release time to start my consulting business." The Burroughs staff was still dazed by Spellmann's mix of "brilliant ideas and blue sky" when he left in 1972 to help close Maryville College. There he swung a series of land deals for the nuns, winning tearful applause by announcing that they didn't have to close after all. continued on page 16

Dennis Spellmann had rediscovered his Boy Scout dream. Gaining rapid fame as a bankruptcy and turnaround expert, he proceeded to bail out a string of Presbyterian, rural and historically black colleges across the country, flying from one to the other and descending like a god to overhaul the books, the payroll and the enrollment. By 1989, he was executive vice president of seven colleges simultaneously, among them Lindenwood College in St. Charles.

A year later, he was president of Lindenwood, and the U.S. Department of Education was auditing two of his prior clients, Tarkio College (now closed) and Missouri Valley College in Marshall, Mo. The same pattern emerged in both places: unprepared students -- some of them high-school dropouts -- illiterate, homeless, drug-addicted, recently paroled or nonexistent, signed up for college courses, their federal grants fattening the college coffers long after they'd stopped showing up.

Everybody thought the game was up. They thought a grand jury would indict the turnaround artist and higher ed would return to its sedate ways, small institutions teetering on the edge of bankruptcy with their ideals intact. Instead, Spellmann escaped un-scathed. He'd done nothing illegal, he reminded the Wall Street Journal: "I didn't invent these grants. If the government didn't want these people eligible, they could change the rules."
They swiftly did so; it's said that Spellmann changed federal law singlehandedly, by forcing officials at the U.S. Department of Education (whom he calls "marble sniffers") to spell out restrictions on financial aid. Today, Spellmann calls Tarkio "one of the best professional jobs I ever did and one of the greatest disappointments," claiming that after he left in 1985, they reverted to their old ways and made him a convenient scapegoat.

By then, Spellmann was working his magic at near-bankrupt Lindenwood, wiping away debt, boosting enrollment, painting pictures no one else could see. He'd made similar suggestions parachuting into other institutions (even convincing the stuffy Jesuits at St. Louis University to discount tuition because it was sinful to let classrooms stand empty). Now, however, Spellmann had the gravitas of a full-fledged college president, and for the first time in his life, he stayed put.

Eleven years later, Lindenwood is the fastest-growing institution of higher education in Missouri, on the verge of granting 10 percent of all baccalaureate degrees in the state. Enrollment has increased ninefold; the endowment has grown from $600,000 to $15.1 million; acreage has expanded from 108 to more than 1,228. The university is building beautiful multimillion-dollar buildings and paying for them with cash. Spellmann, 64, has won himself a tight circle of admirers -- and more enemies than you could fit in Texas.

"Sure, he saved Lindenwood," they say, "but at what cost?"

Founded in 1827 by idealistic reformer Mary Sibley, Lindenwood began as a Presbyterian women's college. For decades, Lindenwood ladies rode horseback through the grove of linden trees, worshiped regularly in the Gothic chapel, studied liberal arts and discussed the serious concerns of the day. A series of refined, scholarly men presided -- but as the 20th century progressed, they grew successively less intellectual, each struggling in his own way to re-create Lindenwood as a modern, coed, solvent institution.

By the time Spellmann accepted the mission to save Lindenwood in 1989, the college had an operating deficit of $1.6 million, bills of nearly half-a-million and a federal debt of $513,000. Enrollment was foundering, the gym was state-of-the-art for 1917 and every roof leaked. St. Charles County Community College had toured the campus and turned down an offer to buy it -- for $1.

Spellmann wasn't brought in to be president; the board, figuring they'd have to close anyway, had already named a bona fide scholar, political scientist Dan Keck, as interim president. But the board chairman just happened to be the voice of St. Louis, KMOX's powerful and curmudgeonly Robert Hyland, who'd led the Maryville board when Spellmann rescued that school. Making it clear that Spellmann would call the shots, Hyland sent Keck out to Spellmann's farm in nearby Cottleville for a chat. Legend has it that Spellmann talked for seven hours straight, and Keck decided he wasn't willing to play silent president. By June of 1989 he'd stepped down, and Spellmann was president.

Spellmann wasn't, as most people assumed, new to Lindenwood; he'd done enough consulting there to be named in an unsuccessful 1983 lawsuit by Robert Johns, a past president who hurled
charges at 27 people, along the way accusing Spellmann and board member William Symes of invading his privacy with a background check and conspiring to get him dismissed.

Symes and Spellmann were old friends; as president of the philanthropic Monsanto Fund, Symes had retained Spellmann's consulting services for seven years, and Lindenwood old-timers say it was Symes who later "played John the Baptist," convincing Hyland that only Spellmann could save Lindenwood.

Spellmann walked into a college that didn't have enough cash to make payroll and had signed only a handful of resident students for the fall. He started by finessing a $2.5 million note from Commerce Bank, which had turned Lindenwood down for a $1 million loan months earlier, by signing for $40,000 of it himself. "Kind of like key-man insurance," he explains. "You get a physical, get insured and commit to work until the note's paid. Over time, you develop a credit rating: At one point I had seven of those notes out at once, $14.5 million total. I'd go a whole week without sleeping more than 15 or 30 minutes at a time." He adds -- is he serious? -- that he really shouldn't have taken the Lindenwood job. "It's too close to home," he grins. "You need to have a plane ticket in your pocket where you can leave. But I knew the purpose could be rekindled."

Finding purpose is the man's hallmark. He says he advised more than half of his nonprofit clients to go ahead and close because they couldn't answer yes to a simple question: If this organization didn't exist, would you re-create it? Lindenwood, on the other hand, had a rich history, a strong mission and incredible potential, but "they'd forgotten what they were originally about. They'd become self-serving."

His first day on campus, he summoned a dejected, cynical, underpaid faculty who'd been watching their beloved college gasp its next-to-last breath for years. "This institution is starting over," he announced. "The old Lindenwood is closed." He described his vision of thousands more students flowing into a thriving, expanding campus, and he gave them all raises.

Then he abolished tenure, increased their teaching loads to five courses, required them to advise 60 or so students apiece and stretched their duties year-round. "I will pay you on merit," he told them, "and I decide what merit is." He rescinded the faculty constitution and bylaws, replacing them with a council of deans appointed by the president and serving at his pleasure.

Next, Spellmann got busy separating "real dollars from Monopoly money" and announcing the first good news: The unrestricted endowment contained more than previously thought. He swelled it further by reducing staff from 427 to 140, replacing some with work-study students and reclassifying others as faculty. By 1990, he'd restored black ink to the ledger. A delighted Hyland now referred to the previous decades as "B.S." -- before Spellmann.

By 1992, Lindenwood's enrollment had tripled. Impressed, relieved and wary, the faculty waited for tenure to be restored. But in July 1993, Spellmann was still claiming the state of financial exigency that had allowed him to, as one prof put it, "impose the equivalent of academic martial law." Faculty sputtered, but they no longer had any say. Accreditors from the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools noted "an atmosphere of repression and fear of reprisal" in
1993 but eventually granted Lindenwood full accreditation. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) cited Lindenwood in 1994 for policies "at odds with the general spirit of an academic community and demeaning to the faculty." But after three of four AAUP presidents disappeared from Lindenwood's faculty in rapid succession, faculty activism dwindled.

Profs did like the lightening of their committee load; they'd spent a lot of time spinning their wheels in the years B.S., and nothing had ever gotten done. But when Spellmann reminded them they were "free from the constraints of tenure," they couldn't help but remember the colleagues who'd lost their jobs challenging him.

John Nichols was the textbook example. The once-tenured chair of the math department, he'd taught at Lindenwood for 24 years and was president of the AAUP chapter. Spellmann called him a "featherbedder" and "rabble-rouser" and fired him in 1993 for insubordination. The case brought faculty criticism to fever pitch, and a group of senior faculty wrote board chair Ray Harmon begging for Spellmann's removal from all academic decision-making. Harmon simply forwarded the letter to Spellmann; he might not be an academician's dream, but he was saving Lindenwood.

He was also stopping "frivolous" intellectual pursuits. The man who'd been executive vice president of seven colleges at once was appalled that faculty might waste Lindenwood's time on scholarly research or travel. He reprimanded the dean of the science division, a respected botanist, for arranging to miss a few classes at Thanksgiving so she could do research in a Guatemalan rainforest. He told Nichols he shouldn't have left to attend President Bill Clinton's inauguration. And when another prof won a prestigious Fulbright award that entailed travel, a colleague says, "Spellmann was pissed." He wanted a student-centered college whose faculty stayed in their offices from 9 to 5 advising (or, as one wag put it, "manning phones as if they were collecting for a cerebral-palsy telethon").

Faculty salaries improved in Spellmann's years, rising from the bottom quartile to the top, but individual amounts ranged so widely, people stopped sharing information with each other. Spellmann's own salary certainly helps the average: The second-highest-paid university administrator in this area (and rapidly gaining on Washington University's chancellor), he receives $200,000 a year in salary, $100,000 a year for "consulting," an unlimited expense account, a $500-a-month automobile allowance and an additional 5 percent of compensation, plus a dollar-for-dollar match gets poured into his retirement fund.

His faculty, on the other hand, have learned not to ask for school supplies. "He'll say, 'You've got your hand in my pocket again.' He thinks everyone's trying to beat him out of money," says one professor. "He thinks copy machines are used for personal reasons, so when you're trying to run off a test you can't find a damn copy machine that works."

Dixie Guyer isn't surprised to hear her brother is thrifty; she remembers him regaling the family with stories of petty theft at the Fort Worth Police Department. "He paid attention to detail," she says. "If you wanted a new pencil, you had to bring back the stub of the old one."
Lindenwood alumni, meanwhile, tell sad tales of the trailer park bought to house them -- feces from the evicted renters' pets, space heaters in the dead of winter, plumbing that ran to a washtub under the trailer. (Lindenwood is now opening two beautiful residence halls on the site, but it's slim consolation for the grads of the trailer era.) Asked for the most recent yearbook, Spellmann says it's still "at press" -- but the last one that made it to the bindery was from 1995-96. Staff worry that there are no health-care professionals on site, no drop-in counseling center for troubled students. "We are not in that business," explains psychology professor and dean of faculty James Evans, "and there are obvious liabilities associated with the administration of those services -- if a student files a malpractice suit, for example. But we have a full Rolodex of professionals; we don't let anybody slip through the cracks."

Academically, the biggest casualty of Spellmann's frugality has probably been the library. Six wooden card cabinets represent its holdings -- which doesn't bode well for their "MA in Library Media Specialist" program -- and theft continues to erode the small collection because there's no security system. Plans are finally under way to put the catalog online, but the new head librarian will have her hands full: She was just made dean of communications in addition to overseeing library operations and information technology.

An anonymous "LindenWorld" newsletter slipped into faculty boxes last spring announced: "President Spellmann has determined that it would be more cost effective to simply close the Butler Library.... A book sale was planned but sadly, there are no volumes of any value still in the building."

That newsletter didn't go over well; nor did an earlier underground paper, the Yellow Mole, or its electronic successor, e-mailed through an anonymous repeater in Finland. "I heard Spellmann tried to contact the Finnish government," a professor offers dryly. Spellmann says he doesn't remember a thing about it.

There's no student paper, either -- Spellmann took all the fun out of it by insisting on approving every word published. "Kids get work-study credit for walking around wearing sandwich boards: 'Choral Concert 7:30 Friday,'" groans a former professor. A current prof remembers watching student-services staff pass out student literary magazines, then scurry around taking them back because a student had slipped in some profanity. A 1997 graduate says that by the time she came, "there were no controversial issues ever," and students had stopped protesting. "I guess because you are paying money to go there," she offers, "and he can take away that scholarship and make you pay the full $10,000."

Even board meetings are unusually harmonious. "He doesn't want the board to know anything," says one disenchanted board member. "He interprets that as board interference. And he forbids faculty from talking to the board, calls that board interference." (Harmon says there's no formal structure for faculty-board interaction but plenty of informal opportunities. Spellmann agrees, noting that "faculty don't want board members calling them about day-to-day operations.")

As for disclosure on federally required crime logs, the U.S. Department of Education sounded amused last summer when its reviewers reminded Lindenwood that it wasn't enough to include only those crime reports you believed were "founded"; they should err on the conservative side
and report everything. "We took exception to that suggestion," says Spellmann. "There is nothing in the regulations that says you report unfounded claims."

Faculty, meanwhile, say they've been told not to call 911 but to let someone in administration decide whether a situation is an emergency. A former professor claims that about $8,500 worth of equipment was taken from his office (he'd brought in his own because the university wouldn't provide it) and the university would neither call the police nor reimburse him. "There were muddy footprints on the ledge, and broken glass, but within about 15 minutes, housekeeping came over with direct orders to clean up," he says. "Finally I called the police and explained, and the officer said, 'We have heard it before from this place.'" (Spellmann says he doesn't recall the incident but that he would never tell someone not to call the police; nor would he have reimbursed the employee: "How would I know what personal property someone took to work? That's a homeowner's claim.")

Bottom line, Spellmann doesn't like criticism -- the occupational hazard of university presidents -- and he doesn't like anything negative said about Lindenwood, ever. When people leave, they must leave fast, and those who stay must be loyal. According to several campus sources, one prof was recently rebuked by Spellmann for attending a sporting event with his old friend John Nichols. As for the various regulatory and accrediting agencies that watchdog higher ed, "If someone inquires, he goes to the politicians, has people making complaints and asking why you're harassing him," says one observer. "He punishes people who go after him; he just comes at you from every side."

The chilling seems to work: Forty-two of the people interviewed for this story would speak only on the condition of anonymity.

Spellmann might not be a terribly tolerant sort of president, but he's brilliant at details -- and consumed by them. He insists that every window shade in Young Hall be kept at the same height; he once issued an infamous "toilet-seat memo" to be read aloud in class, urging males to put the seat down when they finished. He gives every new student a Lindenwood ball cap but expects faculty to police their classes to make sure no student wears a hat indoors. He has elderly housekeepers raking and work-study students picking up sweetgum balls, and one professor remembers staff shooing African-American students off the steps of Butler Hall, lest they frighten little old Lindenwood ladies from making a bequest.

Sometimes, though, the impressions don't quite match the reality. It's like the women's room on the second floor of Young Hall: The sign on the door proudly bears the familiar wheelchair logo, but there's no way a wheelchair could fit inside, and there are no handrails or other modifications.

Then there are the oft-touted accolades. "We were recently elected to a group of schools called the Best Christian Colleges," brags Evans. "It's very selective." It's a $19.95 book, published by Institutional Research & Evaluation, Inc., listing the 87 accredited four-year colleges that have dorms, financial aid and freshmen with grades or exam scores at least equal to the national average.
Faculty sharpen their critical skills by analyzing the way things are counted: Lindenwood's enrollment, for example, just sailed past 10,000 -- but that's not full-time students, it's "unduplicated head count." In other words, it includes the high-schoolers taking French for college credit and the ladies taking ceramics on a lark. The university has to count this way because it's run on semester, trimester and quarter schedules simultaneously, and that's not to mention the staggered summer courses and the new "January term" that packs complete college courses into three weeks.

Then there's the faculty-student ratio. Lindenwood claims 17:1, but its professors can't fathom how; they report 35 students in composition classes, 45 in literature classes, 30 in computer classes (with only 25 computers), nearly 30 in MBA seminars and overflow students sitting on floors because, when the student body quadrupled, Lindenwood added no new classrooms.

Finally there's their proudest statistic, the "placement rate," the percentage of graduates who land in professional positions or grad school within 18 months. A few years ago, Lindenwood claimed 100 percent placement, and now the rate's an impressive 98 percent -- except it doesn't apply to the nearly 2,000 students the university graduates each year; it applies to the 250 or so who are motivated enough to put their résumés in a special job-placement catalog. (Before the catalog, it's said, on at least one occasion the person responsible for the stats tried to count everybody who hadn't called back, figuring they must have jobs if they didn't have time to call.)

In the 1999 catalog, most of the graduates earned degrees in marketing, communications, business, education, human resources or human-service-agency management and are indeed working in related positions -- but many were already doing so while they were in school. Quite a few were adult students taking evening classes paid for by their employers. Random phone calls to these 98-percent-placed graduates turn up a communications major who's a claims rep for an insurance company, another who's teaching aerobics in a gym, a business major who's "between jobs right now," someone in "management" at Blockbuster, a woman with a master's in health care who just found a job taking orders for a phone company and another health-care major who is "most definitely not working in his field," his mother announces, hanging up the phone.

Land, to Dennis Spellmann, has always meant success. He calls himself a groundhog, admires his grandparents deeply for staying on the land when everyone else left and buys wherever his family's roots stretch (Cottleville was settled by his forbear, Minerva Cottle, and her frontiersman husband, Zaddock Woods). In Spellmann's work, too, land's often saved the day. Take Sulphur Springs, where he worked for a year as city manager in the '60s. Dried-up economy, land good for nothing but grass -- so Spellmann convinced the town's businessmen to plant coastal Bermuda along the new interstate and establish a dairy co-op. Then he read that Hollywood Candy in Centralia, Ill., couldn't get milk because of a Teamsters strike, so he invited them to open a plant in Sulphur Springs, right next to the dairy co-op. "We got peanuts down here, too," he said, "and a lot of poor folks who need jobs." When the president asked what sort of subsidy he was offering, Spellmann retorted, "Sir, I am insulted. I'd expect you to pay your own money." Intrigued, the president took the bait. "I sold 'em the land for twice what I was authorized," recalls Spellmann. "They wound up building the largest candy plant in the world, 10 million bars a day -- and it all started with what the ground could be used for."
At Lindenwood, Spellmann started by buying back land the university had sold for quick cash, buying whole subdivisions he could use for adult student housing ("If they get pregnant I don't have to kick them out, move them over into single-parent housing") and buying commercial property he could parlay, annex or trade to fulfill his elaborate vision of Lindenwood's future. Along the way, he made some brilliant moves: bought a country club for the cotillion; bought the boarded-up Southern Air Restaurant, where Chuck Berry allegedly videotaped the women's room. It was a mess, so he convinced Wentzville's Rotary Club to remove soggy drywall and sweep up debris; in exchange, he'd give $4,000 scholarships to students from Wentzville. (He gives that much aid to most students anyway, but the Southern Air is quite tidy now.)

By 1994, Spellmann was talking about luxury villas for alumni and several other projects, enough to alarm St. Charles residents who were afraid Spellmann was trying to run the whole city. "I'm just trying to plan my little campus," he told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Six years later, that little campus boasts the spectacular Hyland Performance Arena and several other multimillion-dollar facilities ("We used to say he had an edifice complex," a professor offers primly). Ground just opened for the $12 million Spellmann Center, and the president insists on showing every visitor the plans and sketches for his next projects.

Spellmann's dream-in-progress is the Daniel Boone Home, now a National Center for the Study of American Culture and Values surrounded by a living-history village. (The home itself actually belonged to Daniel's son Nathan, but luckily for Lindenwood, Dan'l died there). In 1998, the Boone home's previous owner entrusted Lindenwood with the historic site's future. He now seems to regret it; there are rumors of a lawsuit about to be filed in federal court. But Spellmann's forging ahead, planning an amphitheater, apple orchard, popcorn field and sheep farm where students will shear and weave, learning historic ways at the Frontier University of the New Millennium.

This fiscal year, the frontier university spent $17.8 million of its $56.1 million budget on capital outlay, more than $12.6 million of it in purchasing yet more property. Meanwhile, the St. Charles City Council just confirmed another pet project: straightening First Capitol Drive, with the state paying $500,000, the city paying $1.5 million and Lindenwood chipping in 75 percent of any additional costs. This will allow the university to create a majestic new entrance, expand its boundaries, build a Fine and Performing Arts Center and use the old Commerce Bank building for -- Spellmann's eyes twinkle -- the world's only drive-through registration. Service.

Commercial holdouts along First Capitol are caving fast -- all but the Bargain Barn, the thrift shop with the defiant red "Have NOT sold out!" sign in its window. Word has it that if its owners don't relinquish the property soon, the city will declare eminent domain.

With so many residents and small businesses angry, how does Spellmann's vision keep prevailing? It helps that Lindenwood's in old St. Charles, a sepia-tinted village where business is done on a handshake. It helps that the school is in the fastest-growing county in the state and that it draws from rural communities that can no longer rely on farming for a livelihood. And it helps to have strong connections. St. Charles Mayor Patti York is now a member of Lindenwood's faculty and its Board of Overseers; Missouri Sen. Steve Ehlmann (R-St. Charles) also serves on the Board of Overseers; Missouri Rep. Jon Bennett (R-St. Charles), an alum, serves on the education appropriations and higher-ed committees. (Spellman and Harmon were two of the 14
donors who gave Bennett $500.) Lindenwood's director of institutional advancement, Carl Bearden, a longtime member of the St. Charles City Council, was just elected state representative; Lindenwood's dean of management, Nancy Matheny (who earned her Lindenwood MBA without having earned a baccalaureate) used to be president of the City Council and later helped Spellmann negotiate many property deals. Her husband's company does heating-and-cooling work for the university, and the Mathenys recently bought a condominium from the Spellmans.

In short, Spellmann is surrounded by a tight-woven net of support. He has his wife, Sue Spellmann, on the Board of Overseers and his kids in administrative and faculty posts, and in 1994 he gave his college mentor Bob L. Meisel an honorary doctorate. When old friend William Symes left the Monsanto Fund, he joined the faculty as a chemistry professor and helped give students the Meyers-Briggs personality test. As for the board, its officers don't have to rotate, and chairman Ray Harmon is deeply loyal to Lindenwood; his father and sister both taught there, and he received an honorary doctorate from the university. So did vice chair Ben Blanton, whose construction company managed the $10 million dormitory project and whose name now adorns one of the halls.

It's all perfectly legal, and the system functions smoothly. But it makes those outside the circle feel pretty helpless.

On the corner of Spellmann's desk sits a rough bronze sculpture of a masked bandit, a strongbox on the ground beside him, a Colt pistol in one outstretched hand and a shotgun in the other, bearing an inscription that reads, "Go ahead, be a hero." Spellmann usually swivels around, sits sideways and leans way back, "so if people want to catch his eye, they come in and stand to one side," notes an employee. "But that way, they're also facing the guns."

"Goddammit!" he'll explode. "You're not the goddamn president here, I'm the goddamn president." Proposals go through 13 or more drafts, and Spellmann must initial nearly everything. "He's like Khrushchev without the shoe," groans a recently departed professor: "He loves to pound his fist on the table: 'Goddammit, I told you this.' 'No, you didn't, sir, you told me this.' 'Well goddammit, this is what I'm telling you now.'"

"Most people aren't used to dealing with a person who doesn't try to put restraints on his anger," a former dean notes calmly. "He doesn't know how to figure out how people feel or how they see things, so he yells at you. When he's yelling at you, he's in control. I've been in the room when the veins were popping out on his neck and I thought he was going to have a heart attack, and then the person leaves and he turns around and says, 'Think that'll hold him?'"

Many Lindenwood employees resent these choreographed explosions, but people close to Spellmann see it differently. "He's a challenging person, and people don't like to be challenged," says Ed Watkins, an education and business expert long associated with the university. "Most people are go along, get along. He disturbs your comfort."

"People tend to complain when they feel their own shortcomings," remarks Spellmann's sister. "And he probably doesn't socialize a lot. My parents didn't socialize with us children, either."
Instead of socializing or paying compliments (one longtime staffer carefully noted his first thank-you in her calendar), Spellmann brainstorms for hours at a stretch, in vivid detail. Faculty trot off to do his bidding -- only to hear, "Well, goddammit, why the hell'd you do that?" when they report back. "They come away saying, 'Man, he's crazy, he said to do it,'" chuckles a former administrator. "But he never really did; he was just thinking out loud."

Sort of like the year, in the mid-'90s, when he told stories of how Mary Sibley had talked to him and told him to go ahead with his landscaping plans. The handful who knew him well discerned the dry humor, but plenty of Ph.D.'s were convinced he was crazy. Spellmann is so frequently misperceived that he sometimes refers to himself as a prophet not honored in his own land, and he seems befuddled by people's reactions to his goddammits. "Nobody needs to be scared if their heart's pure," he says. "I don't tolerate fools gladly. I get unhappy with people when they are trying to do something half-baked and self-centered. Academia wastes so much time playing games, and I don't have time for it.

"I could have more patience, that's true," he adds ruefully. "I'm an ENTJ on the Meyers Briggs, which means I think the world ought to be ruled by logic, and I sometimes don't have enough concern for people's feelings. When you get focused, you get determined; you're not going to get things to happen any other way. But when you come in with the decisiveness of the ER, it's hard to shift gears and operate loosely."

It's also hard to accept external authority. Spellmann hates Washington bureaucracy, and he guards his campus from local intrusions, too -- to the point that when 13-year-old Tiffany Sabourin was raped, stabbed and decapitated on campus in 1998, it was common knowledge that he was giving the police fits, refusing to release information on the faculty or allow them to search rooms. Back in Marshall, his fierce protectiveness went even further: When an official with the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) wrote an unfavorable report on Missouri Valley's teacher-education program, Spellmann told a reporter for the Marshall Democrat-News that the state was plotting against religious schools and the official had left her husband and children to live with a lesbian. She denied both and sued, and the case was eventually settled out of court. But Spellmann raised the specter of a state conspiracy against religious schools again last year, when DESE changed their standards for teacher accreditation.

DESE liked their new standards because they measured student performance, but Spellmann called them subjective and bureaucratic, sniffing the influence of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, an accrediting body from which Lindenwood had withdrawn the previous year. Right after their accreditors found "serious weaknesses" in Lindenwood's program.

Lindenwood claims its teacher education is the premier program in the state, and with 5,000 students enrolled this year, it may also be the largest. But last August, Spellmann's old foes at DESE reported that Lindenwood's teacher-ed students scored more than three points lower on their ACT than their fellow freshmen, the biggest gap in the state. "We can't relate to where they came up with those numbers, and I'm not going to worry about going back and checking,"
Spellmann told the *Post*. "GPA is a much better indicator. Love of teaching is a much better indicator. Some people don't test well.... We've got to get beyond that comparative data."

May 2000, Lindenwood's largest commencement ever. The Pipe and Drums of Moolah Ainad start their first heavy blow and the faculty and graduates line up, the women's floral prints drooping beneath too-short black robes. Proud fathers climb onto picnic tables to snap pictures; busty moms jiggle in their light summer dresses, running from the procession to get a tree-shaded seat.

Spellmann opens, his deep, twangy voice setting the tone. "This past year has been a spectacular one for Lindenwood University," he says, then quickly makes way for the commencement speaker and honorary-doctorate recipient, Gene S. Kahn, CEO of the May Department Stores Co. Kahn urges graduates to "embrace the competitive nature of our environment" and "climb the ladder, rung by rung." Everybody applauds.

And there the faculty sit, black-robed in the hot sun, convinced the president planned it that way because he likes to see them sweat. They're tired of hearing students referred to as "customers" or "consumers"; they're tired of being told they're "service providers" with "billable hours" and their department chairs are "program managers" and their university is a "market-driven, managed operation." "They evaluate you by how many 'seats' (students) are in your classes," sighs a professor, and another recalls how Spellmann "once referred to our North Central accreditation as our 'franchise.'"

The cultures are clashing.

Spellmann envisions Lindenwood as the prototype of a brand-new category: the teaching university. For him, that means putting students first at all times and running their education like an efficient business so they can get on with their lives. He wants to attract faculty who are "team players," "entrepreneurial people that feel kept down by tenure," and he expects them to submit proposals to him, "like to a banker. They gotta learn how to put them into good form, or the banker will say, 'Get out of here.' And if they come up with something that's self-serving, like wanting a bigger office or to cut their class size down and have a bunch of personal items on their desk that have nothing to do with teaching the students and do some travel for their own gratification -- they might see some anger."

The faculty, on the other hand, still dream of Lindenwood as a traditional liberal-arts university with high academic standards. They don't think research takes away from their teaching, and they yearn for enough time to keep up with their field so that they're not just recycling the same old class notes every semester. Nostalgic for the grand old days when the life of the mind meant more than bricks, mortar, greenbacks and pigskin, they hate to see Lindenwood leading a pack that's headed in the opposite direction.

The tension takes its toll.

In 1994, the names of 103 professors and administrators were engraved into individual bricks, laid in a sedate walkway through the center of campus. Six years later, 52 of those honorees are
gone. You have to play hopscotch to land on the survivors. "He always wants new blood, mainly because he can control them," notes a recently departed professor. "Pruning, he calls it. He says it's healthy for the Lindenwood tree."

He prunes, and he re-pots: Since his arrival, there have been six deans of science and five deans of education, and his daughter has held five different administrative positions. People joke about the ex-deans club and the "flexibility" required of faculty who are called to teach outside their own department or add a course on a moment's notice.

Amid the flux, one steady presence is that of Jim Evans, described by one wag as Tariq Aziz to Spellmann's Saddam Hussein. Formerly dean of science and now dean of faculty, Evans had tenure B.S. and even signed that early letter to the board protesting Spellmann's policies.

He's the only letter-signer still employed at Lindenwood.

Asked whether his faculty have adjusted to the absence of tenure, Evans says, "Oh yeah, because it really hasn't affected job security or academic freedom." On the latter point, faculty would agree; Spellmann rarely interferes with the actual content of their teaching, and that's one of the job's great blessings. "At least 90 percent of our faculty members don't have any problem with being managed," Evans continues, "and that's conservative." It's also optimistic. Asked how many faculty like the current setup and would give the president a vote of confidence, a former dean hazards, "One to 2 percent -- if it's a secret ballot." Others guess 2 or 5 percent; a self-confessed Spellmann favorite ventures 20 percent.

Spellmann, on the other hand, is delighted with his faculty. "I brag on 'em," he says. "I told the president of Truman State, 'You don't have any confidence in your faculty. You only admit people that don't need teaching."

Lindenwood's faculty have been meaning to talk to him about that. Since Spellmann came to the university, prospective students have been allowed to waive even the required letter of recommendation and autobiographical essay, and in lieu of grades or test scores "an applicant may provide other documentation which demonstrates the student's ability to succeed." The graduate program doesn't require a GRE exam, and the catalog asks for a high-school diploma or GED in language that doesn't make even the GED mandatory. One professor remembers, early in the Spellmann years, running into a freshman near the end of the semester and hearing the girl call out gaily, "You'll be so proud of me! I just passed my GED!"

"Anybody who has the ability to pay, they will find a way to admit them," asserts another professor. "If you have Down syndrome, they will take you and brag about admitting at-risk students." Ouch. That's precisely the kind of academic sharp tongue that infuriates the president. "Higher education's arrogant," he remarks. "You see a lot of these institutions -- I'm not gonna call names -- where it's almost like, 'This would be a great place to work if we didn't have all these darn students around.'"

Student-friendly Lindenwood recruits all over the place, offering "Education for Pork" last year to hard-hit farm families, dramatically reducing tuition in exchange for $2,000 worth of market
hogs. Now the university's actively recruiting students from rural areas where the high school might not teach all the courses required by state schools. "We are going out and specifically recruiting those kids, because 75 percent of the high schools in our state are vulnerable to that," says Spellmann. "Maybe they are not as prepared. But we're not lowering standards; it's just that they start at a different place. There is all kinds of intelligence and talent -- how they sing, how they dance...."

A recent alum says a "friend who'd never played softball in his life got a softball scholarship and kept it all four years. Everybody's got a scholarship for something." Indeed they do, and Spellmann's proud that Lindenwood athletes don't lose their scholarships if they end up pursuing their studies instead of playing on a team. Others see it differently: "We bring 150 football players in every year, find people who can't get in anywhere else and give them this dream of playing college football. And if they drop out, we have the cash and they have the debt."

Actually, that's not fair. Spellmann learned a painful lesson from those early grant scandals, and he now bends over backward to make sure students finish. The Kaplan/Newsweek College Catalog 2001 identifies Lindenwood as one of the schools that "offer a high level of individual academic attention from faculty." Spellmann personally reviews each freshman's schedule, making sure he or she is busy. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop," he observes. "If their classes all start at 11 a.m., I'll throw in an 8 or 9 a.m., prevent problems right up front."

Just in case, though, he walks the campus at 3 a.m., keeping separate "night owl" and "hoot owl" lists. Night owls are just up late, so he makes sure they're in class the next morning, but hoot owls make noise, so he has "a different kind of talk" with them. His door's always open. He dresses up as Santa for the Christmas Walk, sometimes even fulfilling the role by helping people out of crises. No Lindenwood student ever has to leave because of financial difficulty, and those with academic problems are carefully guided.

"We have them sign a success contract," explains Evans, "specifying that the student will get up no later than 8 o'clock, swipe in with their card at the cafeteria, go to class and not go back to their room before 2 p.m. The Go Get 'Em program (which tracks down absentees, even giving wake-up calls) is part of that."

Evans recently wrote a paper on Lindenwood's transformation, noting that the '60s were marred by "a lopsided emphasis on academic development" and that and the university is now rediscovering its Judeo-Christian and American-frontier ideals. "In the '70s we lost our orientation toward developing students' character," says Evans, who's noticed a sharp decrease in such problems as plagiarism. "Now we have an explicit honor code in the student handbook, and faculty will confront the student and try to communicate why it's not adaptive to be dishonest. There is almost always a nontrivial consequence, and I rarely get a call of distress from the faculty members anymore."

Maybe not, but they do vent their distress elsewhere. When Spellmann arrived, the lengthy description of academic dishonesty and plagiarism in the catalog was reduced to two short paragraphs, and faculty say they've never been allowed to strengthen it. One former prof says he confronted one student with hard evidence of plagiarism and recommended flanking him -- only
to have the student come up and hug him a few days later, explaining that the dean had offered a chance to redo the assignment. "Another time, this big huge football player handed in a research paper on quilting," chuckles the same professor. "I looked at him and said, 'Tyrone? Quilting?' Then I asked him questions, and he said, 'I dunno,' and I said, 'Tyrone, you didn't write this paper.' He said, 'You can't prove I didn't.' Then he said he was considering legal action. He got an A."

An alum, recalling the two young men who were kicked out of Lindenwood for playing cards in a female friend's dorm room, says you'd never be kicked out for plagiarism. "There's a lot of cheating. When I took my religion class, there was a distraction outside, and four guys on the wrestling team gathered around and basically copied my test." A student in the evening division says a classmate tried to read her own paper aloud and "couldn't understand the words. She couldn't say 'vehemently,' and it was in the paper. This quarter she got an A-minus and a frowny face saying, 'Put this in your own words.'"

"The faculty have been working on plagiarism," sighs a former dean, "but it doesn't matter. You work on it, and then Spellmann can say, 'They are working on it.' Nothing happens. And if you're not working on it, he can say the faculty aren't concerned."

What Spellmann does say is that he is "not aware of any problems regarding plagiarism and it is the faculty's responsibility to deal with it, and when they have come up with incidents of plagiarism, the faculty have been supported 100 percent."

**Lindenwood's central irony:** The professors who criticize Spellmann so harshly are his greatest asset, making the place famous for the excellence and dedication of its faculty. Christina Kurtz, a giggly and charming senior who came to Lindenwood when she was offered a free-ride academic scholarship, says she was shocked at how much knowledge and warm help her professors provided. "They were like my home away from home," she remarks. A mass-communications major, she kept her 4.0 grade-point average all four years: "In high school I'd taken a lot of honors courses, and some were for college credit, so when I got to Lindenwood, my general-ed courses were a breeze. But then the work picked up."

Malinda Hennessy, who graduated with a degree in communications from the evening division, also says her teachers were the high point, although the rigor of the material varied considerably. "We don't turn in much homework," she explains. "They did a lot of in-class stuff. But some were hard -- like Dr. Knoll's class: That was tough; we had quite a lot to do in that one."

John Knoll resigned from Lindenwood this fall. Kurtz' favorite prof, Charlie Leonard, left this summer, as did longtime psychology prof Mary Utley and more than a dozen others. Lindenwood's hiring freely, though: This fall's catalog lists 161 faculty, up from 139. What alarms the traditionalists is that only 67 percent of the 161 hold doctorates, a 5 percent drop from the previous year, and 46 profs hold degrees from Lindenwood, Tarkio or Missouri Valley. Before Spellmann, none of Lindenwood's 58 full-time faculty held degrees from the college (a point of pride in academia, where middle-tier schools pull their faculty from the next tier up) and only 11 of 71 adjuncts did. (Lindenwood no longer lists its adjunct faculty, which includes people hired to teach Lindenwood extension courses at rented facilities all over the state.)
Spellmann scorns the Ivy League eggheads who grade on a curve, but his faculty feel as if they're grading for the Macy's parade instead. "It's very difficult to know you are giving easier grades than they deserve," admits one, clutching a sweet note from a former student admitting she now regrets having her F changed, that she knows she deserved it. In the cash-cow evening division, where local corporations partner for on-site courses and pay the bulk of employees' tuition, a student claims to know classmates who "go in quarterly and say, 'My company's paying X and they will only reimburse 50 percent if I get a C; raise it to a B or I'll call Spellmann.'"

Undergraduate faculty, meanwhile, say they'll get a call in November about a student they've barely seen, asking, "What can we do to get this person to pass your class?" The reply they've never dared voice: "He needs a time machine or a brain transplant."

Lindenwood gives up to 27 hours of credit for "life experience" (real-estate or stockbroker's license, military or computer training, self-developed training in particular fields), and the latest buzz is a degree in the ever-employable mortuary science. The core curriculum remains solidly academic, but the students aren't always ready for it. "Up until seven or eight years ago, I would cover 12 units in one semester," says a recently departed professor. "Last semester I managed to cover barely four. There are exceptions, brilliant students who make your life happy and beautiful. But we admit anything that walks. Some don't even buy textbooks -- they are very brazen; they go to the prof and say, 'This course sucks.' They have no idea what it means to be a student."

Other profs say they've switched to multiple-choice tests because their students can't write, cut down on the number of papers because there's no time to grade them. Writing samples offered by one include what one hopes are typos about the information "supper highway" and ideas coming "to the for front." A graduate thesis promises to "focus on the effect training and development in the workplace on employees job satisfaction," and another graduate student's paper reads, "Where I work. I had tow human resource manager within the last two since I been there.... The have effective employee all ask the employees for there input."

Lindenwood recently improved its writing and reading centers and shored up the requirements for passing a composition course. But it's dropped the graduate-thesis requirement altogether.

Faculty say it's useless to protest; they're supposed to be "team players." Besides, if they're so goddamned upset, as Spellmann might say, why don't they leave? Age, money, health problems, a cozy house in St. Charles, loyalty to what Lindenwood could be, the scarcity of academic jobs, no research and publication to put on their résumé, love of the students, masochism, the thrill of achieving the impossible, cowardice. "They roll over and pee like puppies," scoffs one who did leave; a colleague who stayed says, "I can't tell you how many times I've sat in my car and cried, asking myself that question."

Dennis Spellmann recently received his 50-year pin and Silver Beaver Award, the highest conferred, from the Boy Scouts of America. He's proven himself. "I don't know that there is another college or university across the country that's had the results Lindenwood's had over the past 10 years," remarks Watkins, and even the president's detractors say it's only fair that the spectacular new Spellmann Center be named after him. Their hope is that his successor will be a little more humane, a little more intellectual, a little more judicious.
Harmon just wants another Dennis Spellmann. "He's a true genius," he says. "Spending half-an-hour with him is more enlightening than spending a month with someone else. We move forward on major issues at an amazing pace -- which is very comforting to people involved with the university." The board has no plan of succession, can't bring themselves to make one. "It would be very difficult for us to go out and find a person of his caliber and have him report to Dennis," remarks Harmon. "Dennis is basically a one-man show."

The fear of the faculty is that the one-man show will end, and the micromanaged structure, unencumbered by paper trails or vice presidents, will topple. "Sooner or later," warns a former professor, "the college is going to feel the effects of this hubris."

If an institution is, as Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "the lengthened shadow of one man," Lindenwood now bears the shape of Spellmann's college-football career, his Marine drills, his Boy Scout rules, his business acumen, his impatience with intellectual trappings, his distinct vision. "A lot of students say good things about him, and a lot of kids say bad things about him," remarks Kurtz, whose own experience was wonderful: Spellmann invited the student-government officers to his home for dessert -- chocolate-covered strawberries -- and when they mentioned small problems, he took immediate action. "I know he's a very good businessman," she says, "but he was so gentle. A very gentle, kind man. Another time, I was in his office and he rolled out the plans of years to come, these aerial shots and drawings. He seems to me like a visionary."

Can't convince the cynics, though. "He's worked at places that are desperate enough to accept the consequences," shrugs one. Knoxville College, for example, a historically black Presbyterian school that, like Tarkio, did a post-Spellmann nosedive, losing accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities in 1997. "There are people here who sing his praises and blame the college for not being able to accommodate his brilliance," says a Knoxville administrator, "and there are people who cough and spit every time you say his name. He brought in some associates and swelled the enrollment with students the college was not skilled in educating, and we are still recovering."

At Knoxville, too, there were concerns about the overuse of federal grants, and even at Lindenwood, the shadow of Tarkio hangs over Spellmann. But according to someone who worked closely with Lindenwood finances in the early years, Spellmann never broke the law once; he just reinterpreted it to benefit his institution. "He infuriated the state and federal bureaucracies" (still does) "because they expected him to follow their procedures 100 percent of the way. But I sat in meetings with Dennis and federal people, and he wasn't a madman railing against the system. He threatened them because he knew their system." A former development director chuckles, recalling a capital campaign when "one of the auditors had a question about something. They went back and double-checked the standards and told Spellmann he was correct, and he said, 'I know I was, because I wrote the standards."

Shaping policy, developing land, infusing cash -- these are Spellmann's talents. But they're only half of the job description. "Dennis is out of his element as a university president," believes a longtime associate, "because he will sacrifice excellence for expediency. He thinks only in concrete terms -- land, numbers, dollars. He asks, 'Can we?' but never 'Should we?''
Some say Spellmann's greatest strengths are beginning to work against him -- the vision so
strong he's driven to achieve every detail; the conviction so staunch he can't listen to anything
that contradicts it; the focus so tight he can't attend to anything beyond his own very concrete
goals. He's so direct, he eliminates dialogue; so able to get things done fast, he destroys any
chance for consensus; so productive he feels obliged to shame and goad every employee to the
same standard.

"If you believe in psychic energy, I'm surprised he's not dead," says a longtime professor.
"People would just joyously rip his throat. He talks about getting people off welfare and freeing
them to succeed, and then he turns around and destroys people's lives."

"The best thing Lindenwood could do is to thank Dennis and let him go and save some other
college," remarks someone long associated with the university. "He saved the body of
Lindenwood, but he didn't save its soul."