New College: D Minus Five Months

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A puzzling, frustrating, but probably vitalizing characteristic of American higher education is its diversity. The array includes giant universities—the multiversities described by President Clark Kerr of the University of California—both public and private in control; state colleges; liberal arts colleges; technical institutes; teachers colleges; junior and community colleges. While the members of each class have certain things in common, their differences are enormous. There is no need here to comment further; everyone is familiar with the range.

The remarks to follow will be concerned with one attempt to create one college within one of the classes: liberal arts colleges. The attempt to create a liberal arts college, however, has brought those concerned with New College face-to-face with the knotty problem of reaching a viable definition of liberal education. Actually, if one considers the operating policies and procedures of a college a de facto operational definition of its view of liberal education, there are as many definitions as there are liberal arts colleges. On the other hand, one can readily observe certain communalities which justify reducing the number of definitions substantially. In a sense, liberal arts colleges are like people: black or white, tall or thin, male or female, young or old—there is something human about them. When one tries to reach for this human essence, however, it proves to be exceedingly elusive. I would submit that this is so in large part because somehow the essence of liberal education is human, a mercuric, phantasmagoric, but very real entity.

Not to be diverted into an attempt to speculate in this philosophical thin air, it seems fair to try to describe one college's attempt to arrive at a working definition of liberal educa. ton and to implement this with a program. There is no need here to essay any systematic coverage of the history of liberal education. In deference to the fact that this is a conference populated by scholars, however, it would be only seemly to make passing reference to Athens in its golden age.

First, however, let me state a thesis: while liberal education is multi-dimensioned, two of the most important dimensions—or would it be better to call them sides of the same coin or, to acknowledge (if it is so) orthogonality, the warp and woof?—might be labeled as (1) the concern for content and (2) the concern for individual development. Let me make it clear at the outset that I do not consider these to be opposed in any essential way although in practice one may gain such ascendance that it is detrimental to the other.

By concern for content I mean the age-old belief that part of the business of higher education is to preserve, to cull, to criticize, and to add to man's store of knowledge. It is this concern which results in the assignment of such importance to libraries, laboratories, and research on campuses. Surely, to be educated means to know some things which the knower and others believe worth knowing.

The concern for individual development is less often openly acknowledged to be an explicit goal (except in such vacuous notions as the "well-rounded man"), but it has been, I would insist, an important, sometimes dominating thread in the fabric of education. It was so, long before John Dewey came on the scene. It is harder to describe succinctly or satisfactorily. It is to be seen as a theme in the Platonic dialogues, particularly in the Republic, where the education of the philosopher-kings is not only

concerned with what they know but with the kinds of persons this knowledge and its acquisition makes of them.

It may be seen in the history of Oxford and Cambridge where, often, what the graduate knew was of much less importance than what he was.

Viewed in one way, this concern views education as a kind of rite of passage, an initiation into the establishment with the college serving as a useful but in some ways substantively irrelevant screening and polishing agent. At its best, this concern for individual development was well expressed by Sir Francis Bacon who said that we should not worry about educating lawyers, teachers, or physicians but rather thinking men who are also lawyers, teachers, and physicians. I will not belabor this distinction further; I hope and trust that the points are reasonably clear.

Colleges differ among themselves as to the emphasis they put on each of these concerns; they differ individually over time within each institution. These concerns were, in a sense, involved in Socrates' quarrel with the sophists, for he was interested mainly in getting young men to think deeply and imaginatively while the sophists were selling a set of socially desirable skills and items of information. Let me repeat: I am suggesting no basis for invidious comparison between these two concerns. I believe that properly conceived liberal education demands the presence of both. What I am suggesting is that these are best dealt with if recognized explicitly and taken into account.

One other problem needs brief examination as part of the preamble. The ubiquitous explosion of knowledge has brought colleges to a point where new solutions, more adaptive than the mere addition of courses of instruction, must be sought.

Curricula are in desperate need of thorough revision. It also seems to be a propitious time to realize that no one can know everything and that the best that a college can hope to do for its graduates is to equip them with an adequate supply of vital ideas and functional skills which will permit them to continue their educations throughout their lives.

So much for prologue. Now for New College. In the earliest discussions among the founders of New College certain broad policies were laid down. One was the decision to operate on a year-round basis, permitting graduation in three calendar years.

Another specified that the students would pay the actual cost of instruction. A third reguired that all students be in residence. A fourth policy—actually less of a policy than a belief—pointed to extensive use of the tutorial mode of instruction.

Within these broad outlines, New College has developed to its present point.

Year-round operation is certainly a rapidly developing trend in higher education. The traditional academic year is a fossil relic of days when young men needed to be freed for haying and harvesting on the farms. Its persistence is due in part to the vast inertia of the institution but is, without design but with success, attuned to the fact that uninterrupted study makes for dull boys. Various forms of year-round calendars such as the trimester and the four quarter plan are beginning to en. counter a considerable amount of resistance. Faculty members and students are increasingly finding ways to build in breathing periods.

On the other hand, it is hard to justify the traditional academic calendar in a day when millions of students need—or, at least, want—higher education and when funds for new buildings and new faculty are so inadequate and when faculty members with even nominal qualifications are at a premium. The opportunity and the challenge for New College were to discover a calendar which had the virtues of real

efficiency and yet which took into account the facts of life regarding need for rest, rehabilitation, and rumination.

The calendar on which we propose to operate involves a forty-eight week year. Starting in late September, it will consist of three twelve-week terms with each term followed by a four-week independent study period. Students will normally be expected to commit themselves to forty-eight weeks, but they may, if it seems in their best interests on any of a number of bases, take off a term or a reading period. Faculty members will be permitted to take off any two of the three reading periods; in addition, provision will be made for scholarly leave on a more extended basis.

One major goal which such a calendar seems likely to attain is that of flexibility. We have, for instance, little or no interest in the junior year abroad or any of its variations. An opportunity to go abroad is probably a good thing but under different conditions. Under the present conditions of travel, it would be possible to send a student to Oxford to work with a specialist on a topic of interest to him and have the student do a significant piece of work within a month. This is particularly true if, as planned, he spends the previous term working up a problem to a fairly advanced point. However, if more time is required, he could take a twelve week term. Or, he could combine a term and a reading period for sixteen weeks. He could, if desired, add on the previous reading period for a total of twenty weeks.

The system is modular and highly flexible. This was the goal.

A college can do no better than to prepare its graduates for a lifetime of disciplined and productive use of intelligence.

Facts become obsolete, but the acquisition of certain principles and analytical processes can become the student's most valuable graduation gift. The New College program is intended fundamentally to permit and encourage students to attain a power and competence in intellectual analysis and a deeply rooted desire to go on learning which together will enable them to lead free and exciting lives.

Several basic assumptions have led to the creation of the New College curriculum:

1. Each student is responsible in the last analysis for his own education.
2. The best education results from the active confrontation of two first class minds. The emphasis here must be on "active" and "first class." A former president of Fisk University said that to put a second rate teacher into a small class results only in the passing on of mediocrity under conditions of intimacy.
3. The greater the degree of flexibility, the greater is the likelihood that students will reach the highest levels of which they are capable. It was the search for flexibility that led to the creation of the calendar already described. It led to a decision to teach only a very small number of courses. It serves as a guide in developing the entire program.
4. Student progress should be based on demonstrated competence and real mastery rather than on the accumulation of credits and grades. Too often, students are permitted to proceed with only C-minus competence or 75 per cent mastery. At New College, we expect to demand that the students proceed as quickly as they can but to demonstrate before they go on that they do in fact have control of a topic or area.
5. The best liberal education derives from such mastery of a small number of vital ideas, principles, and modes of analysis. Higher education's stables are urgently in need of a Hercules to clean out the accumulated debris, what Whitehead called "inert ideas." Since no one can know everything, it is better to teach little but teach that supremely well.

6. Liberal education requires an appreciation for the unity of knowledge.
7. Students should have from the very outset opportunities to explore in depth areas which are of interest to them. Some will have a good idea when they enter of what they want to study; others will need a period of exploration. Basic to this assumption is opportunity.

The curricular structure of New College is as follows. In the first year students will be required to take three courses: one in the natural sciences (including mathematics approximately through the calculus), one in the social sciences, and one in the humanities (including foreign language). In addition, they may (although this will not be required take an additional course in some discipline which interests them. At the end of the first year for most (later for some, perhaps earlier for a few), there will be a series of comprehensive examinations. Those familiar with the Chicago system will see some resemblances.

The second year will see approximately two-thirds time devoted to the specialty area, the rest to electives. Students will be expected to continue to read widely in areas outside of their specialties. Reading lists and preceptors will guide them. In addition, they will be expected to use the language they have mastered to read both in their specialties and also in the masterpieces of that language.

The last year will be devoted in part to the specialty, including a piece of independent research, and in part to an interdisciplinary seminar designed to encourage the bringing to bear of insights acquired all along the spectrum of the disciplines.

It is expected that students will take no more than two or at most three seminars at any one time. These will not be “content” seminars but will deal, rather, with modes of analysis.

For instance, we do not expect to have a course in American history. Not that American history is not important. It is. It is too important to be treated as it usually is. The student who has learned to read history with insight and perception, how. ever, can be left very largely alone to accumulate the essential body of facts.

From the very outset, tutorial experiences will be made available. The relationship we hope to foster between students and faculty is that of colleagues. To some extent, this will produce changes in the traditional tutorial pattern familiar from Oxford. Nevertheless, we believe that it is in the one-to-one relationship of the tutorial that the most exciting education is likely to take place.

Any college—even one still in embryonic form—is a complex affair, and there are many aspects of New College which invite comment. The quality of the faculty and the student body are absolutely crucial. Something can be said about both now, but it seems better to wait. The proof of the pudding is still in the eating.

One area, however, involves an enormous risk but one which we view as essential to take. That is the intent to dispense with credits and grades. Credits as measures of student or faculty work load are very largely meaningless. There is almost no variance. Grades have been an albatross around the necks of faculty members and students alike. Numerous studies have demonstrated the unreliability of grades. Those of you familiar with measurement theory will recall that the validity of a measure cannot exceed the square root of the reliability. This casts grave doubt on the validity of grades.

Even worse, however, grades serve to conceal more than they reveal. In all but large lecture courses, conscientious professors manage to learn a good bit about students. At the end, however, this must be compressed into a single letter grade or number. In the conditions we expect to have at New College, we feel that what the professor knows must not be ground up and reduced to a single index.

Another bad feature of the usual grading system is that it puts the students and faculty into a kind of competition and makes difficult the development of colleagueship. The credits and grades, rather than the learning they presumably reflect, become the ultimate goals of students.

In hopes of avoiding the pressures to conform to usual practice, New College proposes to dispense with a registrar and to have instead a college examiner. John W. French of the Educational Testing Service will assume this responsibility. His responsibilities will be two-fold: first, to select where appropriate and develop where necessary a whole range of evaluative devices—tests, rating scales, anecdotal records, and the like—to generate as complete a picture as possible of student progress; second, to initiate and maintain an imaginative and thoroughgoing program of research on a whole range of problems, providing those concerned with the information by means of which programs may be modified as seems indicated. If there is a key job at New College, it is his.

In broad outline, this is New College less than a half year before it opens. The problems of creating any new college are enormous. The problems of creating a genuinely distinguished college are almost unbelievable. If it were easy to do, it would have been done many times. One has only to look at the handful of great colleges to be assured that any effort is more than justified; it is required.

Afterword

Experimental Colleges, W Hugh Sickler, editor; Florida State University, 1964. The book, a collection of papers about an assortment of experimental colleges and programs, was an outgrowth of the Wakulla Springs Colloquium, held in the spring 1964, and sponsored by FSU's Committee on an Experimental Colleges, appointed the previous year by FSU President Gordon W Blackwell.

John W Gustad was appointed academic dean (and later provost) of New College in May 1963. He participated in the Wakulla Springs Colloquium, and contributed this paper to the collection.

New College's first entering class would arrive in September, 1964, hence the title.