

“We Look Before and After”

100 years of New College

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Looking backward

Take a running leap, skip back 50 years, and it’s 1964. New College has 101 students, 10 faculty, and three required Core Courses, aimed at “basic literacy” in Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences. Students’ achievements were assessed twice over at year’s end—once by Comprehensive Divisional Exams (“Comps”) with questions written by the professors, and again by nationally norm-referenced multiple-choice exams designed to test the New College academic program itself.

In its early days, New College offered no credit to transfer students, so all its second-year students shared a first-year background. The overall curriculum, then, was to be an “hourglass” pattern of introductory wide learning (first year), an intense and narrowed “Area of Concentration” (second year), and then expansion to a wider and often interdisciplinary Senior Project before graduation (third year). Initially, “old” New was no public college; it was private — with high expectations and tuition.

The core programs fell apart. Then came the Contract System, which lingers today. It tried to draw sponsors and students closer, but it came to verge on the “open curriculum” where “excellence” battled with relevance. At its most flexible, the system was summarized by “one, two, three”—students’ contracts were anything one faculty member approved; the Area of Concentration was anything two approved, and the Senior Project was OK if three professors blessed the Bacc Exam.

USF saved us from the fiscal crash of 1975, then we then spun off into our (precariously funded) status as the Resident Honors College of Florida So now... tiny sparkling jewel we are,

teetering in the wide tiara of Florida’s universities. One defunding flick of a legislative finger, and we’re shucked into the mud.

Now, the next 50 years.

Looking forward: Watch out, this is dark

Because, of course, “you can’t manage what you can’t measure,” Florida shall fulfill its policy: “to seamlessly lash the educational system to the employment needs of the State.” (I do love that verb lash.) From kindergarten through graduate school, a seamless flow of well-managed widgets!

A liberal-arts education, after all, did consist mainly of students learning how to model their own complex intellectual and personal identities. Faculty helped. But future faculty become even fewer, and more distant, contingent labor. (MOOCs don’t need a union.) “Seminars” become “units” become “credit hours.” Creeping Requirementism burgeons. Fresh from the production line, students roll.

Is this too bleak a vision?

In the dark of feudal Europe, who could have foreseen democracy, capitalism, or socialism? Something yet unseen might replace the strictures of corporate plutocracy.

“Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought”

Still... the coming half-century might turn a curious full circle. Just as New College, blessed with hard-won local and national funding, arose from the scrub between Sarasota and Bradenton in the 1960’s, so might we persist in the 2060’s as an “Island of Excellence”—this time, a literal island. (Climate-change, don’tcha know.)

It would be tough to float the Palm Court, but it could be done. New College would offer a fine view of combers over



the condo-reefs of Siesta and Longboat. We could bob the waves as an enclave of eccentric intellect. Our visitors (let’s call them “edu-tourists”) could marvel at, and even measure, the output of undergraduates engaged in real research. That alone would keep cash flowing. Then, when drones from Tallahassee snooped too close, we could lift anchor—or fire up the dirigible, and sail free! One thing’s certain: Excellently odd people, if they can afford it, will always find a place to huddle. That place could be New College.

That’s my bright vision.

The light at the end of the tunnel is lava

Standardization reigns. Even supposing New College floats, I can’t forget that classic science-fiction tale “The World as Will and Wallpaper” (R. A. Lafferty, 1973) where the Young Adventurer sets forth to find the New, but discovers that the future—land and ocean plated over with interlocked floating platforms—offers only one reiterated pattern of buildings. Stores. Personalities. The same ones, over and over the same.

New College, of course, won’t be there.