

FIRST POST: 22 July, 2009

Forty years ago, I published a little book called *THE IDEAL OF THE UNIVERSITY* in which, reflecting on my experiences as a student and professor at Harvard, the University of Chicago, and Columbia, I attempted to think through the principles underlying my vision of university education. My mode of discourse was utopian, both in the good sense of being inspired by my conception of the ideal forms toward which I thought education ought to strive, and in the bad sense – mocked by Engels in his little book, *SOCIALISM: UTOPIAN AND SCIENTIFIC* – of being abstract, rootless, unconnected to real social movements from which new forms of education might emerge.

For all of those forty years, I have continued to pursue my vision, in my classroom teaching, through a series of undergraduate and graduate programs that I created or had a hand in creating, and in my ceaseless musing and daydreaming about what a truly ideal college or university would look like.

I am no closer now than I was in 1969 to seeing my dreams become a reality. Indeed, in the past two decades or so, everything in higher education, worldwide, has been moving in precisely the wrong direction. The corporatization of education has proceeded apace, with profitability replacing knowledge as the measure of institutional success and students ever more strongly dissuaded by crippling loan burdens from following the arc of their curiosity.

Nevertheless, as I pass the middle of my seventy-sixth year, I find myself turning more and more frequently to the dream I have for so long cherished of an educational community that embodies the ideals to which I have devoted my life. This little blog, now visited regularly, I do believe, by at least eleven people, and perhaps a few more, offers me a forum for the deliberate articulation of that dream. In a series of postings, I shall spell out my vision with as much specificity as I can muster. I hope that for those of you who read this, it will be a source of reflection and even inspiration, and that a few of the people who have found something of value in my book over the past four decades will find their way to this site, in order to discover what more I have been thinking all that time.

My plan is to elaborate the vision in a series of postings, each of which is accompanied by a link to the entire series preceding it. [I believe I have figured out how to do this, without seeking the help of single young person!] I very much welcome your thoughts and responses, should you feel so moved. I remind you that my email address is rwolff@afroam.umass.edu

SECOND POST: 23 July, 2009

Everyone reading this blog is intimately familiar with one or more of the four thousand college and university campuses – tertiary institutions, as the jargon has it – that now operate in the United States. They vary enormously, from 50,000 student behemoths like Michigan State and Ohio State to tiny liberal arts colleges with no more than 600 students. Some award a full spectrum of undergraduate and graduate degrees, both academic and professional; others offer no more than a two-year Associate's Degree. The large state university campuses resemble corporations a good deal more than they do the itinerant bands of scholars and students out of which the medieval university evolved. On modern state university campuses, the life of the mind is often not even so much as honored in the breach. As Clark Kerr, then the President of the vast University of California system, famously observed forty-five years ago, "I find that the three major administrative problems on a campus are sex for the students, athletics for the alumni and parking for the faculty."

Rather than suggest a suite of practical reforms that might marginally improve America's tertiary education sector – which I suppose would be the realistic and responsible thing to do – I should like to try instead to flesh out an image I have long had in my mind of the ideal college. I am sure it will never be instantiated, for to accomplish that would require many millions of dollars in today's world. But by thinking through the principal features of such an ideal, their relationship to one another, and the principles that ground them, I may at least be able to offer what Max Weber, in another context, called an Ideal Type of the college, and this in turn may serve as a standard against which to judge and also to understand our actual colleges and universities.

I unashamedly and unapologetically begin with the conception of a college as a community whose members are individually and collectively committed to the life of the mind. I have in mind men and women who are in love with ideas, who embrace them, caress them, probe them, celebrate them, and admire their beauty. [And yes, I do really intend the erotic overtones and implications of that language.] All my life, I have sought to understand profound and difficult ideas, to clarify them, to enjoy their beauty, and to share that beauty with others. My enjoyment of ideas is as much aesthetic as intellectual or ideological. A personal story will perhaps help to explain what I mean.

In 1985, when my long marriage to Cynthia Griffin was coming to an end, I spent time in therapy with a wise psychiatrist, Dr. Lenore Boling, whose offices were in the famous MacLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. This was in fact not the first, but rather the last, of many courses of therapy that I had sought out in my life to handle a variety of emotional problems. A good deal of each weekly session was, of course, taken up with my descriptions of what was happening as Cynthia and I tried unsuccessfully to reconcile. [There was nothing so dramatic as a Republican style affair at the root of our incompatibility – simply a growing apart of two people who had been deeply committed to one another for twenty-eight years.] Despite the fact that I was tremendously upset by what was happening to me and to our family, my monologues were utterly free of tears. Then, one day, I happened to be talking about my work, my writing and teaching. I

explained to Dr. Boling that what I tried to do when I was struggling with the central passages of Kant's CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON or Marx's CAPITAL or Hume's TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE was to turn the ideas over in my mind, slowly making them clearer and clearer to myself, telling the story of the ideas to an imaginary audience in my head, until I reached a point at which I could present the ideas to my readers or my students in their complete simplicity and profundity, so that they could see, as I could, how beautiful they are. As I said this, quite unexpectedly, my eyes filled with tears and I choked up, so that I could barely continue to speak. I think it was truly not until that very moment that I fully understood what my life had really been about.

Quite simply, my vision of the ideal college is a community of students and scholars who are capable of experiencing the beauty, the power, and the joy of great ideas. What might such a community look like, in today's world?

THIRD POST: 24 July, 2009

Henceforth, I shall focus my attention on undergraduate education. The term "university" as we currently use it carries the implication of professional schools certifying students for careers, and that is not what I have in mind at all. So let us imagine, if we can, an ideal undergraduate institution, a liberal arts college, as we in America would call it.

Hollywood types use the phrase "high concept" to describe an idea for a movie that can be stated in less than a complete sentence. "Terminator in drag," "Brangelina as paid assassins" [that one actually got made], "George W. Bush – the musical." That sort of thing. When I search for a high concept to capture my vision of the ideal educational institution, what I come up with is "co-ed monastery, with sex."

I imagine a community of six hundred students – no more – and sixty professors. A ten to one ratio is already utopian. Anything less would open me to ridicule. This community is like a monastery in at least three important respects. First, it is a community of people who are, and understand themselves to be, united by shared commitments, reciprocal responsibilities, and a common conviction that the life of the mind is a valuable and important component of life. Second, it is a community whose members have committed themselves to hard work in pursuit of a rich and productive life of the mind. And third, it is a community of persons who take collective responsibility for the daily life of the community, and who share the labor of maintaining it in good order while they pursue the life of the mind.

As this last may strike some as odd or unfamiliar, a few preliminary words are in order. In all of the actual colleges and universities with which I am familiar, there is a sharp distinction between town and gown, between the students and faculty who ARE the educational community, at least in their own eyes, and the large number of men and women who cook the food, tend the grounds, clean the buildings, answer the telephones, run the errands, and in general provide the indispensable support without which the activities of the community would almost immediately come to a halt. No matter what

the superficial casualness of the relations between support staff on the one hand and students and faculty on the other, everyone understands the status distinctions, as rigid as any caste system, that ordain the social and economic hierarchy of the community.

In the ideal college that I envision, as in a monastery [or, for that matter, on an Army base], the work usually done by hired staff will be performed by the students and faculty. The students and faculty will cook the food that they eat, clean up after themselves and wash the dishes, maintain the grounds, repair the plumbing leaks, clean the buildings, and do the filing and phone answering and other office chores. This labor will not be left to the financially disadvantaged students who do it as “work study” to help pay their bills. It will be a natural and integral part of the responsibility of all who live in the community. Medical services will be provided by trained professionals, of course, and even plumbing, carpentry, and electrical work will have to be overseen by licensed practitioners, but one of their duties will be to teach the students the elements of those trades, so that under the guidance of licensed tradesmen, they can do most of the work.

The administration of the college will be the responsibility of the faculty, and the internal organization of the college – of which, more later – will facilitate their efforts. There will be a President of the college, who will teach as well as preside, but there will be no Deans or Assistant Deans or Provosts or Vice-Chancellors, no staff-run Learning Center. There will be a library, of course, and it will require one or several trained librarians, but all the rest of the work in the library will be done by the students. In short, to the extent possible in the modern age, this will be a self-sufficient community of students and scholars.

My insistence on this rather unusual feature of the college has its roots not only in my ideological persuasion – I am, after all, a Marxist socialist of the old school – but also in a lifetime of experience, going all the way back to a summer camp that I attended for three years when I was a teen-ager. Shaker Village Work Camp, founded by Sybil and Jerry Count, was a left-wing teen-age camp in the Berkshires that offered the children of progressive middle-class parents an eight week combination of music, folk dance, choral singing, and four hours of work a day. It was staffed, as you might imagine, by young lefties, many fresh from service in World War II, who believed fervently in the educational and spiritual value of manual labor. We rolled and maintained the camp’s one tennis court, manicured the grounds, turned pegs on the shop’s wood like the ones that the Shakers used to hang chairs not in use [my favorite job], and helped out in the camp’s office. It was a formative experience for me, fleshing out my rather abstract understanding of communal responsibility.

What would the students and faculty of this ideal college do? I will leave that for the next part of this essay.

FOURTH POST: 25 July, 2009

All of the courses of study in our college will be small seminars, with an average of ten students each. There will be a great deal of individual instruction, of course, but no large lecture courses or Teaching Assistants. The normal course load for each student will be three courses per semester; the normal teaching load for instructors will be three small seminars per semester. Thus, each instructor will teach thirty students each semester. He or she will know them all by name, and over the course of four years, I would expect instructors to get to know a good many of the six hundred students at the college.

Seminars will meet a minimum of two hours a week, though many instructors may prefer to spend more time with the students in formal classes. The work will be extremely demanding, and there will be a great deal of written work in addition to class discussion. Instructors will be expected to read, comment on, and return written work immediately – certainly no later than one week after it is submitted – so that students get constant feedback on what they have written. The goal toward which everyone is striving, student and instructor alike, will be simple and unambiguous – perfection.

This is perhaps a good place to take up the vexing subject of GRADING. No subject – not politics, not sex, not race – is so fraught with emotion as the assigning of grades. Young people with any serious interest at all in schoolwork are conditioned virtually from infancy to seek, cherish, and respond to grades. One personal story will suffice. Shortly after I joined the University of Massachusetts Philosophy Department in 1971, I found myself teaching a huge four hundred student section of Introduction to Philosophy, with a large staff of graduate student TAs. I devised what I thought was a rather exciting course, organized around the theme of the healthy personality in the just state, a rather attractive alternative to the usual snooze through logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. After I had finished describing the theme of the course, a young man roughly in the middle of the sea of students raised his hand. “Aha!” I thought with pleasure, “I have captured their interest.” When I called on him, he asked in a rather flat nasal voice, “Professor Wolff, can you tell us what will be on the final exam?” I was so deflated that without thinking I replied sardonically, “A thousand short answer questions.” There was a gasp from the assembled multitudes, and I realized that I had blundered badly. “No, no,” I rushed to assure them, “that was just a joke.” For the rest of the semester, a sizable fraction of the four hundred remained convinced that the final exam would indeed contain a thousand short answer questions, and when they discovered that it was actually a list of essay questions, with choice, they were seriously bummed. I learned my lesson and never again made a joke about exams or grades.

There are three quite distinct activities that are conflated and confused in the notion of The Grade. These are Critique, Certification, and Ranking. [For a more extended discussion of this subject, see *THE IDEAL OF THE UNIVERSITY*, Part Two, Chapter One.] Critique is the identification of strengths and weaknesses in a student performance of some sort, for the purpose of helping the student to improve his or her grasp of the activity in question. When I correct the grammar of a student paper, I am offering a critique. When Yo-Yo Ma shows an advanced cello student in a Master Class how to play a phrase of one of the Bach cello suites with greater fidelity to Bach’s style,

he is offering s critique. Without critique, education is reduced to feel-good finger painting. The aim of critique is not to enhance the student's self-esteem, but to improve the student's performance, and the goal, as I suggested above, is not a pretty good performance, or a slightly above average performance, but perfection. If this seems unnecessarily rigorous, ask yourself this question: Would any self-respecting violinist wish to settle for a performance that was slightly out of tune [but mostly – perhaps 97% -- in tune]? Would any serious apprentice mathematician be content with a proof that is almost valid?

Certification is the evaluation of a student performance for the purpose of determining whether the student shall be admitted to some socially defined role. The Bar Examination certifies prospective lawyers as ready to argue cases in court. The Medical Boards certify medical students as ready to practice medicine. The Doctorate in one of the Arts and Sciences certifies a student as ready to serve as a professor in an accredited college or university. The only relevant question in any certification procedure is whether the applicant does or does not merit certification. There is no such thing as one applicant being more certified than another.

Ranking is the establishment of a linear ordering of the performances of a number of students, for the purpose of arranging them in some hierarchy of relative strength or success of performance. The ONLY purpose of grading is to sort a superfluity of students into a scarcity of desired posts or to assign to a superfluity of applicants a scarcity of desired rewards. There are fewer positions in the handful of highly desired law schools than there are applicants for those positions. There is a similar shortage of openings at the handful of highly desired medical schools and highly desired graduate departments in Arts and Sciences. [You will notice that I say “highly desired,” not “highly desirable” or “elite” or “best.” That is an entirely separate question that need not concern us here.] THEREFORE, undergraduate instructors rank the performances of their students, using letter grades or numerical grades. THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO OTHER REASON TO ASSIGN GRADES, ONCE THE PROCESS OF CRITIQUE OR CERTIFICATION IS COMPLETED.

It is not the purpose of our college to certify students as ready to adopt socially defined roles, nor is its purpose to sort them into scarce positions in some other social institution. Therefore, at our college, there will be critique, constant critique, unrelenting critique, but no grades as they are commonly understood. If you strive for perfection, there is no need to be told just how much you have fallen short. Should you achieve it, you will need no instructor to tell you that you have done so.

FIFTH POST: 26 JULY, 2009

Considering the history of experimental undergraduate education in America, it might be natural to suppose that I have in mind some special set of required courses as the core of the curriculum of my ideal college. One thinks immediately of St. John's College, at which students read classic texts in the original Greek and Latin, or the University of Chicago of Robert Maynard Hutchins, with its broad interdisciplinary

survey courses in Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities, and its final capstone course based on Aristotle's classification of knowledge [a program in whose final dying throes I taught for two years]. One thinks as well of General Education at Harvard, which first became a regular part of the curriculum in 1949 [the year before I entered as a freshman] and continues, with many alterations, into the present day, or the famous required course on Contemporary Civilization at Columbia, which draws on the talents of the university's most distinguished scholars.

Not a bit of it! Those programs are perfect for your typical bright, well-prepared, directionless undergraduate, for whom college is a way station on the road to a career in one of the professions, and who is content to sample bits and snatches of Greek tragedy and philosophy, Russian literature in translation, history, sociology, anthropology, and perhaps even the laboratory method in the life sciences. But the students at my ideal college will be recruited not for the equanimity of their idle curiosity but for the intensity and passion of their thirst for knowledge, and I hope and assume that many of them will be possessed by very specific epistemic obsessions. I have in mind someone like the young E. O. Wilson, who was fixated on ants at a time when the social behavior of animals was utterly *déclassé* in Biology. [My sister, Barbara, was a fellow graduate student of Wilson in Biology at Harvard in the early fifties, and she describes him as reclusive and eccentric. I once spent an afternoon with Wilson in his lab – a sort of arranged date – and can attest to the accuracy of her memory.]]

One student may arrive at our college desperate to learn as much mathematics as she can, as fast as she can. A second may have become fascinated by the periodic open air markets of 13th century Flanders. A third may be launched on a quest to find some common insight uniting all of the major religions. The very worst thing that could possibly happen to each of these young people, as they arrive at the doors of our college, is to be told, "That is very nice, dear, but first we have seven required courses we think you ought to take so that you will be prepared to take your place in adult society as a citizen of a democracy, or so that you can participate in the great conversation that we educated folk have been carrying on for the past two and a half millennia."

There will be a certain amount of unavoidable direction. During that first weekend when new students are unpacking their bags and scoping out their classmates, we may require everyone to read the same book, so that serious conversations can begin immediately. Something challenging but manageable – perhaps Plato's *GORGIAS*, or *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*, or *THE SELFISH GENE*.

We want immediately to establish two principles that shall guide students during their time with us: First, that the jobs they choose or are assigned as part of their contribution to the communal life of the college take precedence over all else, because their fellow students and instructors are relying upon them; and second, that there is absolutely no book, no discipline, no idea that they cannot master with sufficient hard work and guidance from their instructors.

There will, of course, be a wide array of courses from which the new students may choose, and those who are not hell bent on following a pre-existing obsession will receive all manner of helpful suggestions from the faculty. But no effort at all will be made to turn out well-balanced, broadly educated citizens.

I openly admit that I am here reproducing the distinctive features of my own undergraduate education. Despite having to take two large surveys, in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, as part of new General Education Program at Harvard, I was left pretty much to my own devices when it came to choosing courses. In my first semester, I took symbolic logic with Willard van Orman Quine. In my second semester, having just turned seventeen, I took a rather specialized graduate course in Philosophy and Logic with Nelson Goodman. The next year, I took five courses in mathematics, graduate mathematical logic, and set theory and three advanced courses in philosophy, together with the required Humanities course. Taking all in all, I had the most appallingly unbalanced undergraduate education imaginable. It was wonderful!

I anticipate that the students will put considerable pressure on the faculty, who will have a hard time keeping up with them. But that is as it should be. One final story, this one possibly apocryphal, will capture the spirit of my vision. This story is about Paul Samuelson, who went on to become the first person to win the newly created Nobel Prize in Economics. It is said that when Samuelson came up for his doctoral orals at Harvard [prior to writing the dissertation], he was examined by three extremely brilliant and distinguished economists, including the great Wassily Leontieff, who himself won a Nobel prize. After two hours of intensive questioning, the candidate was asked to step out of the room while the committee deliberated. When he had closed the door, Liontieff turned to his colleagues and said, with a smile, "Well, gentlemen. Did we pass?"

Now THAT is my idea of a student.

SIXTH POST: 27 JULY, 2009

The college education will be free. There will be no charges for tuition, room, board, health care, books, or other expenses, and each student will be given a small stipend for personal needs. Students from wealthy families will not be charged exorbitant fees to help defray the expenses of students from poor families. Hence, all students will graduate with no loan burdens, making it possible for them to follow career paths that are not defined by the need to pay off student loans.

This is a utopian vision, but the absence of fees is hardly a novel feature of our ideal college. Monasteries and convents also do not charge fees. They are supported by churches or states. In many countries of the world, higher education is free for those who can gain admission, though rarely are food, clothing, and shelter also provided.

Our college will therefore need a large endowment. To be sure, the non-academic labor of the students and faculty will reduce considerably the cost of maintaining the college, but an endowment will still be essential. How much? I confess that though I

have made some back-of-the-envelope estimates, I really am not sure what the annual operating budget will be. My guess is that the college might cost fifteen million a year to run. That translates into an endowment of perhaps three hundred million, over and above the capital cost of the campus and buildings. Chump change for Amherst or Williams, but still a significant pile of cash.

As soon as the word gets out that our college is free, really free, we will be inundated with applications. Merely paying for a staff large enough to read all of them could add several millions of dollars a year to the operating budget. How WILL we select our students? This is clearly one of the two most important tasks facing the college [the other being recruiting the faculty – more of that anon], so we need to talk about it at length.

We will NOT be examining the performance of high school students on the Scholastic Aptitude Test or any other supposed measure of student academic ability. Nor will we be examining grade point averages. We will take no interest whatsoever in sports, music, art, drama, debating, or other extra-curricular activities, and we will not be reading letters of recommendation. In fact, we will not invite applications at all. We will not accept students; we will go out across the country and look for them.

Let me be clear about what we will be looking for. Quite simply, each year we shall seek one hundred fifty young men and women who are prepared to devote four years of their lives to the rigorous intellectual activity of the college. Adverting yet again to the religious analogy, we will be seeking one hundred fifty young people who have a calling to the life of the mind. We will not be looking for the BEST one hundred fifty. That way lies self-defeating madness. Once we have found one hundred and fifty, we will stop looking until next year, even though there will almost certainly be many, many more whom we have not found.

Where will we look? In secondary schools across the country, some in up-scale privileged neighborhoods, some in blighted inner cities, some in tiny rural communities, some in working class enclaves. Wherever we go, we will ask the teachers in the schools one question: “Do you have a student who is obsessed with books, in love with learning, passionate about ideas?” We will not be asking, “Who is your best student?” Very often, the best student in a school is a performing seal who has mastered the trick of balancing a ball on his nose while playing The Star Spangled Banner on a set of horns. When we find prospects, we will talk with them about what they have been reading, read what they have been writing, listen to them as they talk about what excites them, engages their intelligence, puzzles and fascinates them. We will explain in great detail what life in our college community would hold for them – what their responsibilities would be, what we would provide, and, equally important, what our college would not offer. When we find a young man or woman who is right for our college, we will offer admission on the spot. If the offer is accepted, we will put one more chalk mark on the blackboard in the President’s office. If the offer is declined, we will move on. No positions will be held open for especially “qualified” candidates. There will be neither early admission nor a waiting list, just instant admission.

Who will carry this burden of recruiting? The question answers itself – the Faculty. No one else is competent to judge whether a candidate is suitable for our college. Each Fall, upwards of half of the Faculty will fan out across the country on weekend trips, searching for students for the freshman class entering the following Fall. On average, each professor will be responsible for finding five students. By early in the new year, we will probably have filled our class.

We will be seeking a gender, racial, and ethnic balance in each class. How can we do this without falling afoul of laws against quotas and racial preferences? There are two answers: First, we are seeking one hundred fifty suitable candidates, one by one. At no time will we be comparing one candidate with another, ranking them comparatively. Each potential candidate will be measured against an inflexible standard: Is he or she a person who has the commitment and the ability to be a member of our college community? If the answer is yes, then he or she is in. Otherwise, not. Thus there will be no elaborate system for sorting a flood of applicants into various categories, hence no possibility of adding points for race or economic background or gender.

Second, it is entirely up to us where we look, and as anyone who knows America is aware, when it comes to race, ethnicity, and gender, where you look very powerfully shapes what you find.

Will the faculty be able to recognize suitable candidates, without relying on the usual stigmata – SAT scores, grades, letters of recommendation? Well, ask yourself this: Can an athletic scout recognize baseball, football, or soccer prospects, simply from watching them play? Can a music teacher recognize musical talent? If we academics cannot actually tell whether young persons are suitable for our college after spending time with them, talking with them, reading what they have written, then we have no business calling ourselves Professors!

SEVENTH POST: 28 JULY, 2009

The college will be organized into four Houses, each with a separate complex of small buildings around an inner quadrangle [very Oxbridge, of course, but why reinvent good ideas?] Each House will be home to 150 students, and several of the fifteen faculty associated with it. The faculty, of many different fields, will constitute a Senior Common Room. They will be collectively responsible for all of the administrative decisions and actions that the students may need. The entire faculty of the college will act as a Curriculum Committee, choosing what courses to offer, and in what sequence. They will also act as a Personnel Committee, making decisions about hiring and tenure. [Yes, the faculty will have, or be able to earn, tenure. And if they choose, they can unionize, although it is not clear against whom they will strike, should they decide to withhold their labor.] The President of the college will rotate membership in each of the four Senior Common Rooms.

The student rooms will be arranged into suites, each of which will be home to three, four, or five students. Each suite will have a small common room and a bathroom. Every student will have an individual small room, the door of which, suitably soundproofed, can be closed to provide privacy. The underlying assumption of the physical arrangement is that each student will spend most of his or her time studying.

Each House will have a dining room and kitchen facilities, where students will take the meals that some of their own number prepare. The dining room will double as an assembly room, and will be fitted out with all the latest audio and video accoutrements. It will serve as a venue for House meetings, public lectures, and the like.

There will be no intercollegiate sports at the college, and no coaches or trainers. The college will have some facilities for pick-up sports activities – a playing field with a running track, perhaps, maybe even a pool. But the entire focus of the college will be on the life of the mind. Students will of course be free to form whatever organizations they choose, but they will do so on their own, without encouragement or discouragement, or any financial support, from the college.

The academic year will be organized into two fifteen week semesters, in the customary manner, with the usual holidays and breaks. Since I expect that some of the students will be very poor, the college will try to remain open throughout the entire year, at least on a skeleton basis, so that students who need to, or who wish to, can spend all of their time on campus. If a sufficient number of students are interested, the college will conduct intensive summer study sessions during which students can delve ever deeper into the subjects that interest them.

One important point concerning grades, not mentioned earlier. There will be no such thing as flunking out at this college. Some students may decide to leave, having discovered that unrelenting study is not in fact what they are seeking. But once the college collectively decides that a young man or woman has the calling, and he or she is welcomed into the community, the faculty and the students will have a commitment to that young person and will do everything possible to make the four years at the college valuable and rewarding. We will be demanding and rigorous, always holding the student to a higher standard, but there will come no time at which the faculty sit in judgment on the student and vote In or Out, Pass or Fail. In this way, as much as in any other, the college will be more like a religious order than a school.

I think it can be taken for granted that the academic performance of the students will be such as to merit a Bachelor's Degree after four years of such rigorous and intensive study. I anticipate that graduate and professional schools will compete for them, should they choose a career path that requires their certification.

How will the faculty be recruited, and what sorts of academics will we be looking for? The simple answer is this: the instructors must have the same commitment to the life of the mind that we demand of the students, and they must themselves be so gifted, so brilliant, that they are capable of teaching the sorts of students we shall be recruiting.

They must be as devoted to teaching as the students are to learning, and they must have a capacity for experiencing and, in their own way, expressing the love for one's students that lies at the core of all great teaching. [Here I will simply make reference to Paul Goodman's two great extended essays, COMPULSORY MIS-EDUCATION and THE COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS.]

What sort of person will we seek as President? The first, and absolutely non-negotiable requirement is that the President must be a scholar of such power and distinction that he or she will be recognized as pre-eminent in any gathering of scholars, regardless of titles or administrative position. This is of course not now the custom in the American higher education community. The norm is for some failed academic, who recognizes early on that he or she is not really going anywhere academically, to shift over to the administrative track. A Department Chairmanship, then perhaps an Associate Deanship, followed by a Provostship then a Chancellorship, all the while moving from institution to institution – what Robert Michels long ago, in a somewhat different context, called “the circulation of elites.” The result is a University President who, stripped of his title, would scarcely be noticed in a Senior Common Room. The exceptions are notable – Robert Maynard Hutchins at Chicago, James Byrant Conant at Harvard, even, in his odd way, Leon Bottstein at Bard.

Well, there you have it, at least in sketchy outline – my utopian fantasy of the ideal college. Is such a place even possible? Well, my big sister, Barbara, reading an earlier portion of this essay, remarked that the academic side of it sounded to her much like the Swarthmore College that she attended from '48 to '52. As I said when I began, I conceive the college as sort of co-ed monastery, with sex, and monasteries of some sort have a long, distinguished history.

Will such a college ever come into existence? Not unless a dot com billionaire [if any have survived the crash] reads these posts and decides to throw several hundred million into the pot.

What value is there, then, in the fantasy? Here I stand with the Utopian Socialists against Engels' mocking criticism. The value of this fantasy, or Ideal Type, is that it allows us to clarify certain principles underlying an activity in which we are engaged, but whose roots we have not really examined. What follows are a few conclusions I draw from the fantasy:

First: The two central and indispensable features of the college are that it is a genuine cooperative community, in which the members of the community themselves perform the labor required to sustain the community, and that there is no fee imposed on some, but not on others, for participation in the community. These two conditions, taken together, will communicate and instill the underlying ideological orientation far better than any forced indoctrination of principles. Those who work together cooperatively in such a community come to understand that they are part of a shared enterprise. There is no class of persons who are, in Orwell's immortal words, “more equal than others.”

Second: Critique is essential to education; certification and ranking are irrelevant to education.

Third: Once a student is admitted to the community of the college, everyone is committed to helping that student to develop intellectually. There is no flunking out, nor is there any graduating with honors, just four years of intense cultivation of the life of the mind.

Finally: The closer we can come to embodying the principles of this ideal college in our actual educational enterprises, the more perfectly will we serve our students. Perhaps we may even succeed in inspiring a few of them with the same vision, which they in turn can pass on to their students. When all is said and done, it is the vision underlying and inspiring this fantasy that gives value to our careers as teachers and scholars.