

1968
September 25, 1968

LETTER TO NEW COLLEAGUES

For twenty months a growing group of us have been talking and walking together, reading and writing in a peculiar common search for what a good college should be. We have learned by doing -- trying ourselves to be students and teachers, to be a college while planning one. We have had some failures, we have many continuing arguments, and we have learned a few lessons. As the first of those students, let me report on the state of the search. If the past is prologue, other members of the planning staff will give different accounts. And that summarizes where we are: what we have started is a dialogue -- not a very good one yet, but still a dialogue.

Books and Conversation. A few of us with medieval fancies or a love of large metaphors believe there is a Great Conversation going on that has engaged the human race throughout history, and in which we are all engaged today in this first world-wide generation. We think an important part of it can be found in the great books of the Western tradition which argue with each other and with us across the centuries. We say that students everywhere and a college anywhere should seek to catch up on and carry on that conversation. So we see the authors of these books, from Homer and Plato to Marx and Freud, as members of our faculty -- as the primary teachers talking in our seminars. Others, especially

some student planners, have pleaded with us to drop the talk of great books and speak of very good books. Sometimes we have tried to be low-key and call Shakespeare a very good writer and Oedipus a very good play. But by whatever names they hide, the books are there, they deal with our common questions of sex, politics and religion -- or beauty and truth if you prefer -- and we should locate and read them. And we should not just settle for these best-sellers of 3000 years of Western history; we should try to uncover their counterparts in the other cultures of the East and South. This pole of opinion at Old Westbury is incorporated in our commitment to the common seminars -- but in the plan for those seminars is also incorporated the other pole: the contemporary world, its literature, art, new language and urgent concerns, which each seminar group can add with all its diversity.

This division of power in the common seminar was not a weak compromise, but came from experience out of the planning staff's own discussions that shifted from Antigone to Malcolm X, from the Symposium to McLuhan. The combination should produce a stronger, not weaker, dialogue if we accept Socratic search through a common conversation as the central thing. The chief rule for this is to follow the conversation where it leads. So if we are to be a college based on dialogue, learning how to talk, argue, explore, analyze, construct, criticize and question together, on campus, off campus, and in all parts of our common life must be our primary common assignment.

To this vision, too, we have a countervision incorporated in our plans and hopes: the world of feeling, affection, the fine arts, the natural world, the physical and the psychic, the senses, solitude. If these do not meet the world of ideas around a seminar table as they did when Socrates asked questions about love, law, justice and death, there will be miles of woods, fields and gardens and other places near and far in which to find them.

Rooms and Responsibilities. No doubt the first assignment actually given you was your room. You will note that you were presented with no rules and regulations for a dormitory. Your student colleagues who came here ahead of you convincingly argued that the community residing at Planting Fields should take responsibility for its self-government. Legally, the social rules of student living are to be approved by the nine-man (eight men and one woman) Council of the College and submitted to the Chancellor and trustees of the University. We have told the Council that we are asking you to consider the whole matter and propose to them the rules you agree upon for social conduct, discipline and organization of residences. This may involve some negotiation between you and the Council in which the faculty and administration can be helpful but not determinative. You will find the Council open and interested.

What we have said strongly to the Council and to others is that from the beginning students here are to be respected as men and women and not treated as children; that you will be citizens of this college.

community, not subjects; that we take very seriously the idea stated in our Statement of First Program that "responsibility for one's own learning, in college as in life, will be the operating principle;" and that this means the college should not try to substitute for a parent. We have pointed out to many parents that we will not pretend to control young adults over whom most of them would no longer claim real control. After high school the majority of your peers are going out into the world to work. At 18 or 19 many men go to Vietnam or other strange places in the armed services. Since after four months, practically all of you will be going out to live and work on your own in new settings for the second semester, it seems reasonable for you to take responsibility now for how you live here.

Therefore we see these residence halls more as apartments than dormitories. We hope you will run them as cooperative ventures -- and that you will respect those students who don't want to spend a lot of time in cooperative committees or assemblies. (H. G. Wells said the trouble with socialism is that it takes too many evenings.) We hope you will respect the interests of those who want privacy and quiet, and respect the concerns of the Council who see themselves as representing the wider community.

Practicing the art of politics is a good exercise of the liberal arts. We are not a utopian colony floating on a cloud, but a college within a university, a community within many communities. That adds to our power of ultimate influence and limits some of our present possibilities. We are subject to many laws and must deal with many outside forces. Sheer survival proved finally impossible for Socrates; it may not be so easy for an experiment fashioned in his image. We need to negotiate this world, even as we learn how to change it.

As you consider the best possible rules (which may turn out to be

the fewest possible rules), I trust you will view the politics of our experiment as your problem as much as mine.

Partnership. No question has used and abused more time and energy than the idea of partnership. Some blame what they consider the fraudulent rhetoric of "full partnership" for too high or false expectations among students and for resulting tensions and disappointments. Yet the original mandate of this college, before any of us were given responsibility for carrying it out, was stated in the University's 1966 Master Plan as follows: The new college of "innovation and creativity" will "admit students to full partnership in the academic world and grant them the right to determine, in large measure, their own areas of study and research." That was approved by the trustees and submitted by the Governor to the Legislature. Believing that this states a good goal for higher education, some of us have taken seriously the task of turning that rhetoric into reality. Nothing has happened to persuade me to go back to the trustees, the Governor and the Legislature to report that such partnership is not possible. On the contrary, over the last twenty months student planners have played such a lively and valuable part, and have had such a large influence on the plans, that it seems to me the partnership has in fact been forged.

Some say the idea is good but the rhetoric is wrong: do it, don't say it -- or do it, then say it. They may well be right and my stubbornness wrong. Certainly the promise of full partnership has given rise to some hopes, such as equal voting power by students on all matters, which have been and will probably continue to be

disappointed. But I suspect that most of these tensions about Student Power would be with us even if we dropped all reference to partnership, and that the tensions are not only necessary but useful. In any case, I opt for the tensions that come from a troublesome ambiguity like the idea of partnership. The best of American history is the story of the tension between ambiguous Constitutional promises like the freedom of speech, due process and equal protection, and their inadequate fulfillment in reality. Without those promises and tensions wouldn't we settle for too little? So I propose that we accept the tensions as inevitable and relax and enjoy them.

"At least say what you mean and don't mean by it," comes the equally stubborn advice. Let me try to do that in the light of what we have done and learned so far:

Students have participated and should continue to participate as members of all important committees and planning bodies within the college. This participation specifically extends beyond so-called student affairs to the central issues of curriculum planning, faculty appointments, and college governance. This does not mean that students and faculty should not meet in separate groups when their separate interests make this appropriate.

In the first program students will have a large measure of freedom to determine their own plans of study by designing and carrying through independent studies, by selecting their field work and carrying the responsibility for it while in the field, and by helping to shape the direction each common seminar takes. In the "free university" component, students may initiate and teach new courses and students are asked to select a chairman for this part of the program.

Like most partnerships in the professions, we have proceeded not by taking votes but by prolonged common deliberation with every voice respected. Consent and dissent have been vigorously registered, and we have operated with a large measure of consensus, in which students have been fully represented and often very effective. But no one is made a partner by fiat. Partnership is a thing one comes to feel, a responsibility one takes, "not to be had for a word or a week's wishing."

Constitution and Common Law. Then what have the hang-ups been? There is been? There is genuine and important disagreement about the best form of college government. Some seek a community of equals in which all power is shared by the group through radically democratic group processes. Others see little to be gained from endless committee rule in which decisions tend to be made according to the lowest common denominator, though they, too, want the college to be a "Republic of Learning," in which persuasion is the principle. For the time being, the power of the presidency, such as it is, is on the side of the Lincoln-Roosevelt-Kennedy-DeGaulle view of a strong executive in a strong dialogue with all the constituents.

"Is it true that on occasion, on a faculty appointment or some other important decision, you have acted against the advice of the majority of the planning staff?" I was recently asked. "Yes," I said. "Would you do it again?" "Yes." In my view, a president has no right to abdicate his legal power and responsibility. A University College needs an executive whose interest is the whole enterprise and its success in the larger University and in the larger community of which it is a part, whose mandate is more than balancing factions and following a consensus, whose practice is to lead.

Though an executive cannot ignore a majority very often without exhausting his capital, he will not be doing his job if he does not use his capital to bring in new elements and instigate change. The term of a president should be limited in years; and he should be accountable to the whole college community, to students and faculty, as well as to trustees, all of whom should be able on appropriate occasions and in appropriate ways to block and even to terminate his power. And a president should constantly seek to empower others in the community, not hoard power in himself. But the power which others assume should also, I believe, be personal so that persons with particular responsibilities have power to act and are from time to time accountable, though not constantly in time-consuming committees.

The college's present organization reflects this. After consultations I appointed the chairmen of the different sections of the curriculum (the common humanities seminar, the social science seminars and workshops, independent study and the field program). Though they are expected to respect the principle of wide participation by students and faculty which is now our "common law," these chairmen are personally responsible for making and carrying out the necessary decisions in their areas. Some of them have chosen to operate their parts of the program with group democratic decisions, but that is their choice; others have chosen to make the final decisions themselves after getting the widest feasible advice.

Perhaps we can design a better system. We have agreed that a constitutional committee of faculty and students will proceed to propose rules and by-laws for the formal division of power within our community, and we have agreed that the constituent colleges which will comprise Old Westbury will have the autonomy to try different forms of government, including, if one or more of them chooses, an experiment in group democracy. We should have a good time doing this for we are all probably frustrated founding fathers, and we just might discover some new forms of creative federalism in our "college of colleges."

Whatever the forms of self-government we choose, I trust that we will continue to submit ourselves and our views to the process of persuasion, and that we will have checks and balances to enable and require the consideration of different interests and views in the community.

As an example of how our common law works, ten days ago some 15 students and several faculty members submitted a statement or petition asking that "the decision-making process stop until the entire community is present." The whole planning staff responded to that statement in a full discussion with the respect that any such strong position deserved. The decision-making did not stop, but we agreed to proceed only with the necessary decisions, to begin the constitutional committee, and to present all the pending questions to the whole community when it assembles.

The analogy of the common law suggests another principle we have been trying to follow: Do not get hung up over issues in a vacuum; do not decide things too soon; wait until you have to decide and do it in a practical context. This is the principle of constitutional law that allows a court to act only when there is an actual case or controversy before it. Our lawyer-colleague, Philip Camponeschi, invoked this doctrine so persuasively a while ago that it is now called the Camponeschi Rule.

Challenge and Contract. The corollary of all this is that we have an agreement (some of us put it in low-key as a Gentlemen's Agreement, others talk of a Social Contract) to live together, to work together, to search together, to create a college together. Advice and consent is a formula with two factors: we give a great deal of advice to each other, but we are also called upon to give our consent generously. Partnership can only be partially embodied in a constitution. Its spirit requires personal responsibility in the vigorous sense of the word: a partner responds -- he responds strongly in opposition to something

he feels strongly against; he responds affirmatively when it is time to move together, and only he can determine when to say Yes or No. We have been trying to set up a system of maximum challenge, where students will challenge faculty and faculty students, and administrators will be challenged by both and challenge both; where a common curriculum will challenge each and all of us; where the opportunities for initiating new common studies, even for planning new kinds of constituent colleges, will be a continuing challenge for us all. But for this to work, we will have to respect the contracts we make.

For example, the students who chose to go to Tel Aviv University made a contract with that University, with us, and with themselves, to carry out a particular one-year program of intensive language study on an Ulpan, campus courses run by the University, and field work. Similarly, here at Old Westbury-Planting Fields students who choose a particular course are entering a contract for a particular period of time with the faculty member or members conducting it. Students who agree to a particular field assignment are making a contract with the agency where they will work. Contracts should be entered into carefully, with the terms understood as clearly as possible. But making contracts (and laws and constitutions) is an essential part of the process of self-government. It is the way we do together that which we are not capable of doing at all or doing so well by ourselves. A college is a network of such contracts. Honoring our contracts, even when the going is tough, makes the difference between freedom and anarchy. In anarchy it is not only the center that cannot hold; things and persons

all fall apart.

The First Program. The main contract we have made with each other is the first program that we begin this week. It was hammered out over many months around a planning table, by students, faculty and administrators. It represents a remarkable degree of consensus. It is subject to change from time to time, especially at the end of each year, and we will need a reviewing and planning system that encourages this. Even within the first program, there is an escape hatch on page 14 of the original Statement of First Program -- the provision that "a student may present an alternative program of study to a faculty-student committee for approval." There will be opportunity for students to choose from a number of seminars being offered in the social-science-urban studies stream, organize courses themselves, engage in independent study and participate in planning new curriculum. But the program also calls for a strong common commitment to the common seminars, workshops, and field work. The program is open-ended, so that you can continue to help shape it from further experience and reflection. And probably by next year, certainly by 1970, there will be alternative programs to which you may switch. But trying and testing it is our joint contract with the State University, the Regents, the Middle States Association, and ourselves.

Let me encourage anyone who has doubts about parts of the program, by saying that I have doubts too, and that I trust our doubts will be welcomed even as we move along. I wonder whether the reading of the great books as a common experience has been too

diluted by the short list of common readings and the large freedom each seminar group will have to read and discuss what it chooses; I wonder whether we have enough Socratic spirit and skills to break through our specialisms and private interests for a common search. Nevertheless the program seems to me coherent, timely and important, and has my support, along with some recurring questioning. It will need your consent as well as your continuing advice. Let me add that some of the main thrusts -- taking race and poverty and the City as our central objects of exploration; and a field program the first year -- were largely the contribution of the first group of student planners. So let's take this first program as a good question and see where it leads.

New Programs. By 1970 we are committed to offering several new curriculums, including programs in which science and mathematics are strong and other traditional academic disciplines are represented.

Through our field program, we are planning next spring to recruit a number of so-called disadvantaged students for a special summer program; these students would join the regular class next fall, although they will be offered some continuing special tutoring.

From the beginning we have wanted to organize a Master of Arts in Teaching program that would be particularly designed for those who teach or have taught in the Peace Corps overseas or similar ventures at home or abroad. Our formal and informal collaboration in organizing and developing the Teachers, Inc., headed by two part-time members of our faculty, Roger Landrum and James Wylie, is a step toward such

a masters program. The teachers of Teachers, Inc. who are working in Long Island and New York City schools will be on campus for special seminars and conferences from time to time.

International programs that will help us become a "school of the world" also have high priority. The program in Israel and a probable field project in Mexico this year are just the first beachheads. There should be more and deeper ones by 1970, when some of you may want to go overseas for a full year or two.

We have long had in mind, the development of problem institutes which would be research and teaching enterprises, offering major parts of our curriculum. Some kind of urban affairs institute, and possibly an Afro-American institute, should emerge out of our first program's concentration on the urban problems of race and poverty. By your second or third year you may be taking the equivalent of "majors" in one of these institutes.

For those who want the arts to hold a more central place in the regular academic program than is the case in the first curriculum, plans are underway, which you can help develop, for a variety of programs in music, dance, theatre, poetry, painting, sculpture, and graphics. The creative artistic enterprise will thus be in lively dialogue with the verbal dialogue around the seminar tables.

As the Statement of First Program indicated on pages 50 and 51, we intend to develop law, medicine, theology and teaching as major new forms for undergraduate curriculums in the liberal arts. Some of us wanted to try this as our first experiment, but settled for a few small beginnings, such as the courses this fall by Yale Law School Professor

Joseph Goldstein and Timothy Jenkins, and the various ways in which Michael Novak may introduce theological readings and questions, or Phil Camponeschi and I bring law and politics into the common humanities seminar.

By next year, pockets of some of these new programs will be underway, which you may wish to try. Meanwhile, from time to time the proposed new programs will be presented to you for your criticism, and some of you may participate in planning them.

At some point the first constituent college of Old Westbury, presumably based on this first program you are beginning, will be set free to sail with substantial autonomy as part of our expanding college of colleges. Even then there should be much intermingling and interpenetration of programs, courses, faculty and students. The crucial test of this plan for federated colleges, "visions and revisions," will be continuing a close and powerful dialogue among the various programs. For we want not a planned college, but a college that in all of its parts is planning.

Meanwhile, the architectural planning and then the construction of the buildings on the Old Westbury campus will be proceeding, hopefully with the ideas and criticism of many of you.

There is much we can do together and much we will have to say to each other. We should have a good time doing it, and may on occasion reach as high as comedy or tragedy. Some of the things we have to say can't be put in words, and some will take a long time to say, but in the beginning are words, it is probably earlier than we think.

there is world enough and time, and there will always be the freedom of the mimeograph machine. Scholars tell me that the Greek word for school means a place of leisure for the pursuit of insight. I hope we use our time well in these rare years together. If there is too much chaos in our first days, forgive us and join us in making something of it. It takes some chaos to make a world.

Sincerely,

Hani W. Ford