

IN A NOW familiar pattern, normal schools have become teachers' colleges, teachers' colleges have upgraded themselves into liberal arts colleges, liberal arts colleges have been promoted to universities, and universities—with no place to go—have soared into the empyrean as multiversities. In this process of jubilant escalation, the word precedes the deed. Schools assume the mantle without the inner reality—the academic equivalent of buy-now-pay-later. But there comes the time when the name and reality must be congruent; otherwise chaos is come again. Founder's Day celebrations come and go, but an academic community must live with its daytime resources and nighttime conscience. Unless the academic currency is to be seriously depreciated, there must be a closing gap between pretension and achievement.

To be sure, there are educational statesmen aplenty to chart the road to academic probity. The yardsticks are drearily familiar: Ph.D. rate, library resources, faculty salaries, and student board scores, publications, and the academic pork barrel we call contract research. These, at the very least, are crudely measurable. My interest is in something far more imponderable—the intellectual tone of an institution, its *Geist*, what is left after the brick and mortar and salary increases have all been taken into account. A rich, "successful" college may lack intellectual vivacity; a poor one may have it.

In the process of academic upgrading there is a factor at work that one might call, without too much malice, the lower middle-class syndrome. Institutions of higher learning, after all, are not strikingly different from families. They have a father (the president or chancellor), the tyrannical Big Brother (the dean), and lots of helpless children. Families like to get up in the world; they want to be accepted. And the family "on the make" has been the target of satire from Jane Austen to William Whyte Jr. Colleges and universities, we like to think, transcend the vulgarities and vanities of ordinary people, but they rarely do.

Essentially, the lower middle-class syndrome is characterized by an intense desire for respectability and by a pervasive insecurity. In higher education, this is relatively new, for colleges used to be aristocratic preserves

where there was no broad margin of freedom, and nobody was worried about his Dun & Bradstreet rating. (The mischief-making of the old-time college student makes the current generation seem like a race of prudent Organization Men, their eyes peeled for the corporation recruiter. Indeed, that is why Fort Lauderdale exists: to drain off the energies dammed up by the new gentility of college towns.) With the democratization of higher education, that broad margin of freedom has shrunk. I am here applying to higher education what de Tocqueville perceived a long time ago about all of American life.

status seeking in academe

By DAVID BOROFF

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Let me demonstrate how this applies to recruiting faculty. I have observed that it is the marginal school—the newly constituted university that has not yet won the esteem of its peers—that is likely to trumpet for all to hear its high Ph.D. rate. If this is the way to achieve academic respectability, then we have it. Interestingly enough, it is the leaders of the academic procession who are often cavalier about the Ph.D. or, to put it more precisely, who can accommodate non-Ph.D.'s in their ranks. Novelist Saul Bellow, for example, is on the graduate faculty of the University of Chicago in the Committee of Social Thought. How many liberal arts colleges, only recently redeemed from the equivocal status of a teachers' college, would risk a man of that sort with all he implies of disruptive challenge and creative insurgency? At the University of California, Eric Hoffer, the self-educated stevedore, is in residence on campus and has become a charismatic figure there. How many teachers' colleges would hire him? In

back of the rigidity about the Ph.D. is the professionalization of American life—a tendency that can hardly be arrested. But that is precisely the point: the aristocrat still cherishes the gifted amateur: the lower middle-class *arriviste* is afraid of him.

The new liberal arts college or the recently emerged university can hardly compete with the mighty potentates—with imperial Harvard and marauding Stanford and brazen California—for the best academic talent. But neither should such a school settle for threadbare Ph.D.'s, the poor relations of their discipline. With a little imagination, the newly emerged school can build a faculty that can make up in color and excitement what it may lack in conventional academic kudos.

The lower middle-class syndrome also expresses itself in the selection and care of students. Board scores are paramount—why take a chance with the academically disheveled? But even more significant are the personnel policies of such schools. For here the dominant motivation is to stay out of trouble, to maintain a nice, proper, unoffending student body, to be on good terms with the community—in other words, the Department of Student Personnel is an annex of the public relations office. Anything that deflects the upward lunge is anathema. Gentility suffuses everything like a gentle fog.

The personnel technician is likely to have a clearly defined idea of what students should be like. It is a concept which all too often mirrors his own self-image: prudent, hard-working, ambitious, snugly tucked away within some capacious fold of the middle class. Obviously, this has little to do with the surging, mercurial energies of youth.

Alas, so many of the professionals in higher education are of lower middle-class origin, this writer among them. (Higher education—indeed, all education—has been one of the expanding frontiers of our time which attract upward mobile elements.) Isn't it unreasonable to demand of them an aristocratic urbanity and ease and tolerance?

It is possible to argue that one should be as faithful to one's origins as to the ideals of higher education. Most of us are, in fact, trapped in

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middle-class respectability, and it would be unnatural to be anything else. But if I may be ameliorator for a moment, there are ways of dealing with middle-class panic.

One must first recognize that college is not a finishing school, that it traffics with more urgent matters than initiation into the middle class. One must understand, too, that there can be no real intellectual life without risks, that at the heart of intellectual and artistic inquiry is subversive dynamite. (What other than a great howling negation do modern writers like Genet and Ionesco affirm?)

When I visit a college, one of the first groups I ferret out is the bohemians—not only because as marginal people they can provide insights into the majority community but also because they are a kind of antiestablishment establishment, dissidents in residence. As such they fulfill a valuable education function—so valuable, in fact, that their recruitment should be part of the admissions program of every institution. If they don't come, go out and find them. (I submit for your consideration that the civil rights movement, which successfully buried student apathy, was powered largely by bohemians.) The educational value of bohemians is a notion that most admissions officers will assent to in theory and violate in practice. In their blatant contempt for conventional values bohemians can be threatening.

As a corollary, I deplore the stranglehold that Greek-letter societies have in some institutions. There is often a natural alliance between college administrators and fraternity men. The more modest the class origin of the administrator the more he may secretly yearn for the negligent ease and middle-class security of gilded fraternity youth. (It is a mistake to think only of faculty serving as models for youth; sometimes it is the other way around.) The healthiest campus situation is not one in which fraternities do not exist but rather one in which they are vigorously challenged by a sturdy and vital independent group. As a besieged minority, fraternities can be a wholesome force on campus; in full command of the campus, fraternities are dangerous and ultimately stultifying.

There is another hegemony that colleges on the move should try to break

up—the tyranny of the young. Anyone who taught when the G.I. Bill was at flood tide knows how thoroughly it spoiled him for the callow and the uncaring. Still I have learned from a good number of older students that even in this brave new world of continuing education they must run a fearsome gauntlet of probing questions, raised eyebrows and discreet skepticism. The extension division mentality dies hard.

The lower middle-class syndrome manifests itself, then, in a predilection for well-groomed, the well-trying and the safe. Despite all the recent

bohemian students should be recruited

fervor about salvaging the culturally deprived, working-class students tend to make teachers and administrators uneasy. The latter often deny the working-class student his identity and try to recast him in the image of the middle class. At a college, which will remain nameless, the dean of student activities zealously tried to turn all of the young women into Vassar girls, though their background was urban not suburban, working class not middle class. When social activities were scheduled, the dean exhibited an unseemly eagerness for them to order tea, not coffee, to betoken their upward mobility. Alas, it was all in vain. The girls, inured by long evenings over coffee in local luncheonettes, were immune to the dean's blandishments.

Any college in earnest about upgrading itself should have lots of out-of-state students and as many foreign students as the international traffic will bear. In some state universities, foreign students tend to be concentrated in the graduate schools where they do the least good to the college community. And even when foreign students exist in large numbers on a campus, they tend to be ignored or

shunted into their own segregated preserves. Enveloped by official good will, they become invisible men befriended only by the bohemians, who, in reaching out to foreign students, only intensify their own alienation from the mainstream of campus life.

I wonder if I might draw from my own techniques in appraising colleges to suggest some "informal" indices of institutional excellence. A few of these things may seem absurdly homeily, mere domestic bric-a-brac of the college community, but they are far more important than one might think. I have witnessed a direct correlation between the intellectual vitality of a school and the bravura of its bulletin boards. Harvard, Swathmore, St. John's in Maryland and Bennington provided some of the most entertaining and revealing of bulletin board graffiti. (Bulletin boards, after all, are the latrine scribbles of the literate.) At the other end of the spectrum, at a school grievously afflicted with lower middle-class anxiety, all bulletin board notices have to be cleared with a prissy office of student activities determined to civilize the barbarians. What does one do—schedule a course in bulletin board writing? Hardly. The sense of play, the social passions, the sheer idiosyncratic energy that turn up on a bulletin board are an expression of a school's ethos.

The bookstore is another cultural index. I have observed some terrifying displays of philistinism and intellectual torpor in some bookstores. At a small college I had occasion to visit, the bookstore was a kind of general store in which books were tucked away behind Bermuda shorts and long woolen stockings. And there wasn't a single magazine above the level of *Life* and *Time*. And let me make a plea right now for the enormous educative value of magazines. We miss an unequalled opportunity when we fail to involve our students in magazine reading. It is a national scandal that with millions of college graduates the general magazines of the consciously intellectual class—*Partisan Review*, *The American Scholar*, *Commentary* and *Commonweal*, *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, the university quarterlies—have a pitifully small circulation.

The browsing room in the library is another sensitive area. Here again

the self-image of the institution is reflected. In a newly converted state university in the Southwest, I visited a browsing room that didn't venture beyond *The Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* that some good soul had donated and back issues of *Good Housekeeping*. How seriously can one take this institution's protestations of academic virtue?

No dean worth his stipend can afford to be indifferent to student hangouts—especially those that dispense coffee—for that is where the serious talk takes place. My bias is obviously toward urbane, light-handed administration, but here a little social engineering is in order. The vital schools have meeting places where students—and faculty—can repair for coffee and conversation. One shrewdly administered college in the South combines its snack bar with its paperback bookstore—a conspicuously happy marriage. The most justly celebrated hangout in academia is the University of Wisconsin's Rathskeller ("The Rat"), where beer has corrupted no one, and where political debates flourish at any hour, class lines crisscross (freshman girls meet *real* graduate students), and professors sit in earnest conference with students over cups of coffee.

Another index of cultural health is the student newspaper. Here again the itch for respectability among administrators can prove the undoing of an independent student press. I am amazed and appalled at the curious myopia among some college administrators—as if some schoolboy japery in print had serious consequences. The best schools are those in which the student press is untrammelled, where, in fact, interference is simply unthinkable, the ultimate impiety. At Harvard, Wisconsin, Michigan, Swarthmore, the student newspaper is not only an organ of information but a soapbox, a circus, an arena for the whimsical and sportive. Administrators afflicted with status problems are prone to overreact to such tomfoolery, but it obviously has its place.

To be sure, one can't "organize" an effervescent bulletin board, a spirited hangout or an irreverent student newspaper. One can only create a climate which enables those to flourish. What can the conscientious administrator do to create this climate?

First, he must be vigilant about too much Big Brotherism. I recognize that I am proposing that he liquidate himself—at least in part—but his primary loyalty is to his institution, not to his profession. George Stern, a University of Syracuse psychologist, has discovered that the schools where the intellectual life is valued most are also the least bureaucratized. Administrators these days are something of an easy target, and I shall forswear my own guild loyalty as a professor by not joining in the lynching-bee. But it seems to me that a kind of academic Goldwaterism is in order here: when

is the student newspaper really free?

in doubt curb the centralized administrative power. If students are to be intellectually autonomous, they must witness autonomy at work.

On the other hand, the alert administrator will make exertions where they really matter. A current vogue which strikes me as being exceedingly worthwhile is that of bringing speakers to campus. This is one of those fringe activities which rarely show up in graduate record scores and almost never win an unrestricted Ford Foundation grant. But it provides an opportunity for the chance encounter with a seminal mind, which, after all, is what education is all about. Northwestern University, whose students chronically bemoan their middle-class blandness, runs an annual intellectual pow-wow which combines efficiency and zest. With logistical virtuosity, they fly leading intellectuals into Evanston from all over the country, put them on stage and make them define themselves for a few hours. The atmosphere for the three-day fracas is not unlike a football weekend with tickets at a premium, post-mortem parties and endless talk, talk, talk.

For the school on its way up, there

must be genuine support for faculty holding unfashionable views. I have been impressed by the fact that Notre Dame was quick to hire Samuel Schapiro, a victim of an academic purge in another Midwestern institution.

Recruitment of a faculty for the school on the move should be governed by the principle of diversity. The liveliest faculty is a balanced one in which there are built-in polarities—some conventional researchers, a few consultant types getting rich fast, a clutch of dedicated teachers full of resentment toward the foundation hounds and some visiting professors from non-academic milieux (government, industry, trade unions and journalism—even the military). And a college that cannot tolerate a social barbarian with a first-class mind is still lost in the mists of the genteel tradition. In truth, choosing faculty with a view toward their social acceptability is a survival from the old days when colleges were genteel preserves, isolated from the turmoil of the outside world. This no longer makes sense at a time when colleges not only are no longer separated from the great world, they *are* the great world.

It should be clear what is my goal for the culturally aspiring college. It is nothing less than a tumultuous diversity in which there is a kind of built-in dialogue. I make this plea for diversity because its claims in our evershrinking universe are more exigent all the time. College should provide a stirring exercise in pluralism, not because the student will meet it later on, but precisely because he won't. The melancholy truth about our lives is that we tend to be ghettoized in our own professional middle-class enclaves. For most of us, our internationale is that of the discipline. Yet the tangle of ethnicity and nationalism and cultural variation Out There is one we can ignore only at great peril. College is the only chance—the last chance—for most students to apprehend variety and diversity, and to make this apprehension interfuse their attitudes throughout life. *END*

DAVID BOROFF is associate professor of English at New York University and a distinguished interpreter of the U.S. college scene. This article appeared originally in the Dec. 19, 1964 issue of Saturday Review.