

Has the Small College a Future?

by HENRY STEELE COMMAGER

The college is an American institution, unknown elsewhere in the Western world. In the Old World, higher education has been, and is, assigned to universities; in many countries of the Old World the secondary schools—public schools, *lycées*, and *Gymnasia*—perform most of the tasks of our colleges and display most of their stigmata.

How did it happen that Americans contrived the college? Creation of the first institution was almost fortuitous, and set a pattern: Harvard College was founded at a moment in English educational history when the Oxford-Cambridge colleges had taken over from the universities, and it was a kind of stepdaughter of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, which was a very special Puritan foundation. But the deeper explanation is simply that the Americans were not prepared to create or maintain universities; indeed, they were not prepared to do so until about a century ago, with the creation of Cornell in the 1860s, the transformation of Harvard under Eliot, and the founding of The Johns Hopkins in 1876.

When the Americans finally did create universities, they did not (except briefly at Hopkins) substitute them for colleges, but added them atop the colleges. The two were not integrated—as at Oxbridge, where the colleges provide the tutoring, and the universities the lecturing, the research, and the laboratories—but were made consecutive. This meant that in the United States the university tended to be an enlarged and grown-up college. To be sure, at the better universities such as Harvard, Columbia, and The Hopkins, the graduate and professional faculties took over, but it is mostly the college tail that wags the university dog.

The college is not only indigenous, it is unique. The college emerged in the United States to serve a particular constituency and function in a special way. Note first that the college was designed to be and long supposed to be terminal. It provided all the education the young were going to get—in America, at least—and that was supposed to be quite enough education. In a simple and unsophisticated society, young men with only a college degree (there were few young women with such degrees until the mid-century) could go into teaching, law, architecture, busi-

ness, and in some states even into medicine. Any additional training as they might need they were expected to get in offices or at work—not altogether a bad idea.

Second, the college was designed to take care of boys rather than young men. It was, in many ways, what the preparatory school is today. In the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth centuries, boys entered college at thirteen or fourteen, and a really bright lad like John Trumbull could pass the entrance examinations for Yale at the age of seven (he had the decency to wait until he was twelve before presenting himself). When in college, they studied pretty much what young men at Exeter, St. Paul's, or Lawrenceville studied half a century ago: Latin and, perhaps, Greek, mathematics, religion, rhetoric, a bit of history, a bit of science.

This youthfulness of students appeared to justify, even require, the perpetuation by the institution of *in loco parentis*, now in full retreat. It was clearly necessary that tutors—and even presidents—take care of the health and morals of the young who had been entrusted to their care by anxious parents. The necessity of careful supervision was not relaxed in the nineteenth century, for though students were older, by then, two additional considerations had emerged: the presence of young ladies on the campus and the growing number of distractions that assailed the young.

The youthfulness of students served as both an inspiration and a justification for what came to be regarded as the chief concern of the college: instruction in morality and the nurture of a Christian character. The purpose of European (as distinct from English) universities was to train for government service and for the professions; in America it was to mold character. If this were taken care of, all else would take care of itself.

But the college, perhaps inadvertently, served another function: It was an instrument for the prolongation of youth. For a century and a half now, Americans have been bemused by this romantic notion, a notion deeply rooted in history and the national character. Americans pursued happiness more self-consciously and more energetically than other peoples, perhaps because they thought it a natural right,

perhaps because they equated it with the things America had to offer, and thus had the satisfaction of a self-filling objective. Certainly, they equated happiness with childhood, an equation that made sense if children did not have to go to work in fields or factories at the age of eight or nine. Those who had not themselves had the opportunity to prolong their youth by going to college instead of to work—and this included most parents up until the 1930s—passionately desired this boon for their children. Let them enjoy four golden years—years of youth, years of freedom from work, from care, from the problems that would soon enough crowd in upon them, freedom, even, from dangerous ideas—in some pastoral college where they might pick up as a bonus a smattering of learning, precepts of morality, a gloss of good manners, and maybe a wife or a husband. Who can doubt that one reason the older generation so deeply resents the college rebels of our time is that they are making a mockery of the myth of the four golden years. As education was for long the American religion, the revolt against the college is what the revolt against the church was two generations ago.

During the past quarter-century the sweeping revolution in higher education has shifted the center of gravity from the college to the university. It has deprived the college of many of its traditional functions and some of its uses, and it has raised questions about the validity of the whole collegiate enterprise.

Thus, where the college was for generations terminal, it is now becoming preparatory. Where the college was, for long, the refuge of a kind of social if not intellectual elite, it has now become the haunt of every man and of every woman. And where it traditionally fulfilled a clear and familiar function—moral, social, and educational—its function now is a subject of controversy and of uncertainty, and among students there is a growing suspicion that its function may have disappeared.

For the traditional functions of the college are being usurped—or should we simply say taken over?—by other institutions. It is squeezed from below by the growing maturity of the students, the improvement in secondary education, and the rise of the junior college as an intrinsic part of the public school system. Good students no

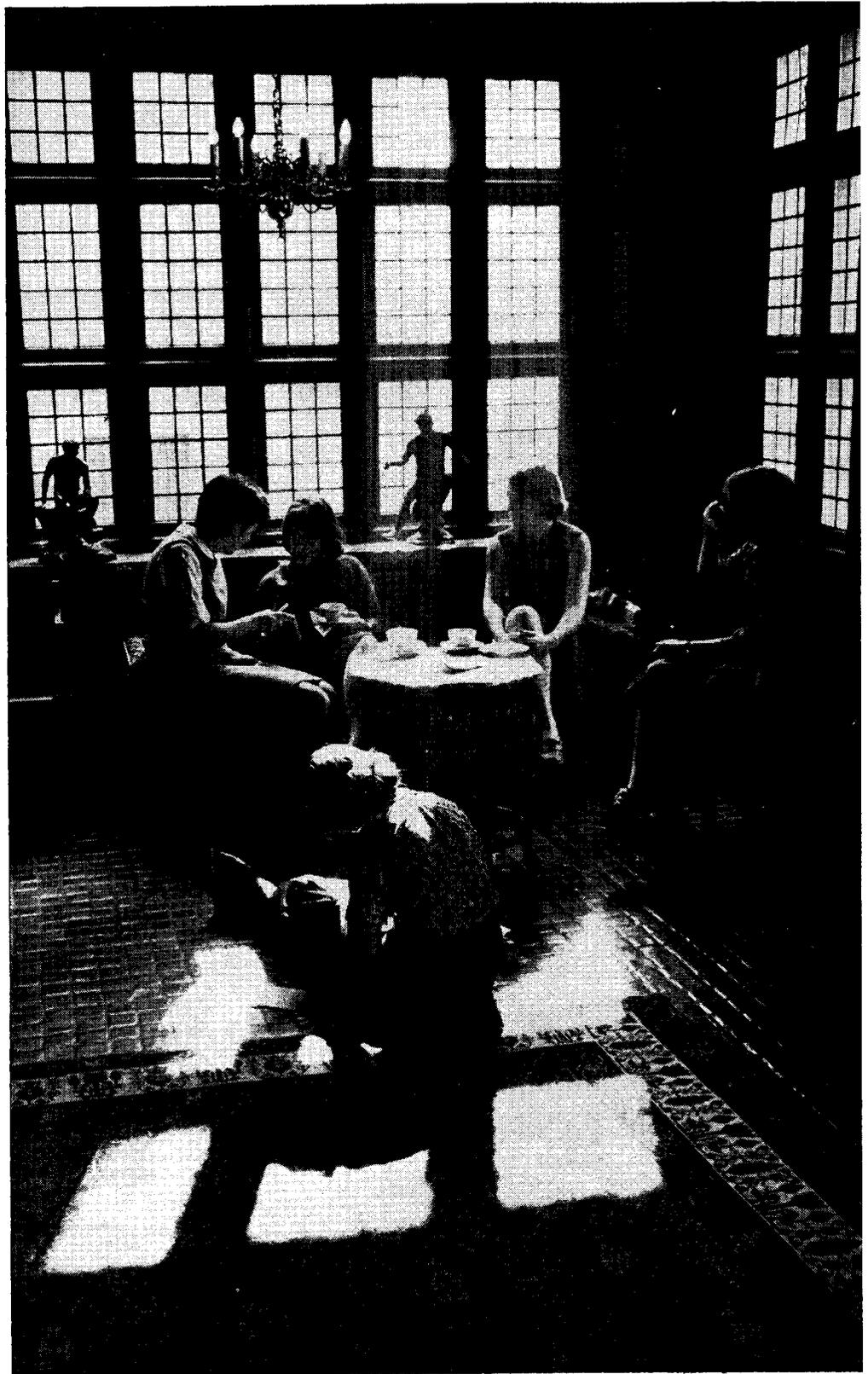
longer need the old "required courses" that so conveniently filled the first two years of college. We are moving, almost irresistibly, towards the Old World practice of relegating these courses to the secondary schools where they belong, and while this shift has not yet reached the remoter parts of America, it will. And the college is being squeezed at the top by the importunate demands of graduate and professional schools, the military, the custom of early marriage, and the necessity, therefore, of getting on with the job.

If the college is thus pressed inward from both ends, what will be left for it to do? What can it do in the first two years that cannot be done equally well, and at less expense, in a good secondary school, and that is, in fact, done equally well in almost all Western European secondary schools and, perhaps, also in Soviet schools? What can be done in the last two years that might not be better done at a university or professional school, or, as Robert Hutchins has argued, in a law office, a business office, or a library?

It is easier to say what the college should not do than to make clear what it should do. It should not go on teaching elementary courses in such obvious subjects as basic English, repetitive American history, or public speaking, nor such non-college subjects as accounting, basketball coaching, or military training.

It should not compete with the university or the professional school. Colleges must prepare their students for research and professional schools, but the preparation should be qualitative, not quantitative. They must teach mathematics for those who will be involved in science, economics, and philosophy, languages to those who will devote themselves to the humanities and the social sciences. There is nothing new about this: It is the traditional training that the colleges provided in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It should not—and I tread on controversial ground here—provide introductions or surveys of almost everything, so that the young will have been exposed to "general culture." Surveys, like outlines, rot the brain. "Culture" cannot be taught; it is something that the student absorbs from the atmosphere in which he lives—from the tradition of the institutions, from the buildings and the grounds, from well



—George W. Gardner.

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stocked libraries, from great teachers, from fellow students, from exposure to the intangibles "at hand." Nor can we have much confidence in the therapeutic qualities of a nodding acquaintance with world civilization, world literature, and world art. Our generation knows incomparably more about the problems that confront us than our forebears did about theirs, but it is unable to solve any of them. We are incomparably better acquainted with other peoples, nations, and civilizations than our forebears were—every student has been "introduced" to Asia and Africa and Latin America, and he has a name-dropping acquaintance with their great authors. But we are probably more isolationist and certainly more belligerent than we were a century ago.

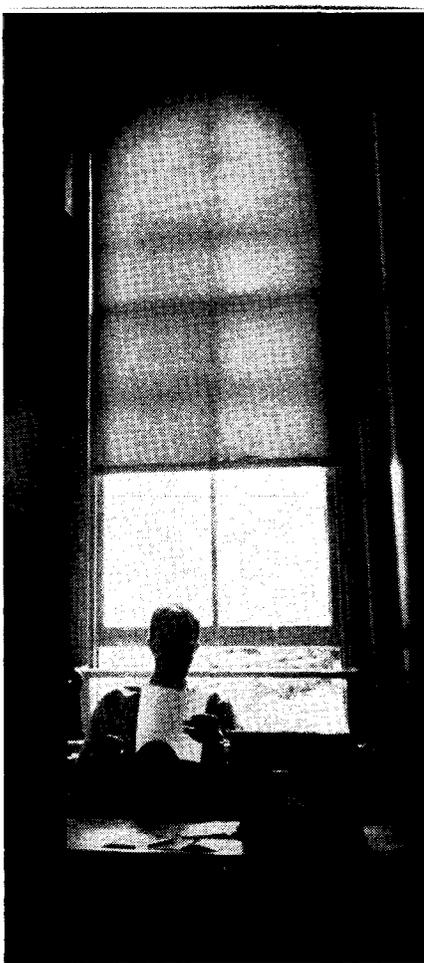
Are the colleges, then, to return, in principle and even in practice, to the philosophy that animated them in the eighteenth century—that of training character, keeping the young from temptation, and trying to persuade them to learn from the trivium and the quadrivium? Are they—more seriously—to try to provide each generation with a common body of knowledge, a common frame of reference, a common bundle of values? Certainly they cannot now undertake these tasks in any simplistic fashion.

Students are no longer children prone to having their morals supervised or their characters molded, and they resent the suggestion that they should have their minds disciplined. To try to provide a really common body of knowledge about the contemporary world would lead the colleges down just those dangerous paths of surveys and smatterings that lead nowhere except to boredom. And important as it is for each generation to have a common body of references and allusions, this is a task for the elementary school and the high school, the home, the church, and society.

What then may we expect to be the character and function of the college of the future? How can this institution so deeply rooted in American soil and connected by a thousand filaments with our sentiments, our culture, and our philosophy best serve students, the commonwealth, and the community of learning?

First, one thing the liberal arts college may be able to do is stay small, simple, and relatively unorganized. At a time when almost everything, including man, is organized and mechanized and computerized and dehumanized there is a great deal to be said for colleges that allow room at the joints.

Much of student discontent has been aggravated by, and directed against, the great, impersonal multiversity that



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appears to treat students as interchangeable parts in a giant educational machine. What is not sufficiently appreciated—by the public anyway—is that much of the faculty demoralization is rooted in the same problem. The situation for faculty is more complex: On the one hand, most scholars want to teach and carry on research at institutions with large faculties, elaborate laboratories, well-stocked libraries, and numerous graduate students; on the other hand, they yearn for the satisfactions of an intimate intellectual community located preferably in a small town. Oxford and Cambridge testify that it is possible to have both, but it is not certain that their experience is relevant to America. Efforts to transplant the Oxbridge pattern are more successful for students than for faculty. At present—and until American ingenuity devises some method of combining the advantages of size with the delights of intimacy—most scholars must choose whether they will take the one or the other.

The college can, in this situation, make sure that it does indeed offer the traditional advantages—a genuine community, an easygoing relationship between trustees and administration on the one side, students and faculty on the other, amid tranquility and freedom

from secular pressures. Such a situation does not develop spontaneously. It requires in trustees and administration a sophisticated readiness to see education through faculty eyes, while from the faculty, a sense of pride in the institution that makes it, rather than the profession, the object of habitual interest and loyalty. It places somewhat more emphasis on intangibles than is customary in larger universities: tradition, the beauty of the campus, housing, hospitality, social intercourse, and the avoidance of ostentatious efficiency.

Colleges, certainly, can forgo some of the advantages of efficiency—advantages usually counterbalanced by costs. The college no more needs to be overtly efficient than literature, art, music, or the family needs to be efficient. As it can forgo size, so it can forgo an elaborate administration: Almost every American college is over-administrated. It can even forgo the comforts of a business vocabulary and stop calling teaching a "load" or academic studies "offices." And if it launches itself on comparative cost analyses for, let us say, Greek and business administration, it is on the road to ruin. If the financial pressures force colleges to cut down on courses—as almost all of them should—then clearly they should cut not the difficult courses that require skilled guidance, but the popular courses, such as American history or journalism, where students can learn what they need to know by going to the library. Administrators, no less than faculty, should take to heart the aphorism of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes that "life is painting a picture, not doing a sum."

Second, there is one area in which colleges can indeed be more efficient, and that is in speeding up the process of formal education. Increasing numbers of students come to college better prepared and more mature than they were a generation or two back, and increasing numbers of them go on from college to some form of graduate or professional work. They do not need to spend four years in preparation for such work, nor can they afford to do so. The college should (and I think will) contract to three years—the normal university period abroad. This would have one immense advantage: It would enable the colleges to educate one-fourth more students at no extra cost in faculty or resources—or to society.

Third, greater maturity in students and increased concentration on preparation for graduate and professional schools or public service careers should permit the college to dispense with the burden of *in loco parentis*. Perhaps this is flogging a dead horse: the young

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SCHOOLS PUT A TOWN ON THE MAP

by CHARLES H. HARRISON

South Brunswick Township does not show on the map of New Jersey, but it fills forty flat square miles between New Brunswick and Princeton. It's a place where curriculum is decided by teachers—not for all time by committees, but maybe just for tomorrow by individuals for individuals. It's a place where 75 per cent of the administrators and teachers have turned themselves inside out to become better educators and better persons.

At first glance, South Brunswick seems an unlikely place to find education exciting, daring, and fun. It is not an affluent community. In fact, the township is a collection of would-be towns with such names as Monmouth Junction, Deans, and Kendall Park, and of 14,000 people from families, most of whom have incomes on the low side of middle class. The township fathers have attracted a fair number of industries to share acreage with potatoes and soybeans. But even with the revenue from big business, South Brunswick's equalized valuation per pupil, at \$29,000, is below the average in Middlesex County and in the state.

South Brunswick resembles suburbia only in a section called Kendall Park. It is the suburbia of the mid-Fifties, with that look of instant housing typical of the period. But the residents of Kendall Park are important to South Brunswick. They are mostly young families whose men are moving up, some of them through the professorial ranks at nearby Rutgers, the state university. Members of the Rutgers faculty and their wives have been well represented on the board of education.

Outside of Kendall Park it is possible to drive down a back road and discover improbable neighbors: a junior executive living in a \$30,000 house and a migrant family of seven living in a worthless trailer beyond the verge of dilapidation. And around the corner may be found a piece of either the

sprawling Princeton Nurseries or some national conglomerate.

Even the nine schools of South Brunswick Township give no hint of anything different. Both the old schools and the new look the same. An elementary school in Kendall Park was thrown together a dozen years ago by the builder of that development. It shows its age and then some.

Why is it then that each year some seventy-five families in nearby communities call Superintendent James Kimple and plead to be allowed to pay tuition to send their children to school in a place that doesn't even show on the map?

The answer goes back to 1962, the year Kimple came to South Brunswick. The nine-member board of education was displeased with its school system, and as Mrs. Jeanne Reock, now president of the board, recalls, "The board was fed up with the sleepy school system we had. We had a weak superintendent, and each board member was responsible for a school. So the board went looking for a new man. Fifty or sixty candidates were interviewed; then they found Jim."

Kimple remembers 1962 this way: "South Brunswick was a highly centralized district with an extraordinarily good board of education. The principals had no authority; the teachers were scared of everybody, including themselves; all curriculum decisions were made in the central office. But it was obvious that the board was interested in good education. The members wanted to change, to meet the needs of kids. They wanted to set policy and not be nine administrators any longer. I had had interviews all over the country—big cities, small towns. I came here because of the board."

Kimple moved to South Brunswick from Fair Lawn, New Jersey, where he made waves during the Fifties as small-town Fair Lawn raced toward becoming a big town. He is now fifty-ish, but running hard and strong on a heady mixture of adrenalin, caffeine, and nicotine. A short man, Kimple has the kind of rugged coun-

tenance the American Association of School Administrators probably would not choose for an image-building poster.

Kimple's method of operation has been to avoid an extensive or lavish building program and to pour all available funds into teacher training and direct services to students. "If there's anything unique about South Brunswick," according to Kimple, "it's that we haven't picked up all the educational gimmicks but have tried to touch all the bases for kids. If a kid needs help today, that's when he gets it."

Kimple took two important steps in 1963. First, he issued an edict eliminating homogeneous grouping. "I didn't want anybody playing God with kids," he said. "I've seen kids labeled mentally retarded who weren't any more retarded than I am. Reading experts put kids aside because they have dyslexia, but nobody knows what the hell dyslexia is. Schools today place kids in categories at age five, and leave them there for the rest of their lives."

When Kimple arrived on the scene, he discovered sixteen sixth-graders in one school who had been assigned to a class for slow learners. One of the children had a functional IQ of 132, but couldn't read. It turned out that that boy and many of the others had auditory or perceptual problems or both. Kimple pounded his fist as he told the story. "I can't forgive what adults do to kids."

The other big step was Kimple's decision to send all his principals to a summer session at the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine. He had already pushed the principals by giving them the autonomy they'd never had before. He told them they were running their schools, but that they would be held accountable. Either they were going to move things, he said, or he would find somebody who could. In 1967, part of the NTL program was brought to South Brunswick to reach teachers and students.

The NTL treatment makes a person work hard at two very difficult chores: examining problems and examining self. Frederick F. Nadler, principal of the Crossroads Middle School, was one of those who took "the cure" in the summer of 1963. "Most of us saw two different persons when we looked at ourselves—the one we show to others and the one behind the facade. I really learned about myself. I took a look at things I didn't want other people to see."

The two giant steps of 1963 have left only one print. The individualization that began where homogeneous grouping left off was enriched by a program that now has involved 75 per cent of