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The Small Liberal Arts College: No Apologies Needed

By Leonard Tompos

I speak as an idealist to all those vitally concerned with the so-called "liberal arts" colleges. In our practical-minded world, I am well aware that to declare oneself an idealist is almost tantamount to declaring oneself irrelevant. Nevertheless, the role of an idealist is an essential one, even in a world of pragmatists. Often it is the idealist who formulates the goals pursued by the practical-minded, the idealist who gives definitive voice to the nebulous values intrinsic to prosaic pragmatic pursuits. Thus, as an idealist, I wish to reply to the oft-heard rhetorical question: "Has the Small College a Future?" (the title of an article by Henry Steele Commanger, Saturday Review, February 20, 1970).

The question of the small college's future likely will be determined by the individual colleges themselves. If they make themselves irrelevant to their students, as well as to society at large, the small college may at best then hope for a hand-to-mouth marginal existence. But such a situation would, indeed be ironic. The irony would lie in the fact that the small, so-called liberal arts college seemingly can most effectively offer not only the type or quality of education most needed today in our society, but also can provide the optimum educational settings and conditions.

Our society today, as well as the rest of the world, is desperately in need of a multitude of persons possessing a true liberal arts education. Educational writer and researcher Terry Borton (Saturday Review, April 18, 1970) defined the goal of a liberal education as an "educated mind—one that combines a sophisticated array of logical and psycho-
logical processes with personal style and a clear value system.” Borton’s definition lacks precision, but does point in the right direction. From a sociological view point (e.g., C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*), one might define someone possessing a liberal arts education as a person who can rather objectively and consistently comprehend the nature of himself and the links between his personal autobiography and the past, present and future. Although possessing specialized skills and knowledge for making a livelihood in our current world, the liberal arts-educated person would also develop a greater understanding of himself. This knowledge of self as a lifelong process of self-growth and development must necessarily entail conscious recognition of the human uniqueness of others, the complexities of even the smallest of human relationships, and a quest for at least some beginning appreciation of Man’s multitudinous interrelationships with the life forms and areas which surround him. Stated concretely, what we need are personnel to staff our basic institutions who can recognize, appreciate and respect the diverse consequences of policy decisions at both the formal and personal levels of human existence, and the consequences of aggregate human behaviors upon our much-abused planet.

The college which can in some discernible way produce graduates who have begun to develop such self-qualities may rightfully claim for itself the title of “liberal arts college.” For too long, too many small colleges have pawned themselves off as citadels of liberal arts education. In fact, however, they have been aping the mind-stifling specialization programs of the universities. These colleges have falsely equated a liberal arts education with taking “survey” and/or “introductory” courses in academic disciplines alien to the student’s “major.” I believe with Henry Steele Commager that

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 grounds, from well-stocked libraries, from great teachers, from fellow students, from exposure to the intangibles “at hand.” (*op. cit.*)

Survey courses alone will not produce the “well-rounded” graduate who is the false pride and hollow joy of so many small colleges. Such formal courses will not give the world what it so desperately needs: citizens, lawyers and judges who recognize that mere code-book legality does not always conform to humane considerations of right and wrong (if in fact there is always a right or wrong side of an issue); political winners of statesman-like calibre; research scientists who recognize the social and political ramifications of their laboratory work; industrial executives who can see that turning today’s fast buck
may lead to environmental catastrophe for their grandchildren; technically competent school teachers with intellectually guided humane consideration for their students' individual needs for psycho-emotional growth; athletic coaches who develop human potential rather than simply exploit it; artists of all types who can effectively expand the layman's comprehension not only of himself but also of the social and natural worlds around him; parents who seek to guide their children toward emotional freedom rather than to fetter them with society's statistically normal neuroses; and a multitude of others who are unafraid to face life as a continuing experience of self-expansion and socio-cultural change.

Yes, the world today needs an increasingly commonplace "intellectual elite"—if you want to call it that—to replace the college-processed degree-holders whose parochial and base concerns have held sway for too long.

A big order for small colleges? You bet it is! But it will be the meeting of that need, the fulfillment of that charge, which will validate the small college's existence. And, if we must sometimes think in mercenary terms—which we must—the more the small college can provide the academic setting productive of such graduates as I've named, the more likely it is to attract lucrative gifts and endowments.

But the small colleges will not be able to get on with this challenge until those who administer them, and those who man the faculty bastions, are willing to publicly declare themselves in favor of something. Without a more clearly conceptualized notion of what a college is really trying to effect in the minds, hearts and souls of its students, and administrative/faculty commitment to those ends, a college education is a waste of everyone's time and money. Without the personal commitment of administration, faculty and students to a relatively clear set of liberal arts values and goals, college life then merely duplicates the larger society's processes of self-alienation.

And it is not only the student who suffers the psycho-emotional stress attendant to such processes! We all become caught up in them, with faculty and administrator similarly affected. We potentially suffer the stress from existing in a world of what sometimes is called "put-ons." In other words, we have learned in large measure not to express what we really feel, not to reveal to others—or to ourselves—what we really experience as unique individuals existing but briefly in this world. Rather, we too often have been coached, admonished, chastised and coerced into believing that the greatest good is to act and think as we believe others would have us act and think. Thus we have become the "other directed" people sociologists have noted since the mid-1950's, and whom the latter-day psychoanalytic crowd has seen fit to label as the self-alienated, the modern soul woefully out of communicative touch with himself. We literally "put on" a con-
tinuing living act of what we believe others expect of us in thought and action. Doing so, we never really get to explore the inner depths of our own selves.

It seemingly is a generally felt foregone conclusion that the large multiversity cannot provide the personalized professor-student intellectual confrontation necessary to their mutual self-growth. Today's university has too often boasted of its burgeoning student population, as if population corpulence per se were a desirable state of organizational well-being. The university's size, however, typically has resulted in bureaucratic immobilization in response to the humane and intellectual needs of its undergraduates.

But this era's young-adult college student is in search of more than specialized knowledge per se. Very often he also seeks self-knowledge, or self-hood, as a prerequisite for the more traditional or conventional forms of intellectual growth. And it is to these ends of genuine human encounters that the small college seemingly has the greater potential for succeeding in meeting such student needs.

First, though, the faculty of the small college must be—or become—free of the mind-constricting feelings of irrelevancy and/or inferiority. It is all too easy for the faculty member of the small college, typically tucked away from the mainstream—or maelstrom—of American urban life, to develop inappropriate feelings of professional inadequacy. Such inferiority complexes not only permeate his professional work in his office, lab and/or classroom, but also are displaced into the personal recesses of his life, into his marriage, and into his performance as a parent.

Too often this personal malaise transforms itself psychologically into resentment and anger toward the college itself, as if the college were a mistress guilty of unrequited love.

As human beings, faculty members must face the fact that they need, as much as the layman—and the student—, to feel a sense of personal worth, and especially to feel themselves as professionally adequate persons. This cannot happen, though, when faculty disvalue not only the type of educational organization in which they practice their profession, but also negate the very nature and value of their work activities. If such is the case, the faculty—individually and collectively—suffer the anguish and anger of self-alienation. Then, in typical clinical fashion, they displace their anger upon the personages who symbolically comprise the college—its administrators, its deans and other sundry administrative personnel.

Not all college faculty need condemn themselves professionally by university criteria which often are irrelevant to the small college scene. Not all faculty need be faddishly engrossed in the prodigious proliferation of pretentious professional redundancy. Especially for faculty at small colleges, they must come to respect their very real
and vital significance and relevance in creating a personalized academic environment. It is in such environments that students may discover not only themselves, but also what aspects of this complex world will become pertinent to their lives!

This is not to say that small college faculty members should be wholly exempt from research, from writing for professional publication, from involvement in regional, national and international professional activities. But there are other kinds of professional practices which ought to suffice adequately for meeting one’s need for professional self-fulfillment. These often are of an intangible nature, and thus less likely to come into their just share of publicity and financial remuneration. These are the actions that enhance the personal dimensions between faculty and students, the fervent presentation of ideas and questions which burst the restraints of encrusted and/or complacent minds, the bringing out of latent student potentials for manifest human utilization of one’s self.

In other words, a faculty member should not feel somehow debased, or ashamed, for devoting his professional growth and development to the personal growth and development of his students.

But it must follow, then, that such efforts not be slighted by administrators! Rewards—honorific and monetary—must be based upon multiple sets of criteria applied appropriately in terms of goals mutually and clearly agreed upon by all relevantly concerned. Faculties, administrations and students must consciously recognize their interrelated need for personally meaningful—and thus personally profound—academic action. Only then can effective collective steps be taken toward achieving a sense of genuine humane intellectual encounters on the small college campus.

Aiding the small college toward meeting such goals is the very fact of the college’s smallness, and its typical territorial isolation. Properly utilized, these factors can lend themselves effectively toward making the student’s college education a genuine experience, or “happening.” Instead of lamenting one’s territorial isolation, take advantage of it. The administration and faculty have at their disposal pretty much of a captive audience. Capitalize on this fact.

Turn as much as possible of the college environment into learning and self-growth experiences. I am not suggesting the development of Orwellian-like spectres, nor am I suggesting the depersonalizing processes involved in the “total institution” syndrome of asylums, monasteries, prisons, military academies of old, and the like. Rather, adopt and adapt the view of your college as an integrated social system, as a small society with its own distinctive culture. Then try to bring about an objectively correct sense of consistency among the values underlying your stated purposes, and the actions taken in the course of everyday efforts made to achieve your goals.
Try to avoid the schizoid features of the greater American society at large. Don’t profess one set of values congruent with a matched set of purposes, and then carry on your daily schedules denying the objective cleavages between ideations and actions. Faculty and administration certainly never have fooled the students as to what the real action was, or where it was. But I believe faculty and administration too often feared facing openly the disparity between wishes and is’s. Rather than facing the discomfort of reality, they elected to live in fantasy. Only sometimes under tragic conditions have they been forced to face realities.

It is difficult to say who suffers more for this, the students or the faculty. The student often comes to see his own involvement in the process as that of con-artist. He maintains superficial academic niceties in ultimate exchange for a college-granted union card allowing entrance into the more prestigious occupational categories. However, in so coming to view his academic world, the student never can attain a sense of genuine self-achievement measured against a clearly defined—and relevant—set of standards. Thus he enters the workaday world fearful of his self-perceived inadequacies, forever feeling inferior to those who have been graduated from other colleges and universities where it is believed—often falsely—that others truly have been educated. This kind of a graduate sooner or later comes to feel angry with alma mater for short-changing him on almost every count. And then alumni directors and fund-drive personnel wonder why so few former students cough up so few shekels for the college coffers!

Compare this with the professors’ plight. Without commitment to a common conception of their collective educational tasks, and without a mutually supported concept of the type of graduate desired, a faculty member often stands philosophically alone on such matters—or perceives such aloneness which is just as real in its consequences. This lonely stance is psycho-emotionally uncomfortable, no less so because one has advanced academic degrees. If the administration is openly unreceptive—or at most quietly sympathetic—to a professor’s ideas in these matters, a sense of alienation, estrangement, may develop between the professional self and others, sometimes even between members of the same department or division. Individually, but in mass numbers, the faculty may begin to seek psycho-emotional support from among the students.

This is fraught with danger. Having perhaps been burned by advancing ideas rejected as heretical or mad by his fellow professionals, the individual faculty member may now be more cautious. Now he may abdicate his personalized academic stance, and give up those ideas, values, beliefs for which he fought so futilely. Now he may espouse the cause célèbres as well as the cause ridicules of his students. He thus may gain not only their transient good will, their fleeting pop-
ularity, but also their intellectual, emotional and behavioral twinship. But having won this Pyrrhic victory, where has his professional self-identity gone? In what ways does he now live up to his internalized self-definition as someone rightfully apart from the students, as someone in possession of secular scrolls of knowledge and questions to be passed on to succeeding generations of students? The popularity of winning twinship with the students is ephemeral at best, and at worst ultimately catastrophic to the individual professor’s sense of self-respect and worth. Also, these occurrences contribute to the students’ collective sense of a lack of firm, fair and humane guidance in their own intellectual and emotional self-growth.

Such may be some of the psychic costs extracted from students and faculty when their college environment is too pervasively characterized by cultural schizophrenia.

The small liberal arts college is at an advantage in avoiding such organizational and personal tragedy. Its size allows personalized contact between all of its participating members. So long as these contacts allow healthy respect for individual differences, they are a positive factor. When such mutual self-knowledge degenerates into personal animosities, when personal enmities take precedence over the collective good, then they may well become dysfunctional to the college and the individuals who make it a viable social organization.

*Effectively administered*, the small liberal arts college should be better able than the cumbersome multiversity to coordinate its activities in support of its values and goals. Direct personal contacts between college personnel at all levels of organization should be utilized to facilitate concreted action, rather than to engage in petty personality disputes.

Traditional programs and activities should be re-evaluated in terms of newly-explicit college values and goals, and in terms of what kind of student one wants to “turn out” as a graduate. Homecomings, vestigial remnants of bygone eras now so quickly made historical, might very well be the time to stage an appropriate and timely academic/cultural conference. The traditional football game thus could provide the necessary gladitorial spectator relief from a weekend’s concentrated total academic learning experience. Currently enrolled students may well work their meetings with alumni into the conference reception schedules; alumni could more readily re-identify themselves with something of real academic substance; and parents of students could be duly impressed with the intellectual stimulation confronting their children. (Such a display of academic depth and substance may even make the parents more willing to keep paying higher tuition rates, and may dispose more alumni to give more dollars to the college.)

Further efforts ought to be directed toward making a continuing link between the students’ campus learning experiences and their
parents' knowledge thereof. Instead of the traditional Parents' Day hoopla of trivia, what about a Parents' Live-In during the week when the real life of academe is in process? A few of the parents may even become cerebrally reactivated. Parent and child may then have something of significance to discuss with one another during holidays which for many students and parents now are simply times of awkward periods of silence broken occasionally by sullen and angry words. Maybe such campus inter-generational "happenings" could in some small way reduce the so-called "generation gap" experienced acutely by so many college students and their parents.

Also, what about parents' being invited to participate for even simply honorific credit in curriculum specials, such as interim programs, summer field expeditions, etc.? Such "total family participation" in the students' education may help establish academically profound traditions, and increase student/alumni identification with the college. (And, again, if one is prone to be mercenary, alumni strongly identifying themselves with the college through continuing participation in such programs will be more positively disposed to put cash on the barrelhead for college development.)

The "problems" stemming from such programs might include the psychological threat to an insecure professor having to "prove" his academic self in a classroom of students and their parents, and the threat to the student's self-growth by the potential real and/or imagined controls of a nearby parent on campus. However, the avoidance of these problems and others will not strengthen a small liberal arts college nor assist its students toward greater maturity. Conversely, the development of programs which successfully deal with such problems will strengthen immensely the college's overall curriculum, and will greatly assist the college in facilitating the student's intellectual and emotional growth.

In re-evaluating traditional practices, summer orientation programs should not be neglected. Mom and Dad ought to be warned that the college may alter their child in some very significant ways. Parents ought to be told, and they have a right to know, what the college is going to attempt to do with their children's minds. It is especially at this point that it becomes necessary for the college to have made up its mind about what kind or kinds of graduates it wants to mold, produce, create, or call it what you will. Whether or not the college has a coordinated program to produce a certain kind of human product, it is still going to have a profound impact upon those who attend it for several years!

The college should be able to clearly say what it hopes to do with an incoming freshman, and how it plans to go about doing it. Anything short of that and the parents are simply being conned into buying a pig in a poke. And at today's tuition rates, many parents balk
at such an offer. Thus, the college that *can* do such will be better able to compete and survive healthily in the academic marketplace, and will better serve its students and society at large.

Incoming freshmen ought to be challenged intellectually immediately. Will they accept the mental agonies of having some already crustaceous concepts shaken loose, and of stretching and strengthening their potential for further intellectual and self growth? Will they give up the pseudo-inner calm of certain foreclosed thought systems to acquire a set of self-learning techniques that lastingly guard against the false security of mental closure? Will they dare explore the depths of their own selves as they probe the recesses of academic unknowns, forever asking, “What more can this tell me about myself?”

It may well be that the student’s greatest learning achievement will lie in acquiring the ability to ask relevant questions, questions that get to the nitty-gritty of ever-increasing rates of social change, questions that link up the individual’s autobiography with the socio-historical processes swirling about him, questions that make relevant one’s college experiences and classroom-gained knowledge. If the student is not willing to engage himself, to commit himself, to the college as a learning process, not simply a “thing” to attend, then he ought not dare to attend the kind of college implicit in my discussion. The student ought to be made to realize clearly, from the beginning of his college career, that *one cannot passively absorb a relevant education!* The academic setting may be correctly structured, the professors may be receptive to student questions and ideas, but the student himself must *take the initiative to make his stay on campus a relevant education!*

But you don’t create these kinds of impressions in the minds of your freshmen when traditional Autumn hazing makes the frosh out to be something contemptible—even if merely in jest. We can no longer afford the luxury of college life being a jesting matter. Neither can we afford to affront the dignity of intellectually sophisticated freshmen.

The freshman is a treasured asset! The college probably has spent much money to lure him onto campus. Treat him with respect, and command his mutual respect by confronting him first with your best and most eloquent faculty and administrative minds. The necessary festive respite from the academic grind will take care of themselves, for both students and professional staff. *Somehow* Man’s archtypical proclivity for festivity always seems to take care of that matter.

And, so, what have I said? From my idealist’s perspective, I see the small liberal arts college as an absolute necessity for today’s world. Such a college’s size allows it—but not automatically—to develop the organizational structural setting and curriculum versatility to meet the needs not only of the students who attend, but also—in the long run—the needs of the world society.

I also see a special kind of student emerging from such colleges, a
student not only competently \textit{trained}, but also \textit{educated} beyond being a repository of information already outmoded as he receives his diploma. I see a student educated to see himself linked with the past, related meaningfully to the socio-historical processes so rapidly altering the world in which he lives, and capable of raising the kinds of questions that keep his mind current and relatively clear in the onrush of social change. I see the small liberal arts college containing the potential for nurturing, developing and graduating the kinds of individuals whose collective impact on the world will be for mankind's humane betterment.

I see small colleges unashamed of their miniscule size compared to that of the multiversity. I see their faculty members deriving self and professional satisfactions from personally engaging their students' minds, and from seeing their students develop their own professional competency and individual self integrity. I envision small colleges becoming inter-generational, involving parents and alumni in meaningful academic happenings.

The realist part of me sees great difficulties of all kinds in achieving such goals, even in limited scale. But if all these things wholly fail to come to be, then we shall all be the poorer for it.