The Perpetual Dream

Reform and
Experiment in the American College

Gerald Grant and David Riesman

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To Judith and Evelyn

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Introduction

1

In this book we have attempted to assay as volatile a period of educational reform as America has ever experienced. We ourselves, like faculty and students elsewhere who have lived in its course, have sometimes been traumatized, sometimes exhilarated, sometimes disillusioned and depressed by the events that have partially reshaped our lives. These events are not yet understood, although scores if not hundreds of volumes have been written about them. Much of this literature has focused on the nature of political protest; there has been less said about what happened in an educational sense. And questions remain. Of many innovations, which seem worth preserving? What have we learned from a decade of experiment?

To understand what happened in the recent era, it is necessary to go back nearly fifty years in order to see how contemporary reforms are related to and distinguished from earlier anti-university experiments, such as those at St. John's and Black Mountain. In some ways, the thoughtful reappraisal of the undergraduate curriculum that has begun to take place on a number of leading campuses reminds us of the debates between John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn about the significance of the "Great Books" experiment at St. John's, which is the subject of Chapter 3. This book will not settle any of the great questions that now grip faculties any more than Dewey's debate did. But we hope our work will help both students and contemporary participants in the debate gain clarity about the choices they face, and that it will create a sober sense of the realities and dilemmas of reform without paralyzing either experiment or renewal.

There are many kinds of reform. Most writing about higher education assumes all change to be for the better, even when the "innovation" revives an ancient practice. American reformers are particularly reluctant to consider that things may turn out for the worse, as did the seventeenth-century pundit who concluded that the rogues who made a cathedral their garrison had reformed it "from the Church of God, to a den of thieves." We discuss a wide variety of reforms. Some of them, if not carried out by thieves masquerading as preachers, seem questionable to us. But, while we do not shrink from labeling a fraud for what it is, we have tried to avoid a debilitating or debunking spirit. Higher education's new diet may be lean, but it allows for variety and invention. In Chapter 10 we offer some proposals of our own.

But this book is not so much prescriptive as it is descriptive and analytical. In Chapter 2 we develop a typology of reform movements that attempts to place contemporary reforms in sociological and historical perspective. We highlight there what we have called the telic reforms—those attempts to change undergraduate education which embody a distinctive set of ends or purposes. Though these telic reforms have come into existence on a very small scale, their impact has been large: they have generated a productive dialogue about distinctive or competing purposes of undergraduate education. In Chapters 3–5, we discuss three models (in sociological terms, ideal-typical exemplars) of telic reform: St. John's College is illustrative of neoclassical revival, Kresge College represents the communal-expressives, and the College for Human Services is an example of the activist-radical impulse. But in writing about each college, we have tried to mirror its life in its full complexity and to be less concerned about justifying a typology.

But the typology is the basis of a major division in the book, between discussion of the telic reforms in Part I and the popular reforms in Part II. In the second part of the book, we are concerned with changes in the character of undergraduate education which are the result of increases in student autonomy, new patterns of organization, and attempts to respond to the demands of minorities and other previously disenfranchised groups. Chapter 6 attempts to explain the relation of these popular reforms to the campus political protests of the sixties and to see the ways in which student unrest actually brought innovation about. Our selection of cases to illustrate these complex interrelationships is more arbitrary than our choices for the models used in Part I, for there are so many—most of the newly founded colleges would be examples. Though we have done extensive fieldwork at quite a number of places, we present only a

few full-length portraits of institutions formed partially in response to demands of popular reform. Florida's New College, one of the wholly new private colleges now absorbed into the public system, is the subject of Chapter 7. The University of California at Santa Cruz is discussed in two chapters: Kresge, one of the subcolleges at Santa Cruz, is portrayed as an example of the communal-expressive reform movement in the first part of the book and the over-all development of Santa Cruz as a genuine innovation in academic structure is depicted in Chapter 8. In the last chapter of Part II, we focus on developments in the state colleges of New Jersey as a means of examining the ways in which the public sector has responded to popular demands for reform and to pressures to grant wider access.

Between us, we have visited more than four hundred colleges and universities. Many of these were visits of only a day or two, often in connection with other assignments. In fieldwork undertaken specifically for this volume, we have made fairly intensive visits to more than thirty campuses. We have interviewed more than three hundred faculty members, and in some cases have had two or three follow-up conversations. Yet it would be wrong to characterize this work as a random sample, or our follow-ups as panel interviewing. In our efforts to understand the patterns of reform in the American academic system, we have relied on the more systematic survey work of others to check our impressions and counter our biases. In the beginning, we compiled lists of "experimental" colleges, curricular reforms, and innovative practices, in order to sift serious efforts from claims by promoters eager to attract attention and students—although the distinction between self-conscious promoter and consciously idealistic zealot is not always easy to make. We have followed leads from colleagues, foundation officials, reports in such journals as *Change* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or the daily press to discover colleges where something might be learned for our purposes. We cannot say that we have been equally thorough in keeping up with the flood of books and articles written about higher education, a minor growth industry that is the principal scholarly focus of hundreds of researchers and faculty members. The Bibliography, although in part a reference for books and articles cited in the text, includes a number of the more significant works that have helped to shape our thinking—but a full bibliography of what has been written in the last decade would be a volume quite as large as this one.

In preparing the ethnographies of the places finally chosen to illustrate our telic scheme, we have immersed ourselves in repeated fieldwork, sometimes visiting a college a half-dozen times or more in the seven years we have been at work. And in a sense, the fieldwork does

not stop when the visit (which may last four days or four weeks) comes to an end. Our investigation continues by correspondence with those we have met, by visits with them at other locations, by telephone queries, and, as is explained more fully later, by the circulation of drafts to evoke criticisms and correction. Sociologists have been criticized for writing about education by counting heads and describing the arrangements of desks and chairs. But indeed it does matter in the atmosphere of a classroom whether the desks are, in ancient schoolroom fashion, fixed and in rows or arranged in a half-circle or a circle; whether the heads nod, whether people wander in late, whether they chat with each other, and so forth. Throughout, our effort has been to make use of such unobtrusive and quantifiable measures as are available but also to go beyond these and to describe the intentions of the actors in the context in which they acted. Sometimes our sensibility has not been up to the task, as is evident in what William Darkey, a former dean at St. John's College, wrote us in response to a draft of Chapter 3:

> An observer can't often glimpse and portray the sporadic, but not infrequent, excitement of fumbling for and discovering for one's self and for the first time important and obvious things. . . . Any account of the process is going to make it look as awkward as it is, and it will seem rather comical that adults should be engaged in it. The account will almost certainly lose the essence of what is going on—the way transcripts of lovers' conversations seem unbelievably silly, because they tend to miss what's really taking place.

Of course, almost any human activity looked at closely can lend itself readily to caricature, if not in the mind of the raconteur, then in the imagination of the reader. This is the more true, the more familiar the terrain. A social anthropologist writing about a nonliterate people may err in the direction of romanticism, even failing to see the demonic beneath the apparently peaceable and beautifully ritualized scene. The work of Erving Goffman has won a wide audience, not only because of his exceptional gifts of observation and his skill as a writer, but also because he seems to undress people we ourselves can recognize, people not so different from us. Many ethnomethodologists have created what they think of as science out of this kind of art, or artfulness. We who give accounts of academic institutions must be ever wary of unleashing a debunking spirit as we discover the gap between the idealism we Americans have had about education, and the day-to-day practice of it. A characteristic American cynicism is often the underside of our lofty aspirations.

All this needs to be said because the experimenting institutions that we have singled out have often made larger claims, and there-

fore can seem more ridiculous, than more pedestrian institutions which see their work in unexalted terms and where the problems are pedantry and banality and boredom. Such places, which are among the institutions Alexander Astin and Calvin Lee, in a book of that name some years ago, labeled "The Invisible Colleges," are rarely visited by observers of the national education scene. We did make an effort to visit precisely such institutions on occasion (Astin and Lee counted 494 of them), although not for extended periods of time, so as to gain a sense of the backdrop against which our experimenting models of telic and popular reforms stand out.

During the years that we have been at work on this volume, colleagues have humorously inquired whether any of these experimenting institutions would still be around when the book came out. The rapidity with which cycles of reform ebb and flow in America is one of the meanings we intend to signify with the title of this book. The campus has been a kind of dreamscape for utopian as well as practical reformers, some projecting their notions of an ideal community on the curriculum and extracurriculum, and others seeing the diversity of undergraduate experience as an epitome of the American dream that education can change one's life, at whatever age. These yearnings, so ingrained in a nation that believes deeply in a second (and often a third) chance for everyone, are never fulfilled but endlessly renewed. Colleges and universities have also been, like churches and sects, arenas for mobilizing political and cultural movements. The boundaries between university and society have always been highly permeable in America, and just as currents of reform have spread from the campus outward, other movements, such as the nascent T-group or encounter movement described in Chapter 4, have penetrated academe with astonishing rapidity.

Yet, this book will be read in the late 1970s about institutions we began to examine a decade ago, and whose faculties were themselves largely the product of that earlier period. What in the 1960s seemed to many idealists (both student and faculty), as worth trying often appears a decade or so later to be fruitless if not destructive. Readers of our accounts of New College in Sarasota, Kresge College of the University of California at Santa Cruz, and the several colleges dealt with more briefly in chapters 9 and 10, should recall the context in which these institutions began and temper their hindsight with compassion.

While many of the faculty involved were, as just suggested, the young protegés of the revolts of the 1960s, the leadership generally came from those who had been through some of the most traditional and classical educational institutions in the English-speaking world.

For example, some of the leading reformers at Santa Cruz were former Oxford dons. The first provost of Cowell College, Page Smith, had been a noted, but in professional terms not especially innovative, American historian at UCLA. The authors of this book are themselves products of traditional, part-classical education, much of which they found stifling, and they are well aware of the temptation, whether in education or child-rearing, to avoid the mistakes of one's parents or teachers by reversing the field and making a new set of mistakes! Thus many leaders of the reformist academic vanguard have considered that almost anything would be better than what they had themselves experienced as students and as young scholars.

Indeed, in reflecting on these older reformers who wanted to provide a better education for their students than they themselves had received, it occurs to us that their modesty betrayed them. They thought it possible that a tremendous industry like American education (and here we must include elementary and secondary schools as well as colleges and universities) could be changed by releasing constraints and abolishing traditions which had not, so they thought, been necessary in their own development and indeed had been actively harmful. Fearing to think themselves superior, they assumed that hundreds of thousands of college teachers—and the number involved is something like 400,000—were probably not so different from themselves. This great educational army was assumed to be as talented, as willing to work hard, and (despite or perhaps because of the pedantry to which they had been exposed) as well educated, as the elite vanguard. But the great mass of faculty were none of these things. Especially in the great expansion of the fifties and sixties, people had come into the academic life with very little sense of vocation, but often with the expectation of a quite obvious step upward in the economic system, as well as in the sociocultural system—with no calling for either teaching or scholarship, or any great interest in doing more than keeping their jobs. To have seen this clearly would have required from the reformers or originators an outlook toward human affairs which they themselves would have rejected as "elitist" and hence, in effect, as both un-American and immoral.

Un-American or not, there have been, in fact, reformers (more in the public-school sectors than in the colleges, though some also in the latter) who have taken the other tack and who, in a phrase not heard much at present, sought and still seek to develop "teacher-proof curricula." Contemptuously considering all teachers as beyond redemption, they have sought through programed instruction, or through the mass media, to reach students with materials, so to speak,

untouched by teachers' hands. Much of the post-Sputnik science-education effort, led by such visionaries as Jerrold Zacharias, was of just this sort, and now again today, in the experiments with packaged modules, the so-called Keller Plan, and other devices, colleges are also beginning to move in this direction, either by bypassing the teacher completely, or by allowing him or her to remain available to those students who need help that the self-contained learning packages do not provide. While the founding innovators dealt with in this book have sometimes suffered from egalitarian sentimentality, the innovators who have sought to dispense with schools entirely or to diminish the mediating role of the teacher, seem to be afflicted with a cynical contempt, an unwillingness to see that even people who enter teaching mainly to make a living are not always beyond redemption, and that incremental changes might be made to improve their work.

Perhaps both groups do share one common failing, again characteristically American: namely, to overestimate what education itself can do. Their hope was either to change the general culture (as the activist radicals sought to do), or, a bit more modestly, to produce a new generation of self-motivated, deeply interested students, not only in the selective colleges but also in the exploding institutions of near-universal higher education, which came into being with the boom of the 1960s. Such faith in education as a panacea, of course, goes back long before that.

Some historians and sociologists writing today, both in the United States and in Europe, see education as anything but a panacea. Rather, it appears to be an effort to reproduce the status quo, almost a capitalist plot to provide the masses with false consciousness, consumer wants (including higher education), and the docility needed to sustain the organizations and factories of a hierarchical society. This is the view of such non-American critics as Alain Touraine, and of an ever-larger group of critics in this country as well. People holding such a view are functionalist in spite of themselves—they would reject the label of functional sociology with vehemence; but what these critics lack is a sense of the degree of muddle in the world, the confusion of purposes, the slippage of aim. They themselves are to a large degree the radical and quite undocile products of the education they attack. We will have occasion, in chapter 9 especially, to notice instances where the very effort to reduce inequality or to compensate for the previous deprivation of many black students, for example, has paradoxically reinforced the extant inequalities. Such a result was anything but purposeful; the benign intentions miscarried for reasons dealt with at length in this volume.

American higher education is in fact much too protean to be summed up in any neat formula. Any number of contradictory trends are going on at the same time. Given our methods, we were unable to sample all these trends, and our book therefore may mislead those who do not understand much about the majority of institutions, which have avoided both the sorts of extravagant claims often needed to get a major reform under way, and the disillusion apt to set in when high-flown attempts fail.

Yet we do not want our own sympathies to be misunderstood: American higher education needs more inventiveness, more imagination, more willingness to experiment and hence to fail, than is generally present. It devours enormous resources—not only of money, but of people's energies, including the income forgone by students and the time put in by them. Though it has proved almost impossible to measure the "productivity" of nonprofit institutions such as colleges, we suspect that we can get better measures of "value added" through college to the capacities of individuals, their sense of themselves and the world they will inhabit, their rational self-confidence —their own willingness to try something, and to endure frustration and failure. In pointing out where many experiments have gone awry, our aim is not to put a damper on experiments per se, but to urge that experiments have a sharper focus, with a longer purview of consequences and a more realistic sense of what is feasible.

Yet in another mood Americans can become almost overrealistic, overpractical. The line between excessive pragmatism (which would inhibit any bold plan) and extravagant unreality (which can only lead to disaster) is hard to draw in advance. Room must be left for the "miraculous" (which often means recognition of the significance of a particular person), even at the cost, in some instances, of catastrophe. One should also have an invisible net under the high-wire act of bold experiments to salvage both students and faculty who would otherwise be traumatized. What reformers need, perhaps, is a board of observers made up of reasonably knowledgeable and sympathetic but skeptical outsiders to watch for and warn against the potential harm to individual human beings who might become the casualties of unrealistic aims.

As self-appointed skeptical outsiders we have not always been warmly welcomed, but the occasions when we have not have been few. What has been true, and a pleasure to acknowledge here, is that this book is in a sense a collaboration with hundreds of teachers and students who have been helpful informants and critics (in some cases, nearly co-researchers!) through extensive correspondence over earlier drafts of this manuscript. For it has been central to our method to

share these portraits with those who have sat for them, as a way both of protecting against the possibility of injury and of getting closer to the truth. At times we found ourselves catapulted into roles that were not part of our research plan. There is a sense in which the ethnographer is bound to become part of the community he is studying. As interested observers we sometimes became reluctant but always concerned participants—we should have known that we would inevitably be drawn into the dialogue itself.

The authors began to work together in 1969, and fieldwork for this volume was initiated in 1970, with grants first from the Ford Foundation, and later from the Carnegie Corporation, and the Hazen and Lilly Foundations. A grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education partially supported work on chapter 5. As in any good collaboration, the ultimate product is a joint effort, and we have interacted at every stage, criticizing and sometimes revising each other's work. But a division of labor was also essential. Gerald Grant conceived the typology of reform that provides the analytical structure for the book, and wrote the first draft of what has now been divided into the chapters on the telic and the popular reforms. In their present form, however, these chapters are very much an outcome of full coauthorship. Grant also wrote the chapters on St. John's, Kresge, the College for Human Services, Santa Cruz, and the concluding chapter on the future of undergraduate reform. David Riesman wrote the chapters on New College and the New Jersey colleges, Ramapo and Stockton. The chapter on Santa Cruz was originally written with Judith D. Grant, who also assisted in fieldwork at Kresge, St. John's, and the College for Human Services. Evelyn T. Riesman participated in fieldwork at New College and at the New Jersey colleges which are portrayed in Chapter 9.

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