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The Middle Landscape of the Private College: A Bicentennial Perspective

GEORGE W. GEIB*

AMERICA'S PRIVATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES have entered the bicentennial year expressing deep concern for their individual and collective futures. They seem constantly engaged in a search for new students and additional financial contributors; they darkly aver that they may be forced to close forever if their search fails; and they point to the dozens of others campuses that passed from the scene in the last decade as proof of the urgency of their case. To some observers these forebodings of doom may appear, like the Associated Press reports about Mark Twain's demise, greatly exaggerated. But the immediacy and intensity with which they are expressed suggest the worth of evaluating the case of the independent sector of modern higher education.

Today the specific appeals by that sector take almost as many forms as there are campuses. Yet if one cuts to the heart of the arguments, three appeals seem to stand out. It is their relevance that most deserves testing. First, the colleges argue that they are an integral part of a larger civil and religious community to which they are tied by long association and service. Second, the colleges argue that their service takes the form of a personalized program that stands in marked distinction to the impersonal world of the modern multi-university. Third, the colleges argue that the most important element of their program is an attention to a fundamental core of humanistic studies. These are, in short, appeals heavily influenced by the history and traditions of the institution, appeals which suggest a review of the origins of private education could help to illuminate its current condition and evaluate its contemporary appeal.

Such a review may not, however, be reassuring to the private sector, because it may prove difficult for many private campuses to present their background to a modern post-industrial society. This will not be due to lack of effort, want of sincerity, or absence of careful argument. Instead it will be due to the fact that the origins of private post-secondary education lie in an earlier era whose animating spirit is difficult to recapture and whose vital philosophic principles are often at variance with modern experience.

The key to private college history lies in the fact that the overwhelming majority of campuses are the product of the middle years of the nineteenth century. Although a few campuses, such as Harvard, date from the colonial era, and a few others, such as Eisenhower, are of recent vintage, the bulk date from a golden age of educational foundation between 1820 and 1880.

This means they date from an era when perhaps the greatest preoccupation of the young republic's leaders was the search to define American nationality

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and to establish America's unique position among the nations of the world by offering explanations of the American character that would clearly separate its people from an older Europe that they and their ancestors had rejected. Of the explanations these nationalists developed, none had more appeal than the vision of the "middle landscape." In every aspect of arts and letters it became common to argue that America lay in a unique condition placed midway between the purely civilized and the purely savage conditions of human existence. It lay between the autocratic cities of Europe, where man was master of the natural environment, and the barbaric wilderness of the Amerindian, where nature was the master of man. America lay between the rationalism of civilization and the intuition of savagery, between European autocrats ruled by cold logic and dusky savages ruled by hot passion.

Only in America, it was argued, lay a natural middle ground. Here, physically, man and environment coexisted in a balanced, harmonious, symbiotic relationship. Here, mentally, man was a creature of common sense possessed of a blend of reason and intuition as balanced as his environment. It was a compelling construct that permitted the people and the institutions of this "middle landscape" to be portrayed as both different from and better than the extremes between which they moderated.

Not surprisingly, the private colleges and universities that appeared in their hundreds in that era fitted themselves to the rhetoric of middle landscapes and balanced institutions. It is an accommodation that can be seen, for example, in the founding impulse itself, where religious and secular supporters united public and private resources to create a unique synthesis. Founded in the small urban centers of the age, the campuses shared a strong promotional impulse, a powerful desire to enhance and even glorify the community through the achievements of a qualified college or even university.

Such institutions required a careful mixture of supporters. From the churches came the early faculty members, ministers who served at the lectern when they were not serving in the pulpit and who frequently linked the college to their own denomination for the purpose of training new clerics. From business and professional leaders came most of the early trustees, together with most of the early endowment: in funds, in land, in monumental Victorian buildings, and in community goodwill. Balancing these private contributions was the public contribution secured by local legislators in the form of a charter that not only granted the usual corporate privileges and defined institutional governance, but also frequently conferred public financial benefits, most commonly in the form of property tax exemptions.

Geared to the communities from which they came, each contributor thus stood ready to encourage the attendance of the cream of local youth, welcoming them to an educational experience that would train them for future community leadership by instructing them in the best contemporary tradition. Woe to the town that was so poor or so shortsighted as to neglect its future greatness by failing to provide the proper training for its youth!

On the surface, such origins gave the colleges an appearance of great diversity. The varied opinions of politicians in an era of constant reform agitation and bitter party division, the differing social and economic bases of America's numerous regions, the conflicting beliefs of sect and denomination, and local pride itself all suggested a rivalry between campuses that would mirror the rivalries of society. The institutionalized conflicts that soon appeared in forensics, athletics, and other intercollegiate competitions took on

great meaning against this background. But such diversity should not obscure the great common heritage that these schools derived from the Aristotelian balance of community resources that called them into being.

This delicate balance appears again when we turn to the early student bodies. For most students college was clearly a middle ground standing between carefree childhood and responsible adulthood. In a century when puberty often came at a later chronological age and when matriculation often took place at an earlier one, a college enrolled most entrants while they were still in the transitional years of adolescence. Thus, the college was normally expected to provide the socializing functions that America now usually assigns to the secondary schools. Just as "sophomore" implied a balance between the Greek *moros* ("foolish") and *sophos* ("wise"), so the nineteenth century collegiate years sought to provide the transition to maturity. The "rites of passage" of the emerging fraternity and sorority systems take on special significance for the social needs they then filled.

The same quest for a happy medium appeared in the college curriculum. There was, obviously, the balance of the spiritual and the secular. No college was complete without its compulsory chapel services or its detailed courses in ethics and theology. But neither was it complete without its program in the rational science and mathematics of the Newtonian universe or its government courses with their emphasis upon Lockean natural law and the balanced government of the American constitution. Yet against this great heritage stood the college programs that introduced the student to the world of the intuitive, the primitive, and the romantic. Usually appearing under the forms of the genteel tradition, first gaining recognition in the student debating societies and the libraries the societies maintained, and often winning its first formal recognition in the literature curriculum, a touch of the passionate thus came to balance the moral rationalism of the college curriculum.

Beyond the balance that the campus imparted to the student through his studies and societies, there was the balance implied by the physical location of the campus itself. Normally located in a parklike environment within a small American town, the college moderated between the urban and the rural, between the bustling city and the arcadian farm. It was an island touched by and touching both, able to return sturdy sons to the soil or to send them, in the manner of an Horatio Alger novel, to the great cities to win fame and fortune by pluck and luck.

Yet ideally the college preferred to serve youth in order that they might remain to serve their own communities, the "island towns" that dotted the nineteenth century landscape. Today, where industrialism or decay have not cruelly altered the urbscape, we can still sense how these towns themselves sought to be a middle landscape. At their center stood the court house, home of the rational, moral justice drawn from European tradition. At their edges were the town parks, natural settings that permitted a brief moment of contact with arcadia. In between stood the palace hotels and the red brick buildings of commerce, effecting the transfer of goods and services between urban industry and rural husbandry. And presiding over it all stood the college educated elite, balanced minds suited to a balanced world. Little wonder that the colleges evoked powerful loyalties from men who shared such an ethos.

It was an enduring image that quickly endeared itself to the public, receiving perhaps its greatest homage in the works of the local color writers of

the turn of the century. When such authors as George Ade and Booth Tarkington looked back to the days of youth to find inspiration for their literature of nostalgia they quickly seized and preserved the campus of the middle landscape for generations yet to come. Most of our modern visions stem from the images they so carefully transmitted.

But little wonder that the college is under modern challenge, because the world it then inhabited is today more apparent than real. Modern universities and community colleges have absorbed the attention of public men and thrown the private campus upon private resources alone. A new, secular, professionally trained faculty have replaced the old clerical instructors and transformed "chapel" beyond recognition. New curricular innovations, particularly the elective system, have ended the old unity of the core curriculum, while a rigorous Germanic scholarship has transformed many humanistic disciplines into remarkable new forms. Earlier menarche and later matriculation have changed student bodies from adolescents to adults. But most important, the continuing march of urbanism has overwhelmed the island town, rendering it ever more extreme in a land where arcadia is vanishing and urbanism is triumphant. The academy will undoubtedly attempt to adapt itself to this new world. But for many schools the adaptation will signal a further break with the great animating heritage of private education, the vision of the middle landscape. Therein lies the crisis and the challenge for the private sector.

The South Dakota 1872 Rules For Teachers in 1976

MARY S. WEINKAUF*

HISTORY, AS EVERYONE SAYS DUTIFULLY, teaches many lessons; but we tend to overlook these lessons and admire the superficial quaintness of an object or event instead. A case in point is the 1872 Rules for Teachers which appear in South Dakota museums and education classes, to everyone's delight and no one's instruction. Actually, there was a very good reason for each of the rules, and it would not hurt contemporary teachers to take some of them to heart.

1. Teachers each day will fill lamps, clean chimneys.
2. Each teacher will bring a bucket of water and a scuttle of coal for the day's sessions.
3. Make your pens carefully. You may whittle nibs to the individual taste of the pupils.

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