

**The Wingspread Conference on the New American College:
Inventing a New Paradigm**

What was initially most striking about the group of institutions represented at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin in August, 1994 was their diversity. Ranging in size from 1500 to 8000, some with separate business, law, music and adult education schools, with endowments small (\$10 million) and large (\$400 million), this self-selected sample of 15 colleges and universities appeared to have little in common other than their independent status and a record of enrollment and financial success in the 1980s and 1990s. But after two days of discussions among presidents, deans, faculty, and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching President Ernest Boyer, Cooperative Institutional Research Program Head Alexander Astin, and representatives from major educational associations, it was clear that such an observation missed the point entirely.

Simply stated, what united all of the participants at the Wingspread Conference was a conviction that an alternative educational paradigm -- the New American College -- is needed in this country and that their institutions should be in the forefront of defining it.

The Conference was a watershed in a number of respects. First, it marked a willingness to "go public" -- to talk about change "outside the lines" -- by a group of educators in the cautious, closely-knit community of higher education ... implicitly joining hands with some of higher education's critics (most notably, the "Brock Report," An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education). Second, it connected the empirical laboratories for educational innovation of 15 "upstart institutions" with the language and ideals of two of the most influential and thoughtful analysts of American higher education, Ernest Boyer and Alexander Astin. Third, it laid the groundwork for the hard work that must follow, to flesh out the New American College "ideal," and the standards and means of accountability ("markers of excellence") that will make this model more than a rhetorical formulation. Finally, although the participants for the most part avoided a self-congratulatory tone (for having "invented a better mousetrap"), in their excitement a vision of the full potential of the New American College "model" to transform the educational landscape could be seen.

"Who are those guys?"

In the 1994 *U.S. News and World Report* ratings of colleges and universities, 11 of the institutions represented at the Wingspread Conference show up among the top 15 schools in the "regional universities" and "regional colleges" categories, including Richmond (#1 university; south), Susquehanna (#1 college; north) Trinity (#1 university: west) and Valparaiso (#1 university, midwest). The categories, which reflect a recent shift in the classifications of colleges and universities by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, capture somewhat more accurately than past *U.S. News and World Report* surveys the strength of these schools -- a set of institutions which have transformed themselves over the past quarter century, achieving great success in the marketplace although receiving generally limited recognition from the educational establishment.

In 1992, when the deans from a few of these colleges began to meet informally, their initial concern, although not articulated, could have been described as the Rodney Dangerfield question: "Why don't we get any respect?" The answer was deceptively simple. Neither liberal arts colleges nor research universities, the institutions were not "pure"; they did not fit established categories very well. They had commuter, adult and part-time students and residential campuses. They used part-time faculty in unusual ways. They had professional schools and applied programs, but spoke of themselves as "liberal arts institutions." They did not brag about the size of their library, but about its pattern of use. Even as they pointed to the quality of students they were attracting, the strength of their core liberal arts programs and their financial success, to critics, because of the large population of their students in job-related professional programs, they had "sold out." And in their own minds, there was always some ambivalence, for the reputational and resource model of educational excellence exerts a powerful hold on everyone who has grown up with it.

Struggling for a language to describe their diverse institutions ("comprehensive liberal arts college"? "liberal arts comprehensives"?), the deans' discussions gradually moved from the defensive to much more fertile ground: What is it that we do well? What is our unique role

in American higher education at a time when critics rightfully attack the failure of many colleges and universities to place student learning first, to teach values and to prepare graduates for a lifetime of learning? What are the needs of students today that we are best equipped to serve? If we have a relatively clear vision of what the ideal liberal arts college and the ideal research university might look like, what would be the ideal "comprehensive liberal arts college"?

"Insights from two gurus"

In addressing these questions, the language and insights of Alexander Astin and Ernest Boyer were extremely helpful. From Astin came an emphasis on "talent development"; on student outcomes rather than institutional reputational and resource inputs; on a vision of the university built upon cooperation, community and service; on the implicit values of institutions, rather than "what we say we are."

Boyer provided more elegant language to describe what "the liberal arts comprehensives" aspire to be: the "New American College," an educational hybrid drawing upon the best elements of the "colonial college" and the "land grant university" tradition -- institutions marked by "connectiveness," where "faculty practices model behavior we want in students," and where professors are able to talk about values and to "develop a language of effective teaching." Boyer defined five important characteristics of the New American College and central to the reform of all American higher education:

1. A new definition of *scholarship*, learning (rather than publication)-based, which supports the primacy of the faculty teaching role.
2. A focused campus *mission*, that captures the unique values, dimensions and potential of the institution, and its role in service to the wider community.
3. A *reward system* that matches the college mission and is flexible enough to respond to differing faculty strengths over a lifetime.

4. A *learning* community, in which the elements of scholarship and learning -- discovery, application, integration and teaching -- are modeled by faculty but also embraced by students and staff.
5. An integrated institution committed to *connections* -- in academic and non-academic life (student services), across academic disciplines and general and specialized areas of knowledge, between faculty and students and the campus and the larger world.

"The wider context"

A public debate concerning higher education similar to the health care discussions of the past two years looms on the national horizon. Like health care, a college education has long been seen as a "good," with a status that justifies an unusual pattern of consumer choices and private, philanthropic, and public investments (witness the manner in which \$100,000 decisions to attend Ivy League schools are made, or conservatives routinely endorse massive public subsidies to "Old State U"). But, as a recent front page *New York Times* article on the "real cost" (\$50,000/year) of an education at Swarthmore demonstrated, here too the veil is coming off.

Limitations on public resources after a generation of rising subsidies; consumer resistance to high tuition; deep concerns about quality, standards, skills and values of graduates expressed by business leaders and elected officials in recent critiques such as the "Brock Report"; the implications of new technologies for traditional teaching and organizational structures; the quiet emergence of a whole new educational marketplace "outside the lines," where future "universities" may have names like Disney, Motorola, Microsoft and Ameritech -- together are subjecting the world of higher education to the same kind of shock wave health care professionals began to experience in the 1980s.

What this all means is that the era of add-ons (never subtractions) and "more of the same, don't worry about the cost" is ending. But what will replace it? Are mergers and consolidations on the horizon? The development of HMO and "managed care" alternatives

for higher education? Will "distance learning" and the "interactive classroom" permanently replace small classes and one-on-one instruction? Will new alternatives challenge the primacy of the "elite liberal arts college" and "research university" models which have defined organizational aspirations in American higher education for more than a century?

As is the case with health care, as important as the public response to these issues is the fact that long-avoided questions of basic educational values -- e.g., are colleges and universities to be student-learning, value and outcome-centered or defined by the professional norms of faculty and previous patterns of capital investment? -- must now be actively confronted. Astin's and Boyer's comments and the Wingspread Conference as a whole, should be seen in this context.

"Laying the groundwork"

At their best, the New American Colleges -- most of which have liberal arts roots, but have adapted to the needs of adult students with a variety of innovative professional and masters programs -- link the ethos and commitment to student-centered learning of the elite liberal arts colleges with the practical real world orientation and commitment to service that once defined the land-grant university. While the name *New American College* could appropriately be applied to each of the schools represented at Wingspread, it might also extend to hundreds of other institutions seeking to redefine themselves in a time of great uncertainty.

A metaphor offered by Redlands University Provost Frank Wong -- borrowed from the world of health care -- provided a tangible image to capture the essence of Boyer's and Astin's comments and embody the distinction between the aspirations of the New American Colleges and the liberal arts and research university paradigms. Decrying the "disconnected specialization" that separates faculty from the "whole student," that isolates knowledge into narrow disciplinary boxes, and that draws an iron wall between the liberal world of learning and the application of knowledge to job and profession, he identified the ideal faculty member at a New American College as a "primary care professor."

Such a professor defines his or her role quite differently from the university specialist. Success begins with knowing the student, and assisting him or her discover the most cost-effective tools to learn and grow. In the classroom those tools may be found in approaches to learning based on problems, rather than traditional lecture or seminar formats. Out of the classroom, those tools may be on the Internet, in another department or division, in a work or service opportunity off-campus or an internship abroad.

The challenge to developing such a vision of the faculty role -- as the symbolic heart of the New American College -- is assessing effectiveness and success. New "markers of educational excellence" are needed. It's a lot easier to count the number of books in the campus library than it is to measure the ways in which students are mastering the tools (which may be far from campus) needed to learn over a lifetime -- so reputations are built on book counts (or the size of endowments, the numbers of articles professors publish, or the college board scores of new students). And, as is the case in health care, there are many vested interests defending the reputational (or input) model of educational excellence.

Moreover, at the other extreme, the growth of "accelerated degree" programs which are little more than low-cost diploma mills brings a rightful concern about "quacks" in a world where traditional standards are under attack. But whereas in the past that concern tended to shut down debate about new standards, today, because of governmental challenges to traditional accreditation approaches, consumer resistance to high prices (for uncertain benefits), and the entrance of powerful new players in the higher educational marketplace whose reputations lie elsewhere, a different outcome is inevitable.

"I'm OK, You're OK"

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Wingspread dialogue was watching presidents and deans "feel out" others in the room concerning the standards and quality control mechanisms of their institutions. Confident of the integrity of their own institution's academic program -- which, typically, includes applied degree programs, evening and weekend colleges, off-campus centers and other financially-successful responses to marketplace needs and

opportunities over the past 15 years, built upon an historic liberal arts foundation -- they were less certain of the commitment to similar standards by other "New American Colleges." What they discovered -- at least among the institutions represented -- was a unanimity of perspectives concerning the importance of high standards, although much diversity in how institutions had maintained quality control while adapting to a changing student marketplace.

Even while skeptical of "special interest" accreditation standards in various disciplines and areas of university operation, no one wanted to throw out the baby (accountability, standards and assessment) with the bathwater (reputational criteria that enshrine historic capital investments and "countable achievements" at precisely the moment that new technologies and approaches to learning may make these less virtue than hindrance to institutional effectiveness). Quite the contrary, what became clear was that each institution was working very hard in its own way to "maintain standards," but what is required is a newly-defined set of standards related to outcomes. Of course, describing that need is far easier than actually developing the criteria.

A starting point is case studies of institutions such as those represented at Wingspread, using their experience as a laboratory for the New American College. How has Rollins College in Florida, for example, brought faculty in its off-site adult education program under its academic review structure? How does the leadership school at the University of Richmond join in the mechanisms for faculty and curricular review of the University as a whole, and how has it broken new ground? Just to ask such questions is to realize how little we know about these innovative schools, how much of the attention of the foundation world and higher education establishment has been focussed on a small group of elite schools and historic educational paradigms and incremental "reforms" (or "betrayals") concerning those paradigms. Much needed are the stories of a different group of institutions, schools that remain deeply committed to quality but are not afraid to break new ground.

For example, as North Central College tripled its headcount enrollment in response to the adult market over the past twenty years -- dramatically increasing the number of applied majors in business, computer science and other fields -- a funny thing happened. The

number of liberal arts majors increased (a little), the liberal arts faculty grew substantially (50%), as did the achievement scores of entering freshmen (ACT 21 to ACT 25). Was North Central retreating from its liberal arts heritage -- as Harvard Education Professor and former Kalamazoo College President David Breneman might argue -- or reinventing itself, returning to its historic values while creating a much richer institutional setting for learning?

Case studies, however, are only the starting point. From those studies, a much wider exchange of information and an expanded dialogue (bringing dozens, perhaps hundreds, of additional schools into the conversation), aided by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the American Association for Higher Education and the Council of Independent Colleges, will emerge the elusive "markers of excellence" defining the New American College. As attractive as the "primary care professor" metaphor is, and as descriptive of the role of many faculty at New American Colleges it may be, how does it relate to the real incentives and constraints most faculty experience? How should incentives and career paths be redefined? Although New American Colleges are unapologetic in linking practical, applied and service-oriented learning with the liberal arts -- in principle -- how effective in practice have they been in building new connectiveness and breaking down disciplinary boundaries? What are the mechanisms for evaluating success in an environment where the academic department is no longer "home" for many faculty? And, above all, how do we make the measure of success for the entire institution "value-added," student-learning based and reflecting the ability to understand and apply what has been learned?

"A better mousetrap"

Themselves often a product of elite liberal arts colleges and distinguished research universities, the leaders of the schools discussing the New American College at Wingspread would be cautious in describing their own institutions as "a better mousetrap." (Rather, they might use the phrase "a different mousetrap.") One reason for this caution is that there is no Amherst or Harvard that others can use as the epitome of excellence, the model against which to be measured. More importantly, in moving from visions of the ideal to concrete examples, it is clear that the characteristics Ernest Boyer and other participants articulated

for the New American College apply unevenly to the schools that would gladly choose this label. The "model" -- the standard -- is still being formed.

Perhaps it was this fact, more than anything else, that explains the excitement which marked all of the conversations at the Conference. The writer P. F. Kluge has described in (*Alma Mater*) the dilemma of being the "second best Italian restaurant" in a liberal arts universe where Williams will always be the best. There are no second best New American Colleges. Like entrepreneurs seeking to create an industry standard for a hot-selling invention, the Wingspread participants realized that what they were about was not explaining what already is but defining what ought to be -- not rationalizing departures from old paradigms but inventing a new one. That will take a lot of work. The most important success of Wingspread was recognizing how important that work is, not just to the New American Colleges, but to the future of American higher education.

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