

THE RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE: Future Prospects

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My concerns identify the residential college in the American public university as the principal focus on this occasion. Naturally, in my judgment, these observations apply with equal force to the large, private research university. I want to take a broad, administrative perspective rather than a pedagogical perspective on this occasion. I take it as given that the pedagogical perspective should be the same, or at least very nearly the same, in every model of residential college and across subject matter foci. Yet, the administrative realities differ profoundly, and we need to inquire what challenges those differences entail in the context in which the needs of residential colleges are less intuitive than they may be elsewhere (as at Oxford).

To begin, let's define the residential college in terms of its capacity for change. There I say the processes of residential university education are characterized rather more by dynamic than inertial processes. I mean by this that success in the residential college depends less on growth in numbers (if at all) and far more on the constant refinement of procedures, resources, and facilities.¹ Higher education emphasizes harmonized and coordinated functioning of dynamic and physical growth factors, and universities compete on the basis of dynamic growth. Program quality and efficiency, subject matter suitability and relevance, and discipline defining achieve-

¹ In the era of corporate downsizing we have become accustomed to the modes of inertial growth. Where the corporate world has largely discovered limits of efficiency and productivity by growing beyond those limits, and then pruning back to sustainable levels of demand response, the residential college operates on the principle of controlling demand. It therefore lacks the capacity to test its potential through a saturation strategy (though any university may do this by proliferation of the model), and it is a challenge of importance to formulate alternatives for testing its potential.

For education this implies not only that a substitute for hypothetically unlimited demand (as a control factor) must be identified, but also that competition itself, or something like it, must be developed to transmit accurate information on which to gauge efficiencies and productivity in education. From this need we derive the conception of dynamic growth as opposed to mere physical or inertial growth as central to understanding the function of the residential college. Canetti (*Crowds and Power*, 1962 [1996]) to the contrary notwithstanding, enhancement and not increase is the fundamental human motif. That was the essence of the limit on the size of the ancient *polis*, just as it is the essence of distinction in the adult human. One might, in this context, see the passion for increase as an adolescent response.

ments (chief among which are graduates highly sought after) constitute the distinctive ways in which universities qualify themselves as educational exemplars.²

This point may seem at first less than intuitive. If, however, you reflect with me that the character of the residential college experience entails a clearly discernible upper limit to the number of students usefully admitted in a *particular* program – whether that is the 500 students at St. John’s College, the 1,000 students at James Madison College, or the 1,500 students at a Pomona College – then you will agree. No one can reasonably expect to provide a genuine residential college experience – with its concomitant requirement for meaningful faculty-student interaction in a context in which the collegial experience itself remains visible and meaningful to all members of the college – in a setting of open-ended, infinitely expanding enrollments – inertial growth as opposed to dynamic growth.

Open-ended, infinitely expanding enrollments is the very soul of the large, research university, and particularly the public university. There productivity is far more routinely measured by growth in numbers – matriculants and dollars – than by any other factor. This inertial growth and the desire for it impose on the large university the logic of segmentation – some would say fragmentation. Within it the most specialized and the most growth-oriented units are the most successful. Thus, a college of social science prospers within a research university by the very logic of its mission and structure – to produce as large a number of graduates (plus credit hours) in as large a number of sub-specialties as possible.

Against that standard, how can a residential college – whose productivity must be measured dynamically rather than inertially – defend itself and prosper in the bureaucratic competition? The dynamic measures that obtain are all quality of academic life measures rather than quantity of academic life measures. Better teaching? That means *lower* GPAs. More integrated learning? Abler students. Readier attainment of life-long learning as a reflex and not just as a slogan. Cultural richness. And most ineffably of all: superior understanding.

² In the world of business, by contrast, efficiency conditions impose a different strategy. The intuitive strategy of seeking to satisfy all perceived demand is not in fact the correct response. The reason is that the levels at which demand operates correspond with industry-specific efficiency conditions, which almost always will mean that a business is in its best position just short of completely satisfying all demand for its product. The trick is to figure out where the cost factors in this equation turn against the interests of the business. The device that is employed to accomplish this in business is, partly, to spawn competition. Thus, one may anticipate a more or less complete test of demand’s capacity to sustain productivity, in proportion as the given market is occupied by competitors who force efficiency rationales on one another. The margin between the profit making satisfaction of demand and the loss incurring satisfaction of demand is the space in which the least efficient competitors fail. Thus, even producers who set “new standards” (the equivalent of “discipline defining achievements”) may “fail” in the world of business.

Are not these all the virtues of education we strive for? Are not these also the very virtues sacrificed to the logic of inertial growth?

If I am right about these things, as I think I am, then it appears that the residential college is at one and the same time the best hope for achieving the mission of higher education and, in the context of the public university, the least likely candidate to be recognized as fulfilling the mission of the university.

The broad, administrative challenge we must ponder, then, is how to privilege dynamic approaches to learning over inertial approaches. If we do this we can spawn a renaissance of residential colleges, even within public universities.

But this will not be easy. It does not suffice to point out that more Rhodes Scholars are sent to Oxford from dynamic programs than from inertial programs. That truth is recognized and, as a contribution to overall institutional reputation, even appreciated. Nonetheless, the implication that one could greatly multiply the number of near-Rhodes scholars by expanding the role of the residential college – and I don't mean a mere "living-learning center" – is stoutly resisted by the privilege accorded to inertial programs.

In my view, existing residential colleges in public universities should consider themselves imperiled by inertia for as long as the role of the residential college is not a growing presence within their universities. That means that the time has come to multiply the number of residential colleges – thus, semi-autonomous and coherent academic programs (not touchy-feely fluff) and not mere social and cultural enrichments. This does not need to occur in the spirit of the 1960s, as a response to the de-humanizing aspects of the "multiversity." It should rather occur as a prudential response to the need to find additional means to defend the notably successful practice of the residential college itself. [And let us not confuse the lack of scientifically established evidence for the success of the residential college with the lack of evidence itself. Just as we are able to ascertain the success of a specific cure for illness before we discover the agency involved, we have adequate testimony for the success of the residential college even in the absence of scientific demonstration.]