

Preface to the Issue

“Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges”

WE LIVE IN AN AGE OF CELEBRITY. For most individuals, fame’s tenure may last a week, a month, perhaps a season. It rarely survives a year, and almost never a decade. Many of yesterday’s supposedly significant men and women do not even figure as footnotes in history; they scarcely exist, having lost all their purported importance. Who, for example, recalls even the names of the principal members of former president George Bush’s cabinet, individuals once thought to be consequential? The greatest number, denied the perpetual gaze of television and newspaper reporters who are able to make and break reputations, have retired into obscurity. When one considers that most undersecretaries and the small army of assistant secretaries in President Clinton’s administration are no better known, inside or outside the Beltway—the president’s “friends” having a much better purchase on the mass media’s attention—one can only conclude that fame in the last decade of the so-called American century has indeed become evanescent; celebrity is a thing of the moment.

This same condition, interestingly, does not appear to obtain with American institutions. In many instances, having once acquired a certain reputation, they do not quickly lose it. There are exceptions, of course; many of the country’s major business

VI *Dædalus*

corporations that were recognized to be powerful and affluent only a few decades ago have very obviously receded in importance, often to be replaced by others that may not even have existed half a century or longer ago. Yet with intellectual and cultural institutions, decline and demise appear to be appreciably less rapid. One thinks, in this connection, of American institutions as famous and varied as Harvard University, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the *New York Times*—to name only three—who today enjoy vastly enhanced reputations. While some may regard their recent fame as the product largely of late-twentieth-century mass media “hype,” and others, recognizing America’s perpetual fascination with money, may view their renown as a reflection of their vastly expanded financial portfolios, with all the advantages that such wealth brings, no one can seriously doubt that their national and international reputations at the end of the twentieth century greatly exceed any that they enjoyed at the beginning, in Theodore Roosevelt’s heyday.

Why should a preface to a *Dædalus* issue entitled “Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges” open with a consideration of questions of reputation, celebrity, and fame? In part because these colleges, often small, with only a very few enjoying what can be termed national or international reputations, figure prominently among the insufficiently studied institutions of a society too preoccupied with bigness and increasingly overwhelmed with what the mass media declare to be important. In these circumstances, much that is distinctive to higher education in the United States, those attributes that make the American system very significantly different from any other, are generally lost sight of. The residential liberal arts colleges of the country, while scarcely invisible, do not today figure in the public prints or in television commentary as the country’s major private and public research universities do. This is a loss to the nation; it distorts an educational reality that expresses values, practices, and ambitions still unique to the United States.

It may be useful to recall how recent has been the extolling by foreign observers of any segment of America’s higher educational complex. Europeans, for example, in the habit of dis-

paraging America's colleges and universities until a hundred or so years ago, began to view these institutions with some modicum of respect only quite recently. Today, when it has become common to speak of "world-class universities"—a term both hyperbolic and vulgar—the United States is acknowledged as standing at the head of the queue. Its most prominent research universities, spread over the continent, are recognized to have only a handful of rivals abroad. While such a claim to American superiority would not have been made even as late as 1914 by Lord Bryce in the third edition of his very popular tome, *The American Commonwealth*—Bryce being one of the first of Europe's men of learning to acknowledge the importance of American higher education—such an attribution might have been made by 1936, the year of Harvard's tercentenary. The claim would have had even greater resonance in 1945, the year when Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan were defeated.

If World War I did much to diminish the principal universities of Europe, even those able to claim distinguished medieval, early modern, and modern origins, and if World War II had even more nefarious effects, revealing the intellectual, economic, and political vulnerabilities of once-proud societies, American universities were not comparably affected. On the contrary, these terrible twentieth-century European civil wars contributed greatly to the aspirations and enhanced reputations of a number of American universities. While a very different judgment would have to be rendered on how the Vietnam conflict affected American higher education—a subject even today more given to rhetoric than to analysis—the society's growing preoccupation with its power and influence has created forms of myopia that bestow significance principally on whatever is recognized to be large and therefore, by definition, important. Optimum size—a classic Greek concept—is not much thought about in late-twentieth-century America. In the circumstances, a handful of higher educational institutions receive an inordinate amount of attention, with others being insufficiently known.

When violence, of the kind rendered famous by pictorially compelling events on Telegraph Avenue, Morningside Heights, and in Harvard Square, is added to the mix, the mass media are

VIII *Dædalus*

in their element. It is much less interesting for them to dwell on the educational practices and philosophies of smaller institutions, to consider how they may be faring in these days of rapid social and cultural change. Yet it is precisely in the study of these institutions—many with proud histories and traditions—that the problems of contemporary America are very obviously illustrated. This, indeed, may be the principal rationale for devoting an issue of *Dædalus* to a segment of American higher education that by definition does not grow and faces very real challenges but persists in believing in its traditional commitments to teaching and learning, accepting the potential need to reconceive both in the context of a society only superficially resembling the one that existed so recently.

These colleges, with their individual and collective enrollments relatively miniscule when compared with those of the great private and state universities of the country, continue to believe that their faith in the advantages of modest size, small classes, and systems of instruction that rely on residential settings are still very much relevant today. Competing for both students and professors—understanding what other institutions are able to offer—they remain committed to educational principles that make the teaching role primary. Knowing that their instructional objectives cannot be realized simply through the provision of more ample classroom space, state-of-the-art libraries, modern scientific laboratories, and a plethora of courses treating every conceivable subject—and yet obliged to address all these needs because so many others do—they seek to demonstrate the virtue of their size and, even more, of their continued commitment to students living together in dormitories that cannot be confused with the skyscrapers of downtown America.

To praise one segment of the American higher educational universe—that of the residential liberal arts colleges—does not call for a disparagement of any other. If the ambition of these colleges is to be viewed as exemplars of certain educational values and ideals, then declaring this to be their sole educational objective is certainly not enough. These colleges, in providing teaching models that merit study by others, in encouraging faculty-student collaboration of a kind not common in other intellectual settings, offer a distinct alternative to the forms of

instruction common in larger institutions. If, in addition, they are able to show the self-discipline that allows them to emphasize certain subjects, leaving others to the more specialized universities, they accept the proposition that there is not a single road for all undergraduate colleges to follow. In such policies, they also speak the language of necessity, an idiom wholly acceptable to a society that is not seeking uniformity in its educational offerings.

At a time when new technologies are thought to be rendering irrelevant the teaching practices of yesterday, when distance learning is lauded and private firms offer themselves as certifying bodies to provide the educational credentials that businesses and others will deem satisfactory, the liberal arts colleges of the country are compelled to be explicit in propounding a quite different set of values. Their faith in the liberal arts—not as the nineteenth century chose to define them or as the twentieth century practiced them but as the twenty-first century will be obliged to reconsider them—is being tested. Until there is a keener appreciation of what the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences have become, until candid inquiry into both their successes and their failures as modes of inquiry and as intellectual disciplines prevails, the country will be riven, revealing either a too bombastic triumphalism about its educational accomplishments or an equally unattractive and exaggerated pessimism. Until higher education for the most ambitious youth in American society is seen as something other than credentialing—providing a certificate that the individual will be able to exchange for something called a job—the joys and necessities of learning will be rendered in a debased coinage. The best of America's liberal arts colleges recognize that their so-called product is something other than a negotiable instrument designed to guarantee employment.

In their emphasis on the values of community, and not as utopians of every age since the Renaissance have explicated those virtues but as young men and women living at a time of unprecedented change are invited to consider and experience them, the better liberal arts colleges seek to foster relations among students, faculty, and their communities that rely on continuous discourse, on an ethic of sharing not universally

X *Dædalus*

appreciated today. Achieving intellectual purposes—supporting the values of criticism and candid inquiry at a time when many of the major cultural, social, and economic institutions of the society preach quite other values, emphasizing certainty and success—cannot be easy. The term “useful” needs to be given new meaning by those who understand what Alexis de Tocqueville learned from his travels through the country more than a century and a half ago: Americans will most ardently seek those things they believe will offer them concrete advantages. The liberal arts colleges of the country, if they remain faithful to their declared intentions, can never accept the values of the mass media, with their somewhat arbitrary and ill-conceived formulations of what they think to be best, in higher education as in so many other things. Because present circumstances compel these colleges, predominantly private institutions, to think in market terms—to consider the wishes of their so-called customers, both parents and students—they can rely on the principle of *caveat emptor*, refusing to make exaggerated claims for their own wares but knowing that the fatuous pursuit of the inconsequential and the trivial in higher education can never prove to be a good bargain.

For the liberal arts colleges of the country, the challenge of the moment is to articulate and realize purposes that extend well beyond the purely vocational, avoiding the policies once pursued based largely on ethnic, racial, and religious exclusions, on snobbery and ignorance. The virtues of the learning of the past can never be despised, but the vulgarity and parochialism of earlier times ought also to be seen, acknowledged, and avoided. The residential liberal arts colleges of the country, once predominantly tied to specific religious denominations and now more frequently secular, once gender-separated and now more often coeducational, pride themselves on what they perceive to be their newly achieved “diversity.” Their efforts in this regard almost certainly exceed their accomplishments. True diversity is still an objective to be sought, and it goes beyond ethnicity, race, gender, and sexual orientation. So, also, there is a desperate need for a truly international perspective, which is not simply related to the cliché of the world having become a “global village.” Today it is easy to be beguiled by the “village

pump politics” of a nation that for the moment lacks a military rival and too frequently acts as if its current economic prosperity is destined to last forever. There is much in American higher education today that is distinctly provincial. It is by no means certain, for example, that without a greater commitment to the study of foreign languages and foreign cultures, of the history and traditions of many, which translates into something more than a mere proliferation of courses, American undergraduates will be able to learn what is necessary for intelligent living, defined as something more than having gained a vocation or profession.

It is a truism to say that we live in a time of rapid change. The more compelling observation is that we are obliged to consider how traditional institutions, including American colleges and universities, are changing, how they ought to change, and why it is not enough for them simply to crave bigness. Their concern with quality ought never to be subordinated to other more superficial goods. America’s liberal arts colleges can be an example to other higher educational bodies, but also to other institutions that have no wish to abandon or neglect those human values once greatly prized.

The creation of communities of serious discourse—an invaluable educational experience for young men and women destined to live their lives in the twenty-first century—is not an objective easily achieved in an age so preoccupied by the ephemeral, so unwilling to make the effort to understand complexity. It is not enough to be a “caring and sharing” society. Even the most attentive care provided to individual students, taking into account both their intellectual and psychic needs, can never be sufficient. We live in a time of casual propaganda and calculated insult, where the intelligence and potential of individuals is rarely sufficiently acknowledged. Our preoccupation with celebrity and with what passes for fame makes us see ourselves and the institutions the society has managed to create in much too superficial a way. This issue of *Dædalus*, in seeking to explore both the triumphs and challenges of one segment of the American higher educational universe, is concerned with a larger question: What ought this country be teaching its young, the many millions who now throng its colleges and universities?

XII *Dædalus*

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S.R.G.