

## WHILE ALMA MATER BURNS

Professors fiddle, trustees temporize,  
foundations fumble

by Gail Thain Parker

Instead of coming to terms with any of the real issues confronting higher education, professors (and others) spend most of their time waging symbolic power struggles which prevent anyone from making decisions about anything. Some pungent observations about the "incestuous viciousness" of academic life from the former president of Bennington College.

Some of the signs of demoralization in higher education are particularly eye-catching—student-recruiting billboards outside O'Hare Airport, professors in the streets of New York begging passersby to save the city university system. Even more disturbing portents can be found if you are willing to read between the lines. Several years ago an article appeared in the *New York Times* on what had become of John Lindsay's bright young men. One of them had given up tenure at a city university only to find—once back on the academic job market—that he had been effectively blacklisted by former colleagues. He felt that politics at City Hall were far less Byzantine than politics in the

academy. Professional politicians, he said, didn't have time for that kind of intracurricular intrigue.

For a number of years now the incestuous viciousness of academic life has reflected the bankruptcy of higher education in New York and elsewhere. Inability to meet the payroll is in a real sense the outward sign of a lack of inner grace, the gracelessness not only of politicians but of haggling and shortsighted professors, administrators, and trustees. Instead of coming to terms with any of the real issues confronting higher education, those of us in positions of responsibility—particularly members of the professoriat who claim authority over all matters of educational policy—have spent most of our time waging symbolic power struggles to prevent anyone from making decisions about anything. The clearer it becomes that we need to re-examine our purposes and delimit our curricula, the more ingenious we are at politicizing issues and preventing substantive debate.

The first faculty meetings I attended were at Harvard in 1969. I have memories of leaning over the balcony of Sanders Theater, a cavernous memorial to the Civil War dead, trying to see what the liberal caucus was doing. It was like watching a basketball game in which the object was to take time-outs rather than to complete plays. The most active man on the floor was the parliamentarian,



who repeatedly leapt to the stage to confer with the president, while the president in turn sat quietly in front of a huge red flag emblazoned VERITAS.

Three years later I was the president (and parliamentarian) at Bennington. The first request was that I avoid calling faculty meetings. After several years spent skirmishing over Southeast Asia and coming close to bloodshed in an effort to establish complete faculty control over faculty appointments, the members of the Bennington faculty were reluctant to sit down in the same room together. Instead of collegiality in any traditional sense, they looked forward to a new era of solidarity through reformed procedures.

During the late sixties and early seventies, professors discovered just how easy it was to disguise self-interest (even from themselves) by means of the new rhetoric of "constituency rights." Instead of defining colleges and universities in terms of shared educational purposes, the ideologues of constituency rights conceived of each institution as a congeries of essentially hostile interests. They abandoned the old missionary phraseology to focus on the internal workings of the academic community, uncovering genuine abuses in the "system," but failing to give their colleagues, much less their students, any sense of what might constitute the good of the whole at a given college or university, and therefore any disinterested way of evaluating alternative policies. It was in the sixties, for example, that faculty members began to claim total immunity from the scrutiny of deans or presidents (to say nothing of trustees) by proclaiming a democratic faith in the sanctity of being judged solely by their peers. The elaborate systems of collegial review that were the expression of this faith have proved disturbingly vulnerable to pressures serving to obscure the need to judge individual merit. Faculties and their personnel review committees are increasingly dominated by the new sentimentalists, who feel that only a murderer would give a colleague a negative review, or the new Social Darwinists, who believe each negative review represents a victory for the race of survivors. Neither group is primarily concerned with quality of mind; both do their part to lend credence to the new legalism, according to which everyone is a case, has a case, or, at the very least, tries to make one.

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trenched interests; worse still is the sixties' legacy of respect for revised procedures. Educational questions are dealt with by inventing new forums for debate; each issue becomes an occasion for reshaping lines of command and reinventing committees. This strategy for avoiding confrontation—on any level—can be seen in recent events at Boston University, where, according to a headline in a university publication, restructuring has been accomplished "to improve communication among administrators, deans, faculty." At Bennington the energy to redesign faculty review procedures grew out of a determination to bind the hands of my predecessor and make it structurally impossible for any president to come to independent judgments about faculty members. At Boston University the impetus to reorganize apparently came from a similar wish to curb the power of John Silber, who has been accused by faculty members of insisting that there is a difference between first- and third-rate people and then making it clear who he thinks is who. A few excerpts from one of the university's newsletters should suggest how tempting it can be to reshuffle a bureaucracy rather than re-examine the purposes of an institution reputedly dedicated to higher learning:

The heart of the reorganization concerns the establishment of the office of a Provost to whom the essentially academic programs of the University report and two major vice presidencies around which the operational activities of the University are organized. The Provost and these Vice Presidents report to the President. . . .

The Academic Vice President, the Academic Vice President for Health Affairs, and the Academic Deans report to the Provost. . . . Charles Smith, former Vice President for Finance, assumes the new position of Vice President for Financial and Business Affairs, to whom the Vice President for Operations and the Vice President for Personnel will also report. Gerald Gross, former Vice President for Publications and Media, . . . assumes the position of Vice President for Administration. . . .

The Provost will chair a new Academic Committee composed of the following: Academic Vice President, Academic Vice President for Health Affairs, Vice President for Academic Services and all Academic Deans and Directors. This Committee will provide a forum to develop and discuss academic plans, programs and preliminary budget matters.

In addition the Provost and the Academic Vice Presidents will meet regularly with the designated officers of the Faculty Senate Council. . . .

Under the new structure an Operating Committee will replace the former Executive Office of the University. A nine-member Committee, it will be

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chaired by the President and composed of the following. . . . The original feature of this arrangement turns on the inclusion of three deans to be elected to 18-month rotating terms. . . .

A further innovation in this organizational plan is the establishment of a Policy Liaison Committee. The Policy Liaison Committee will provide the Board with access to concerns of major importance raised by members of the faculty and administration. . . .

With reality parodying itself, perhaps nothing more need be said. Yet I cannot help feeling that personal testimony is a useful supplement to even the most revealing public events. It was only after I had exchanged my balcony seat at Harvard for the center court at Bennington that I fully understood the pointlessness of academic political games. Last fall I attempted to explain to a faculty meeting how I had come to see that my willingness to negotiate every solution and balance competing factions was, in the long run, destructive. At Bennington a built-in tension persists between the arts and the non-arts. (Interestingly enough, no one at the college has come up with a positive term for the more traditional academic fields; students refer to "paper courses," faculty members talk about "reading and writing disciplines.") Suballiances emerge according to the particular interests at stake. Does Black Music belong outside the (White) Music Division? Which of the two philosophers should be allowed to dominate the recruitment of a third? Does a college with only six hundred students need a costumer? To disagree with the partisans is to be vulnerable to charges of racism, anti-intellectualism, or, worse still, failure to understand the requirements of the creative spirit.

After three years at Bennington I had come to see that the debate was always the same, and that the better I became at anticipating arguments and negotiating political solutions, the more I strengthened the forces that were pulling the college apart. With a broker for president, it was in the interest of faculty members to become lobbyists for particular goods at the expense of the good of the whole.

In the fall of 1974 I spent fourteen weeks trying to get the Faculty Educational Policies Committee to discuss ways in which it might be possible to reduce faculty size. The members of the committee

made it quite clear that they were damned if they would be implicated in making unpleasant decisions of that sort; after all, they were elected to represent the interests of the faculty. In January 1975, I acceded to a trustee request to work with an appointive committee and analyze possible future directions for Bennington. I originally argued for an elected committee, but in the end had to concede that I had seen little to make me sanguine about the possibility of conducting a thorough review of the college's prospects with people who would feel obligated to represent the short-term interests of a given constituency.

The issues at stake were simultaneously educational and economic. No one will give money to a place like Bennington or want to come as a student unless it offers a significant alternative to more traditional forms of higher education. Bennington has to make a distinctive argument for itself in order to survive, much less raise substantial sums of new money. The fuel oil bill, the new arts complex, the widespread decline in enthusiasm for progressive education and hence in Bennington admissions, made the economic projections particularly grim. Faculty members were underpaid, administrators were underpaid, staff members were appallingly underpaid. The picturesque wooden

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buildings were peeling; in short, the time had come for a major capital campaign.

Meanwhile Bennington alumni increasingly sensed that the college was no longer truly innovative and that student-designed majors, training in the studio arts, winter work terms—all things that the college had pioneered in—were now commonplace. Students complained that teachers were lecturing (a violation of the Bennington "idea"), that the curriculum was too traditional (how could a place with Bennington's artistic pretensions fail to offer work in video or Super-8 film?), that the school just didn't live up to its rhetoric. Faculty members worried about the quality of their colleagues, the caliber of students, and the loss of the old Bennington spirit, widely believed to have evaporated sometime during the sixties.

With these concerns in mind the trustee-ap-



pointed futures committee (including faculty, trustees, and alumni) went to work and eventually came up with several proposals. One was to phase out presumptive tenure, a piece of local ingenuity devised less than a decade ago to simulate the real thing. The committee felt that tenure was clearly inconsistent with the avowedly experimental character of the college. They further felt that students should be required to explore two disparate modes of study, preferably one in the arts and one in the non-arts, in order to keep them from developing a misleading sense of their own professionalism, encourage them to make better use of a limited curriculum, and cause them to explore different ways of perceiving reality. The committee believed that the college could afford to move from an 8:1 student/faculty ratio to something closer to 9.5:1, in fact could hardly afford not to do so. Suggestions were made as to how this might be accomplished, and figures were shown to illustrate the difference a reduction in faculty size would make in projecting capital needs.

Somehow in summarizing I find it impossible to do justice to the inflammatory nature of these proposals. They still sound reasonable to me. But even in January 1975, I knew enough to predict that a searching report, complete with criticisms of current operations and realistic recommendations for change, would have something in it to enrage everyone, enabling the various factions to unite—if only long enough to make it impossible for me to



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continue as an *effective* president. I remember saying that I was cashing in my chips. The trustees were unconvinced. They apparently clung to the thought that the relative amicability of the last three years meant I could smooth everything over. I assured them they were wrong.

**D**espite my prescience, I was unprepared to discover that presidents cannot say they are sorry. Once I admitted that I had inadvertently encouraged divisiveness in the name of peace and democracy, I was widely believed to have confessed to Nixonian manipulations. What I meant, of course, was something quite different.

Administration is alienating; in fact, administration may be seen as the art of encouraging other people's alienation. No wonder many university presidents and deans secretly welcome faculty and staff unions. Life is easier if you have principled grounds for not dealing with people face to face. What a comfort to be able to say, "Please refer your complaint to the appropriate representative." Formal negotiations are safely ritualized.

Of course faculty-administration relations are ritualized in non-union shops as well. For administrators to attack faculty members openly is out of the question. Only once did I venture to comment on the savagery of faculty debate, and then after watching a group of faculty members attack a stranger who had been hired by trustees to run a summer program at Bennington. With only his vita and a hastily prepared prospectus to go on, they accused him of being a commercial hack, a racist, and a male Jacqueline Susann. Faculty members can say slanderous things with impunity and can insinuate that administrators are guilty of everything from conspiracy to concubinage; deans and presidents must turn the other cheek. Certainly those faculty members most zealous in defense of their own civil liberties (and of the tenure system which guarantees them) are rarely found rallying around the banner of free speech for bureaucrats.

Because administrators are paid to restrain themselves, faculty members almost always begin particular controversies. Their laments tend to follow a certain pattern: the administration is overgrown; it thwarts faculty members at every creative turn; it threatens their integrity as scholars and teachers with a book-keeping perspective. All important decisions are made

without consulting the faculty. Faculty members are overburdened by committee work, dragged out of classrooms and away from their beloved students to be implicated in the squalid business of running an institution. And yet, somehow, all the important decisions are made without consulting the faculty.

Deans and presidents and treasurers are needed in this psychodrama only because their responses make it possible for the main actors to move from one line of argument to another. Accused of not consulting faculty members about budget decisions, liberal administrators will often respond by encouraging the creation of a representative faculty group to scrutinize the university's financial policies. Unhappily they must do so in the knowledge that



their willingness to modify (and complicate) their own procedures will be perceived as one more example of their failure to understand how impossible additional committee work is for an overburdened faculty. Many professors will further suggest that the new committee has been proposed in a cynical spirit by those who have access to arcane economic information—the kind of thing that appears in the newspaper every morning. Last fall one Bennington faculty member asked why he should be expected to understand, much less sympathize with, the college's financial condition; workers at General Motors were not asked to make personal sacrifices for the good of the company. At that point the vice president of the college (my husband, Tom Parker) began a private clipping service to ensure that at least one faculty member did not miss the articles about layoffs in the automotive industry.

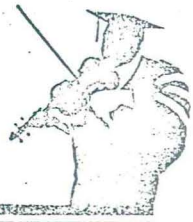
The predictability of academic debates is less depressing than their emptiness. All too often they are exercises in pure gamesmanship, with little apparent recognition by the players that decisions need to be made and even less respect shown for those who might have something of real substance to contribute to the discussion. Randall Jarrell's description of Art Night in *Pictures from an Institution* provides, to my mind at least, an extended metaphor for that peculiar genre, the faculty meeting:

The students had learned all the new ways to paint something (an old way, to them, was a way not to paint something) but they had not had anything to paint. The paintings were paintings of nothing at all. It did not seem possible to you that so many things could have happened to a piece of canvas in vain. You looked at a painting and thought, "It's an imitation Arshile Gorky: it's casein and aluminum paint on canvasboard, has been scratched all over with a razor blade, and then was glazed—or scumbled, perhaps—with several transparent oil washes." And when you had said this there was no more for you to say. If you had given a Benton student a pencil and a piece of paper, and asked her to draw something, she would have looked at you in helpless astonishment: it would have been plain to her that you knew nothing about art. By the time a Benton artist got through exploiting the possibilities of her medium, it was too dark to do anything else that day; and most of the students never learned that there was anything else to do.

All too often at faculty meetings proposals are put to rest by arguments that have more to do with the process of erudite free association than with reason. When Jane Addams first saw the slums of London she found herself taking mental refuge in literary allusion. She was reminded of DeQuincey, who was unable to alert a young couple in the path of a rushing mail coach until he had remembered the exact lines with which Achilles armed all Asia militant. Jane Addams hated herself for turning experience into a species of educated voyeurism. This same kind of self-hate, shared by so many of us in academe, is less often a spur to social conscience than a source of self-esteem. Certainly we exhibit a regrettable tendency to equate our unwillingness to accept responsibility for our ideas with a species of superior virtue.

The separate strands in this web of self-doubt and self-congratulation were clearly visible in re-

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cent years in faculty debates on coeducation. Professors at all-male colleges eagerly supplemented their usual allusions to esoteric texts with excerpts drawn from the statements of development officers and prosperous alumni to the effect that women don't support their alma maters as generously as men do. The dangers of an unexamined assumption of this sort, which should have been recognized by social scientists who know something about statistics, sampling, and social change, or by humanists who have progressed as far as cow one is not cow two, were overlooked by professors eager to prove that they too live in the real world. Of course a certain admission is involved here, a tacit recognition that those who shore learned fragments against their ruins are dependent upon those who make it their business to accrue capital.

But when faculty members have been asked to face the facts of their dependence they have understandably balked. Even the trustees of those private institutions where educational policy has traditionally been left entirely to the faculty are beginning to ask questions about the relevance of the curriculum or about the advisability of consolidating some departmental efforts and eliminating others. These questions are not welcomed on cam-



pus. The chairman of Bennington's board, hard pressed by a reporter to say whether trustees had the authority to make educational as well as financial decisions, reluctantly admitted that the answer, legally, was yes. For her hesitant candor she was rewarded with the following public letter from a faculty member:

Newspapers are never accurate and they are often outrageous. There is ground for hoping, then, that the censure and disparagement of the . . . faculty ascribed . . . to . . . were never uttered—auditory illusions, perhaps created by the chill convexity of our northern morning air. Indeed, the more I consider it, the more certain I grow that the Chairman of our Board of Trustees could not have spoken so arrogantly or brandished her rights so menacingly. The trustees are said to love this college, and there is some evidence that they do. They could hardly at this moment, when wisdom must encourage them to consult their interests, be busy rehearsing their rights. The college is not what it is by virtue of trustees' rights; nor are students the spontaneous generation of those rights. The college does not derive its good name in the world from trustees' rights; nor is its merry personality the distillate of trustees' rights. That we faculty have been content to leave the world and be ill-paid for the privilege has nothing to do with trustees' rights. But it is the common-law of academies that trustees are given their rights so that they might bear a responsibility—of succor, of protection and after all of deference—to the faculty and its natural authority. And just now, when it seems no exaggeration to say that the very life of the college is imperilled, its trustees would affirm this immemorial responsibility, not by contending with the faculty, but by heeding it.

Whatever one may think of the tone of this letter, the assumptions it makes about the historic relationship between governing boards and facul-



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ties is accurate, for the last several decades at least. And trustees, like faculty members, have good reason today to feel that preserving the status quo, whether it is defined in terms of existing departments or of the etiquette of trustee/faculty relations, may be the best that anyone can hope for. At Bennington, trustees originally had the temerity

to applaud the report of their ad hoc committee, but when the uproar began, many chose to believe that the first order of business was to get everyone to act nice again. Some argued that faculty members were angry *because* the report struck home—and they were not yet ready to admit what they knew to be true. Others felt that if only faculty members could be pacified they might be brought to think in terms of the good of the whole college. I, of course, was inclined to agree with the former analysis: there was nothing in the financial part of the report that had not been publicly discussed for more than a year, and faculty cuts could not come as a total surprise in this context—much less after a semester-long debate on the subject in a major faculty committee. Moreover, there was little to suggest that an era of relative good feeling of the sort that the college had enjoyed for more than three years would make it possible to face major issues intelligently.

One trustee who resigned when Tom Parker and I did made allusions to Munich. Perhaps we were all being melodramatic; the next several years will tell. But the crisis in trustee authority is not confined to Bennington. Many governing boards have taken pains in recent months to ensure that they are protected by statements of limited personal liability inserted in their bylaws. This is apparently as far as they are willing to go toward acknowledging that they could be found guilty of sins of omission and inaction. In effect they are buying malpractice insurance and then refusing to operate.

This leaves administrators assaulted on one side by faculty members who hope to avoid knowing about dwindling endowments (as at Brown and Fisk, for example) lest this knowledge interfere with the free expression of their self-interest, and on the other by trustees who often enjoy hearing

cheery half-truths even more than uttering them.

John Silber may have sound surgical instincts, but he cannot lay hands on any instruments, at least if I understand the purpose of Boston University's reorganization. Some presidents suffer silently,

blaming themselves for their impotence. Others quietly plan to get out before the sheriff! A few become desperate enough to say what they think has to be said, and then wait to be carried away. It is easy to feel that your major choice as president lies between the faculty vigilantes and the men in the white coats.



In the meantime institutional life goes on. Some of Emily Dickinson's lyrics have a painful appropriateness for the recently resigned.

*It makes the parting tranquil  
And keeps the soul serene—  
That gentlemen so sprightly  
Conduct the pleasing scene!*

Every year hundreds of these gentlemen debate "the place of the liberal arts in our changing society," an interesting and important subject—if discussed. But pleasant diversions abound. Groups of faculty members and administrators honorably try to resuscitate (or to inaugurate) freshman seminar programs, general education programs, interdisciplinary majors and courses. Worthy efforts in themselves, but all too often giving birth to fabulous invalids, programs doomed by the hostility of faculty members who fear that they will be expendable unless the curriculum is safely departmentalized.

Tensions, some potentially creative, persist between the professional integrity of the specialist and the broader obligations of the teacher, yet no matter how skillfully individuals may resolve this tension in their classrooms, they are not often able to articulate the ultimate purposes of higher education—at least not in public. Faculty members talk at length about the difficulty of designing a significant undergraduate curriculum given the explosion of knowledge, the proliferation of technologies, the general tumult of our intellectual universe. To say that faculty members cannot define what it means to be educated because of this tumult brings to mind the sly observation of a former student who assured me that he never worried about which period of American history was under discussion because any phenomenon could be explained in terms of improved transportation, westward expansion, and the disintegration of the family.

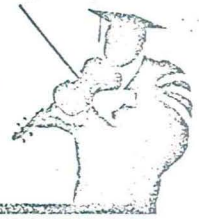
Surely the intellectual universe seemed as unsettled to those responsible for Harvard College's curriculum two hundred years ago as it does to their counterparts today. But in the eighteenth century no one would have suggested that the difficulties of deciding what undergraduates should know excused faculty members from the obligation to make certain decisions and to recognize their own premises. I am not arguing for a return to fixed curricula, and certainly not for "relevance," in the current debased sense of the term, but it

strikes me as indefensible that faculty members and their educational policy committees behave as if they were exempt from the obligation to explain—to anyone—what probable ends are served by particular educational means.

At this point in history I find it hard to believe that faculty members and trustees, left to their own devices, will be able to make the choices that confront all institutions of higher education today—choices between known goods, between particular departments, between kinds of students, between widely recognized community needs and those generated by the internal requirements of academic fields. Precisely because the universe of knowledge has expanded we must abandon the idea that single universities, much less single colleges, can hope to deliver that knowledge successfully in the form of thirty-seven undergraduate majors. Legislators, caught between tax-burdened constituents and local chauvinisms, may be better than many educators at making the necessary choices.

I am convinced that new incentives have to be found to encourage a farsighted realism among

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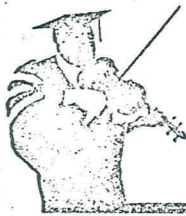


members of faculties and governing boards; they probably need to be bribed. Of course the bribes must be given in ways that appeal to the values, indeed the snobberies, of those of us connected with the higher education establishment. We don't want our money in brown paper bags. Major private foundations, the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, and the National Science Foundation have had considerable experience in bribing both institutions and individuals to do what they already know they should be doing. I think it would now make sense for the foundations to encourage colleges to cut back, to specialize, to merge, even to close, all in the name of a shared concern for excellence.

This is, of course, the kind of sentiment that is easier to salute than to take seriously. What *could* be done by major philanthropies to ensure that the objects of their charity are not flattered out of realistic self-appraisal? A start in the right direction might be made if foundations were to ask genuinely leading questions about the sponsoring insti-



tution's prospects as well as the significance of the particular project under consideration. Visiting teams sent out by the granting organization often know more about these prospects than the grantees. Surely it would be advantageous to force the applicants to educate themselves by thinking through the full impact their new program or congeries of courses will have on the college or university. Here I am not talking about the kind of questions that can be answered with "The opportunity to redesign our introductory courses will give everyone in the humanities at \_\_\_\_\_ a real morale boost." Instead I would like to see applicants



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forced to analyze exactly where the opposition (as well as the support) for the proposed innovations will come from and to describe the processes by which conflicts of interest will be resolved. In this connection the president of the sponsoring institution should be required to go beyond attesting that it would make him very happy to get the money to examine in detail the relationship between the proposal and existing university commitments.

But these are very modest changes when major shifts in attitude are called for. Last winter one former trustee suggested that Bennington declare a victory—forty years of educational leadership—and then shut its doors. What sounded shocking at first seems more plausible upon reflection. Why shouldn't private industry help fund consultants who could advise boards of trustees on dignified liquidation procedures? Right now a number of foundations and companies will subsidize management advice, but efficiency alone is not going to save many colleges, much less assure that they are worth saving. In fact, educational institutions are often more tightly managed than businesses. Streamlining of various sorts can be learned from the profit-makers, but major savings are not likely to be realized by bringing in a consultant who is unfamiliar with those organizations where changing the Xerox machine to a more efficient model is regarded as a sinister management offensive.

With the right support from foundations and the business community, trustees may come to understand the appeal of "honorable defeat" and to see

that the principles of the founding fathers—of both college and country—might best be served by agreeing to merge or go away. Faculty members would not be inspired by this form of Bicentennialism, but at some colleges quitting or merging or changing in time would mean the likelihood that assets would remain to be divided. A faculty member with decent severance pay would presumably feel more sanguine about his options than one who suddenly discovered that—in the interest of not scaring away students or donors—trustees had failed to exercise fiscal responsibility and were now forced to sell his house or default on his salary.

There is a great deal of talk now about retraining professors to serve as the missionaries of a new interdisciplinary god who transcends departments and calls his people to study "Man in the West," "Ways of Seeing," and "The World Around Us."

This talk is generally summarized as "faculty development," a catchall phrase that might equally include programs to reward some faculty members for changing careers entirely.

Meanwhile, in the name of innovation, foundations are still in the business of encouraging colleges and universities to do everything short of eliminating positions and programs. The idea that poverty might lead to important innovation is understandably not compelling to those whose job it is to give money away. In truth, we all seem to prefer the refined cruelty of raising improbable expectations to adopting a farsighted realism. Institutions that have responded to the student market by expanding their vocational programs are still securing grants to supplement traditional curricula, instead of being encouraged to delimit their institutional mission. The liberal arts faculties' thinking in these colleges and universities begins with the assumption: Given that we are all here, what can we do? How can we change spots?, not How can we change leopards? Wouldn't it be more sensible to give these institutions planning money that obligates them to do something more imaginative and intellectually respectable than offering nursing students or special education majors bits and pieces of an already fragmented liberal arts curriculum?

As things now stand, academic humanists spend months arguing over whether they would be reduced to an ignominious service position vis à vis "other people's students" were they to offer introductory courses not designed to channel under-



graduates into their own departments. Anyone might reasonably wonder why it is nobler to teach a handful of dispirited English majors than to make hundreds of intelligent future nurses want to read ten good books a year for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately the threat of unemployment may be too great to permit faculty members to entertain the idea of abandoning curricular structures that require someone in each of their specialties. And the threat of underenrollment makes it difficult for even the most self-critical teachers to advise students about structuring independent majors or transferring to very different kinds of schools. The diversification of our institutions of higher education will simply trap and track students ever more relentlessly unless accompanied by a concerted effort to make it easier for students to move from one college or university to another. As things now stand, those on scholarship find it financially difficult to transfer while those who can theoretically afford to go anywhere are hard pressed to discover what different colleges really have to offer when so many have hired the same public relations firms to prepare their catalogues and brochures. Even a public university need not be all things to all people, as long as it finds ways of assisting prospective students to make well-informed choices among well-defined courses of study.

Having spent several years at Harvard learning how difficult it is for an assistant professor to do other than follow the beaten path, and several more at Bennington discovering that even in the wilds of southwestern Vermont college presidents are expected to follow well-worn trails, I now fantasize about the power of foundation executives to strike out on their own. Yet I know they are as limited by their obligation to formulate general guidelines as those of us who work within institutions are by the ritual affirmation of exceptionalism: "But this is Bennington; but this is Harvard; but that's *me* you're talking about." We have been educated to make distinctions, but not to make decisions. And we have created participatory bureaucracies in our institutions, elaborate systems of surveillance by committee, which guarantee that we can do only one thing really well, and that is to explore our mutual hostilities.

A number of Harvard faculty members typed me

long ago as a fundamentally hostile person, "a female Mencken," in one man's phrase. In fact, only after I left Cambridge four years ago did I become sure that my desire to mock the rituals of my tribe owed less to adolescent cynicism than to a relatively mature idealism. I poke fun because I am so disappointed, and in this backhanded way honor my academic Calvinism, a conviction that to be educated is to have an obligation to bring disciplined habits of mind to the consideration of all questions, even those that are personally threatening.

Inside this somewhat battered administrator is still the conscientious Radcliffe student who wanted to get a Ph.D. because so many honorable people had chosen the scholarly path. My faith in the professoriat has been severely shaken since the early sixties—in my first coming of age as an assistant professor during Vietnam and Cambodia, and my second as a college president condemned to see the fuel oil bill go up 300 percent. No doubt some will question

Those of us in higher education can no longer count on an infinite number of time-outs to decide what game we're playing.



my sense of timing on this occasion as well, when everything I say may be discounted as the petulance of someone who lost a fight. But I am convinced that those of us in higher education can no longer count on an infinite number of time-outs to decide what game we're playing. Instead of arguing for the proliferation of departments, study centers, policy committees, and administrative structures, we need to re-examine our basic commitments. What function should colleges and universities serve?

The second president of Bennington, Lewis Webster Jones, who went on to head the University of Arkansas and then Rutgers, once assured me that in the college's purported Golden Age, "they didn't know what in the hell they were doing." This was an enormously kind thing to say under the circumstances. As president of Bennington I always felt mildly oppressed by a sense of responsibility for someone else's noble experiment. But now that my sense of responsibility is more general, and the full implications of Jones's candor are clearer, I sometimes think that the members of the higher education establishment ought to be paid not to talk to impressionable young people. At the very least we deserve to be told to go and educate ourselves. □