Your Suburban Alternative

by Jay Neugeboren

FLASH!—The experimental College at Old Westbury returns to the bureaucracy that made it!

In the Spring of 1968, while I was living in a small country village in the south of France, I accepted a teaching position at a new "experimental" college on Long Island—the State University of New York's College at Old Westbury, a college where there would be, for the first two years, less than two hundred fifty students, where all administrators would also teach, where students would share fully in planning and decision making, where every student would be required to spend at least one year away from the school working or studying — in ghettos, foreign lands, where housing (on campus — in former servants' quarters) would be provided.

In April of 1969 — more than eighteen months since I'd left America—I arrived at Old Westbury; my disappointment with the school was immediate and immense. The fault, as so many times in my life, probably lay in me, in my expectations. Had I actually believed that a radically experimental college could be sponsored by the State of New York? Had I really hoped that — amidst the expressways and shopping centers and suburban towns of Long Island—one could have an island of relevance, a genuine community? With only eighty-three students, I discovered, the college was already a full-scale bureaucracy. There were, by count, more full-time administrators (fourteen) than faculty (eleven), and the total support staff—secretaries seemed to be everywhere — numbered more than sixty. I received three or four memos a day—reports, studies, notices for committee meetings, evaluations of reports; in the president's office there were shelves lined with more than seventy different handouts, mostly reprints of his own speeches about the college. (I saved all the memos and reports I received; at the end of my thirteen months at the college I brought *them* home: they weighed thirty-four pounds—i.e., about three pounds per month.)

I was staggered — depressed — most by the sheer amount of mistrust and double-dealing that one year had bred; business on campus seemed to be conducted as much by rumor and gossip as by anything else. Faculty members despised one another, and said so. Several of the faculty who supported the president against the students at the same time drafted a letter to Albany, asking for the president's resignation, a letter they were ready to use should the president have lost a major battle with the students.

The housing which had been promised to us had disappeared (as we were about to arrive, the school discovered that it had promised and given out more campus housing—about ten spots—than it had), but at the last minute temporary quarters were found for us. (Two weeks before we'd sailed, I'd received a telegram asking if I could report the following September, instead of in April—this after I'd sent letters, over the course of a year, asking, in each one, exactly when I would be needed on campus and what my duties would be when I got there.) When I arrived, administrators began asking me what *I* would like to do. A seminar they had hoped I would, upon my arrival, "save" had dissolved sometime during the ten days it took for me to cross the ocean—why then, they suggested, didn't I "take my time" and use the months of April and May "to get to know people"? For this, I gasped, I would be paid more than $1,000 a month.

As for the promise of partnership for students—though the official mandate of the school stated that the college "would admit students to full partnership in the academic world," this was taken by the administration to mean that students would be "consulted" on all major decisions; administrators would, still, make the final decisions themselves. They did. Thus, though a joint student-faculty committee to select new faculty had submitted a list of ten new-faculty recommendations to the president, the president had vetoed two of the ten choices, and had made an offer to another prospect who had been rejected by the committee. Not a bad percentage, of course, but—given the fact that nobody could recall the last time a president of a major college had vetoed even a single faculty recommendation, and given the college's particular mandate—this became one fact among many that the students decided they couldn't live with. And so—seven weeks after I arrived—I found myself inside buildings with students, drafting—on the first day of a sit-in—a statement of no confidence in the president and of support for the students which I got the majority of the faculty to sign.

But such things were not what impressed me most about the school. It was—despite its miniature size—a college like other colleges; it was neither "relevant" nor "experimental" (by the following fall, the college had settled down to a vague program, one which virtually excluded "field work" for almost all but those students specializing in Urban Studies, and one which included three programs: a Disciplines College [courses in modern literature and philosophy], an Urban Studies College, and—for everybody else—a General Program that had already been tried and tested for four years at San Jose State College). The college was, however, still different in one crucial way—in its claim to be different. It was a college which tried endlessly to explain away the phrase "full partnership"—but which would not give it up.

By the start of its second year, the president, Harris Wofford Jr.—a former Associate Director of the Peace Corps, an adviser to President Kennedy on civil rights, a lawyer with a special interest in civil liberties—had resigned to become president of Bryn Mawr. His own understanding of educational innovation and civil liberties was evidenced for me several weeks after I arrived, when a student literary magazine was seized from the mailing room and not permitted to go out to students, because, as the president explained in a letter to the editor, it was his judgment that its contents—specifically, a cartoon by R. Crumb, reprinted from *Head Comix* — might "offend the moral views of the majority of the people of New York State who support this college." (When he first saw the magazine, Wofford had sent a messenger to the office of admissions to find out if R. Crumb was going to be an Old Westbury student the following fall.)

None of this was surprising, though, and after a month or two I seemed to get used to it. What never ceased to amaze me was something else: the funds that were being poured into the college for buildings, supplies, consultants, printing, secretaries, cars. I felt, I said during the first few weeks, like Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man—i.e., that I was, quite literally, plugged into the nation's power supply: I received housing, an office, a telephone; my postage was paid for, my writing supplies were provided—there was a carton of supplies on my desk when I arrived—appointment calendar; marble stand with pen; paper; pads; stapler; stapler remover; tape; boxes of throw-away manifold carbon-paper sets ("Your time is worth more to your employer typing than salvaging carbon paper"), and —most amazing of all—there were new state cars with official state seals on their sides, available for my use. (For its two dozen faculty and administrators, there were five state cars; when the school grew to two hundred twenty-two students —and a staff of more than a hundred—in the Fall of 1969, five additional cars were ordered.)

The school's operating budget was slightly over one million dollars for the first year, slightly under two million for the second (items such as the cars came out of a separate budget in Albany). In a speech given shortly before his resignation, the president revealed that the "promise of 'full partnership'" was "taken from an early memorandum on the college by [the vice-chancellor], which was written in the aftermath of the explosion at Berkeley, at a time when the University was anxious to get ahead of the student revolution." The advance construction budget for building a school whose reason for existence lay in such notions—for building a school that would have five thousand students when completed, was (and the figure will doubtless double by the time construction is finished in the late Seventies) one hundred million dollars. As before in my life, I began generalizing: if such waste and wealth were running wild at one *college* in America....

By June, 1970, the end of the school's second year, three-quarters of the full-time faculty were actively seeking other jobs, more than a third, myself included, had already resigned, and two of the college's three "programs" had virtually disappeared. The only solid and hopeful part of the curriculum was the program for nonwhite students, and when the U.S. invaded Cambodia and four Kent State students were murdered, the nonwhite students moved to keep the school open. They had come there, they said, to gain skills, education. Had U.S. colleges ever closed for the deaths of black students? The particular brand of politics practiced by "white radicals"—a politics I had come to call Suburban-Marxism — was epitomized at an open meeting during the last weeks of the spring semester. After long and angry harangues from the whites about closing down the school, resisting the system, organizing the people, and making the revolution, one of their most vociferous spokeswomen raised her hand for one final question: if the school closed, she asked, what would be done about student credit for senior projects?

Her question was not surprising. The College at Old Westbury was, after all, merely another part of the consumer society, another stop in the suburban shopping center, one where students who did not have to work for a living or for expenses could talk endlessly about their *right* to choose and plan and have all the varieties of courses and programs and educations their minds could imagine. The school, like other so-called experimental colleges, pandered to the students' unhappiness with things as they were, to their dreams of things as they should be, and to their desire for instant gratification—to their desire that all things be immediately and easily accessible and "relevant" to their emotions, their lives. Come to Us, the Old Westbury catalog had sung, We are Different, We are Exciting, We Understand your Alienation, We will give you Relevance and Community.

In dreadful times, when the kinds of education available to bright students at traditional campuses seemed so pale, was it any wonder that Old Westbury had the highest application-acceptance ratio of any college in America? (Question on the 1969 application form: "Do you have a reflection in a mirror?") Was it any wonder that the other new colleges which dispensed the same promises of difference and relevance and community were being flooded with applications? And was it any wonder that students wanted their revolutions *with* a B.A.? (When I'd submitted my course descriptions to the school's vice-president, he had suggested removing my note stating that students would not receive credit for a Fiction Workshop [four credits] if they did not submit a total of eighty pages of writing. Wouldn't this, he asked, "discourage" students?)

Back in America, it was not difficult to understand why the state was willing to give priorities and funds to this kind of "experimental showcase," or why, like the students, I too had been taken in by the school's rhetoric and promise. As with the College at Old Westbury, I would say, so with other things: since Old Westbury was in America —part of America in the year 1970 —why should (how could) it be better than, different from, America?