

EXPERIMENTAL COLLEGES

UNIVERSITY WITHOUT WALLS: REFORM OR RIP-OFF?

BY HERBERT LONDON

Student pressures for change—and the academic reform movement—have forced university administrators of every persuasion to adopt “experimental programs.” In fact, many educators have turned around Lord Falkland’s dictum, “When it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change,” by bringing about change whether it’s needed or not.

And so it goes. After having served a one-year term as New York University’s campus ombudsman, I was appointed last year to preside over the birth of an experimental college program—a University Without Walls. After all, if the university *ombatman* (the title students gave me) could mediate student complaints, why couldn’t he initiate solutions? Where I had once been Solomon, I was now prepared to become Moses. All I had to do—or so I thought—was discover what constituted a sound experimental program, modify it to accommodate NYU’s unique character, and accept the plaudits. However, after eight months, after a dozen trips across the nation to look at experimental programs at seventeen colleges, after having the dubious distinction of getting air sick over Pinkeyville, Illinois (on an Air Illinois “mosquito” in my effort to reach Southern Illinois University), I am still perplexed about what an experimental program is and what standards ought to apply.

It is one thing to announce an experiment and quite another, I learned, to implement a program that is truly experimental. In the name of experimentation some very conventional approaches have been pursued. (That, by the way, is understandable; there are just so many “unique” educational options available. When Hampshire College was organized as an experimental institution two years

ago, the only alternatives to the lecture system were predictably conventional: work-study seminars, student-initiated courses, tutorials, and independent study.) In fact, aside from modest structural reforms within universities, the only “actual” experiments I have observed are those educational projects conducted outside the confines of the campus. The gospel of Chairman Mao is inexorable: Students must get out “there,” away from the cloistered, scholarly elite and close to the common man.

Modest initial attempts to escape the boundaries of the classroom—junior year abroad, work-study programs, and correspondence courses—have paved the way for far more ambitious ventures [SR, July 17, 1971]. New York’s Empire State College, for example, offers students the opportunity to study at a variety of on- and off-campus institutions but has no campus of its own. Projects such as Britain’s Open University [SR, April 29] have abandoned the classroom altogether in favor of TV, radio, and kits of learning materials. Floating colleges aboard ships and traveling colleges that employ a variety of vehicles seek a global curriculum. The New York State Education Department’s Regents External Degree Program awards the baccalaureate to anyone who can pass a series of proficiency exams.

Of all these projects, perhaps the most interesting is UWW, the University Without Walls, a consortium of twenty-one institutions.* Organized in 1970 with seed money from the U.S. Office of Education and a supplemental grant from the Ford Foundation, UWW will enroll about 3,500 students this year. A dozen students have already received degrees from participating colleges. The consortium, called the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities, offers a “Union-UWW” degree.

University Without Walls is built, if that is the word, on student “internships.” In theory, the students construct their own study plans and establish their own community contacts. For example, a candidate for a journalism degree at Skidmore’s UWW is doing editorial work

for a community newspaper. A second student, an anthropology major at the Berkeley UWW extension of Westminster College, has been living with the Hopi Indians, studying their religion, family customs, and ties to the outside world. A third student worked with a lawyer to establish a Community Co-op designed to investigate deferred-payment plans and to protect the consumer from unfair interest rates. Primarily because of his experience in the field, this student has been accepted at Northwestern University Law School.

UWW students can also take courses, theoretically, at any college in the UWW consortium. But tuition varies so greatly among participating institutions (from \$3,400 at Antioch to \$300 at the University of Massachusetts) that transfers are granted in only rare cases. In fact, while University Without Walls was designed in a cooperative spirit, individual programs tend to be idiosyncratic. A typical student program—to the extent that there is one—includes course work, internship, and independent study. However, the proportion of each varies dramatically from one institution to the next, and at some UWW colleges students plan virtually any combination they want.

At almost all participating institutions UWW faculty members are “adjunct professors,” hired on a part-time basis; they are often nondegree holders engaged in business, the professions, or the arts. Presumably, these “mentors” guide student plans and supervise student activities. But, like most other projects, this experiment is as good or as bad as the experimenters. In some cases, students are given *carte blanche*, usually accompanied by little assistance or evaluation. As long as the student wants to do “it,”

*University of Minnesota; University of Massachusetts; Antioch College, Ohio; Bard College, New York; Chicago State University; Goddard College, Vermont; Howard University, Washington, D.C.; Skidmore College, New York; New York University; Friends World College, New York; Loretto Heights College, Colorado; Morgan State College, Maryland; New College, Florida; Northeastern Illinois State University; Roger Williams College, Rhode Island; Shaw University, North Carolina; University of South Carolina; Staten Island Community College, New York; Stephens College, Missouri; Westminster College, Missouri; and Westminster College branch at Berkeley, California.

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whatever "it" is becomes worthy of his efforts.

For example, at one eastern college, well-known for its experimental bent, a student recently obtained a degree for bee keeping. Her father, a bee keeper, was her mentor. According to her own description, "This study included a minimum of courses or exams; it meant staying at home and giving Dad a hand." At another UWW institution a black student contended that he should obtain a degree for the same thing he had been doing all his life: "Working in the ghetto." The difference now, of course, is that his activities are being endorsed by the university. Another student at a West Coast college described his internship as "hanging out with the guys." He means the guys in a drug-detoxification program that he entered one year before starting his college "education" and that he continued for credit after enrolling in UWW. In still another instance, a student was receiving eight academic credits a semester for waiting on tables. He contended that this was a "great deal" and added: "I can make two hundred fifty bucks a week and complete my degree in maybe five years."

Despite the rhetorical claim that getting out in the real world is the most direct route to a good education, field activity does not always achieve its intended goal. Some students are deployed solely as a cheap source of labor. In one project I know of, students took jobs as hospital attendants during a labor dispute and became unwitting union busters, to their later dismay. Other students, captured by the enticement of campaign promises, are exploited for political reasons: A whole generation of students can now lick stamps and distribute pamphlets in their sleep. Other students may not "learn" anything from even the most extraordinary experience. After all, as George Bernard Shaw said, "You can take an ass around the world and it won't become a horse."

UWW allows some university programs that have little quality but lots of gravitational pull on students. The bandwagon effect in higher education should

not be underestimated; college presidents like the idea of saying, "Look at us—we're experimental." Students, in their turn—particularly marginal students—sometimes view experimental programs as a way of getting a degree that would not ordinarily be available to them. I can't possibly recount the number of times I've heard UWW students say, "Man, this is the way to get an education; it's easy." Harold Hodgkinson, a discerning analyst of trends in higher education, considered these factors and others and came to the inevitable conclusion that the University Without Walls is "a benevolent rip-off."

It is a situation reminiscent of the Wizard of Oz. Just when the Wizard is revealed as a fraud, he attempts to redeem himself by telling the Scarecrow: "Don't worry about not having a brain. I know many people at institutions of higher learning who do not have one either. But they have one thing you do not: a degree. So, by the authority vested in me, I hereby confer upon you a doctorate in thinkology."

Besides such serious questions about the educational validity of its experimental programs, the idea of the University Without Walls opens a Pandora's box of procedural nightmares. For example, if the university is attempting to combine scholarship with community service, it seems sensible to offer credit for "life experience" that involves community activity—and all UWW programs do so. They credit, however, the life experience only of those persons formally enrolled in the program. Don't other people have "life experiences" that are equally deserving? To give points to enrollees alone subjects one to the legitimate charge of elitism. And the problem does not end there. If "retroactive credit for life experience" is granted, is it not conceivable that some (enrolled) students will qualify for a degree without having had any college courses whatsoever?

UWW directors at all institutions are now grappling with these questions. The founder of University Without Walls, Sam Baskin, admits that establishing cri-

teria for evaluating life experience "is a very knotty problem. In some places it's still probably kind of shaky. But all UWW institutions are searching for ways to work through this. After all, it's a brand new program, and we're very optimistic."

Life-experience credits can be confusing for students as well as for UWW directors. When we sent out a brochure advertising the new University Without Walls at NYU, begun this fall, we stated that credit for life experience would be granted. Among the replies were these:

"I am an actress, singer, and pianist, and would like academic credit for the work (Broadway, Off-Broadway, E.L.T. stock, television) . . . and study . . . I have done. P.S. I am also an excellent cook."

"What is the responsibility of an educator? To my mind, it is above that of paperwork or tuition and should encourage creativity which adds to the progress of the world . . . I have earned my music degrees in blood, sweat, tears—and expense. . . . Have I earned my diploma in music? Please send it to me by return mail."

Several institutions avoid the procedural morass simply by supporting all student claims. In one northeastern UWW project the director's function is to identify "soft touches" (his term) on the faculty who will give students retroactive credit "without the usual hassle." I sat in on a credit-review session in which a young man who claimed to be teaching swimming in a community club was granted six credits of advanced standing in physical education. He presented no corroboration, took no swimming test, and was asked only one serious question ("How long have you been doing it?"). In another case a student received advanced standing in sociology for having lived in a ghetto all her life. No paper describing her experience was submitted and no examination was required. "My experience is worth more than all the theories in those textbooks," she said, and she was granted eight credits.

Such incidents are certainly not representative. But the very fact that they

exist and are generally well known (and often exaggerated) in academic circles adds to the cynicism that surrounds the issue of credit for life experience.

Despite these difficulties, some fifty colleges are applying to join the present twenty-one in the UWW consortium. Many are eager to hop aboard because of the exciting opportunities that the program, at its best, does offer. But it would be naïve to underestimate the enormous potential for cost saving and revenue generation that is also inherent in the project. The *First Report of the University Without Walls, 1972*, contends that savings can be realized in several ways: "student use of nonclassroom resources, such as internships and field experiences; [use of] adjunct faculty members . . . who often serve without pay"; redefining the teaching role as a tutorial and advisement function with a "large number of advisees"; and reducing construction and maintenance costs in major facilities since learning "activities are conducted in the surrounding community. . . ."

The usual cost cited for educating one undergraduate in a conventional liberal arts program is between \$2,500 and \$3,000 a year, only part of which is covered by tuition. In University Without Walls the average cost is between \$1,500 and \$2,000; often it runs much lower. One reason is that UWW depends on the existence of institutions that it does not directly support. For example, UWW students utilize many university facilities, such as libraries, administrative services, and academic courses to which UWW does not contribute. They also take advantage of community organizations (public libraries, social-service agencies) and of courses offered at other institutions—including other universities. Not only must one ask who pays for *these* services, but also what kind of permanent commitment can be expected from the "regular" (part-time) faculty that may receive no remuneration.

In fact, the University Without Walls calls into question the fundamental assumption on which universities have been established: the need for resident experts in academic disciplines. Traditionally, universities have been judged by the number of academic luminaries they can attract. At a University Without Walls that question is irrelevant. Students can usually select their own mentors, a practice that conceivably could erode the educational quality UWW promises to retain. But if an institution can actually maintain its standards and simultaneously reduce the major item in its budget—faculty salaries—the millennium for the university president will have been achieved.

For some universities, particularly the private ones, the issue is not so much cutting costs as increasing revenue. On

this score UWW has a special appeal. It is capable of attracting students who would not ordinarily apply for admission to conventional undergraduate programs. Thus the university can increase its tuition revenue (about \$2,700 at New York University, an average for private universities) at minimal cost. At NYU only seven of the almost 200 applicants to the University Without Walls had applied to other divisions of the university.

There's more to this, of course, than just the money tree. The UWW is educationally exciting because applicants represent a range in age and experience that is rarely found in other programs. In NYU's this year are an actress appearing in the film *Fiddler on the Roof*; a seventy-eight-year-old woman who is president of the Senior Citizens' Association; the author of a Book-of-the-Month Club selection; an assistant to the scientist who decoded the porpoises' language; a dancer with the Martha Graham Company; the editor of *National Enquirer*; a corporation president whose daughter will be enrolled at another undergraduate division; a first violinist with the New York Philharmonic; the director of Encounter, Inc. (a drug rehabilitation center); and the editor of a newspaper in New Jersey. As Peter Drucker so aptly put it, "Learning is not reserved for those who are too old to play and too young to work."

It's a happy situation, then, that the composition of UWW's student body becomes a graphic selling point to foundations in the incessant academic search for grant money. With traditional sources for undergraduate programs drying up, it is now important to do something "really different" to attract new funds. University Without Walls does this in a way that is often envied by traditional academic projects. In some cases, UWW no doubt deserves its special status and unique ability to fly the experimental flag in search of grants. In other cases, it's just another part of the grand rip-off: Raise tuition revenue, cut costs, and at the same time attract new money to support the experiment. Quality becomes a secondary consideration.

Generally speaking, University Without Walls is a mixed bag: It is not the panacea that some administrators and students believe it to be, and it is probably not the wedge that will open the way to a lowering of the standards of traditional, and at the moment defensive, academics. And, willy-nilly, it is a project that brings to the surface the central issues in higher education. For instance, it demonstrably challenges the nature and meaning of the faculty and its legitimacy as the sole purveyor of knowledge. It asks: If community residents have an integral part in planning student programs, why have professors at all? And if one wants an education from his

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peers, why attend a university? If one knows as much as his professors, why attend class? And if one does not recognize a community of scholars, why work for the degrees it confers? University Without Walls may try to be a halfway house between the halls of ivy and the schoolless society, but it can't have it both ways. Either it merges with the community, or it actively attempts to retain the traditions of academia. I have no hesitation in suggesting that it opt for the latter.

This conclusion does not mean the abandonment of experimentation, but it does mean having experiments conform to accepted academic standards. For example, it may indeed be appropriate to offer credit for life experience. After all, work and travel can be learning exercises equivalent to any conventional course. But some consideration must be given to who monitors these experiences, what quality controls apply, and how you distinguish between experiences. From what I have seen, the answers are not yet available and the questions are asked too seldom.

One notable exception is the University Without Walls at Chicago State, which might well serve as a model for other programs. At Chicago State students are offered a program that combines course work and internship in a sensible manner that permits frequent supervisory discussions and the scaling of self-directed learning to student experience and ability. What sets this program apart from others is its built-in controls and the general good sense of its administrators. Controls are engineered through the idea of faculty-student contracts—an innovation that is being applied in many experimental programs, but with varying degrees of success. The contract obliges students to plan a series of specific activities that can be reviewed and ultimately monitored by a faculty member. It is also a firm agreement that cannot be violated with impunity. And it establishes a standard of judgment and a framework in which to consider appropriate academic activities. For example, at Chicago State only those community institutions that have research activity associated with them are recognized as appropriately educational. Clearly, that kind of restraint on student choice does not en-

sure responsible action—obviously nothing could—but it is one way to experiment without violating conventional academic proprieties. And it is adherence to these proprieties that largely accounts for the success of its particular program.

If University Without Walls fails to provide structure as well as openness, it is likely to become the victim of a time lag between the desire for reform and its actual implementation. That is, much of the pressure to pursue “experiments” in higher education came from the students of the Sixties, the children of Woodstock and before. But if the current proliferation of Jesus freaks and other cults is any guide, a return to some kind of orthodoxy will be the theme of the Seventies. Like any other experiment, the University Without Walls is subject to fickle public taste: “In” today, on academia’s relic heap tomorrow.

If University Without Walls is to become a lasting and valid educational alternative, it will have to reassess what experimentation can do and to whom it should appeal. Not all students adapt well to free learning environments. At Summerhill A. S. Neill allowed children to choose their own learning conditions; he found that disciplined students responded well to freedom. He also clearly demonstrated (and this is often forgotten) that undisciplined children learn most effectively under conditions of constraint and undeviating standards. There is no simple answer. But the dialectic remains critical in education regardless of the level or degree of experimentation. From my observation, those students with basic research skills, maturity, a sense of direction, and the capacity to do work independently can derive the greatest rewards from experimental education. In most cases this does not include the average seventeen-year-old who has just graduated from high school. It probably also excludes the ritualist who is at the university because of peer-group or parental pressure. And it certainly does not include those who seek a college degree only as the “calling card” for a better job.

After touring this nation from coast to coast in my effort to discover the meaning of “experimental programs,” I feel entitled to say that there is rarely anything genuinely new in education. Yet that should hardly make a difference. There are palpably things worth doing that have been done before. But whether they invite the new or resurrect the old, reforms depend for their success on modest objectives. Experimental education is not likely to change the basic character of higher education; it is merely an alternative track for a small group of students. If that were occasionally recalled, few would take the revolutionary rhetoric seriously and even fewer would make exaggerated claims in the name of experimentation. □

EXPERIMENTAL COLLEGES

A SYSTEM DESIGNED TO BE BEATEN

BY JAMES CASS

Experimental colleges and programs are appearing on the educational scene at an increasing rate these days and for a variety of reasons. Most important, perhaps, is the growing awareness that many people who have lacked opportunity, or who do not respond to standard classroom instruction, can acquire very sophisticated knowledge and skills if offered the proper environment and support. Student bodies at experimental institutions, therefore, tend to be unconventional. Vermont Regional Community College, for instance, is designed primarily to serve the urban poor. In New York City the College for Human Services reaches out to low-income urban adults. In Washington State Whatcom (County) Community College is committed to providing relevant education for minorities, returning veterans, the middle-aged, and public school dropouts.

Such nontraditional programs are sparked also by the accumulating evidence that very often there is little correlation between academic learning and adult competence on the job. Coupled with student rejection of conventional higher education programs, these factors explain the growing interest in seeking alternative patterns of learning.

The emerging institutions are a mixed lot. A few are extremely permissive; they appear merely to be reacting against the rigidities of conventional campuses as they ignore traditional academic standards. Others—equally unconventional—are desperately seeking truly new ways to structure programs of high quality for students who have never before enjoyed the benefits of higher education.

Representatives of seven highly experimental colleges and the University Without Walls met in Montpelier, Vermont, late last month to talk things over. Most came to question and to listen—there are few answers yet to the question of how to develop programs for which there are no models, programs that will work for students who have rejected, or been rejected by, traditional institutions.

Aside from the inevitable problems of financial survival, the focus of the conference turned on three fundamental issues:

- The relationship of students, faculty, and administration in a learning

environment in which traditional roles of authority have been profoundly modified, if not rejected.

- Definition of what constitutes a “quality” educational program in a situation in which the specific needs and desires of the student take precedence over traditional courses, credits, and academic standards.

- Means for accurately measuring and evaluating learning that takes place in unconventional ways and nontraditional places.

The experimental college movement is, at least in part, a direct response to the fundamental criticisms of traditional higher education voiced in recent years by such prestigious groups as the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education and the Assembly on University Goals and Governance. Demands that colleges and universities serve a more diverse constituency, and that they become more responsive to the needs of their conventional students, have resulted in dramatic changes on many traditionalist campuses. But the experimental programs go a long step further and start from a different set of assumptions about what higher education should be and how it should function.

“It is necessary to assume,” one conference participant noted, “that it is a valid goal for an educational institution to try to identify the learning objectives of the student and to facilitate his effort to achieve them.” Thus, the institution ceases to be the repository of a well-defined collection of courses, among which the student may select—with varying degrees of freedom—those needed to complete a prescribed curriculum. Rather, it becomes the provider of resources that are placed at the student’s disposal, and he, with the advice and consent of his academic adviser, may make use of them to achieve his own educational objectives.

In the effort to bring a greater variety of resources to the learning environment, many institutions seek out people who possess the diverse talents, skills, and knowledge that exist in every community. This effort clearly represents an unconventional view of what higher education should be—a view that has been succinctly stated by Minnesota Metropolitan State College: “No one will graduate from MMSC simply by going to classes or following syllabi—not because these are evil but