

Cowell. Conclusions.

Experiment as Conclusion

Accounts of the undertaking of Cowell College of the University of California at Santa Cruz—the founding college opened at UCSC’s creation in 1965—typically describe UCSC of 1965 as an ‘experiment’. There has been a succession of ‘experimental colleges’ in America, and the founders of Cowell College believed themselves to be staking a place in that tradition. And they were doing so at a *public* university, a further departure from practice.

The fourth Chancellor at UC Santa Cruz, mandated to mainstream an institution which by its existence challenged the conventional achievements of the Berkeley and Los Angeles campuses, had no doubt about Santa Cruz’ ‘experimental’ character. “As an experimental biologist,” Robert Sinsheimer told the faculty members assembled to be lectured by him, “I know that if an experiment does not work you sweep it into the trash can.”¹

Does the ‘experimental’ shoe fit? Perhaps. But there is another way in which the distinctive undertakings of Cowell College can be framed: as conclusions. They sprang from the judgments of the founding faculty each in his or her own prior institutions and experience. In this dialectic, what had been seen and proven wanting gave birth to new ideas. The founding Chancellor, Dean E. McHenry, had said that he favored broad Divisional administrative units rather than powerful departments because of his experience as Chairman of the Department of Political Science at UCLA, where—he told us—departmental fiefs worked against more productive intellectual relations. There was, corresponding to each initiative celebrated by Cowell College in its

¹ At a special meeting of the faculty, held in Stevenson College 175, 20 February 1979. A better biologist would try to learn why the experiment appeared to him to have failed, and what else he might learn from it.

first days, a critique of higher education in America, a critique of specific practices and habits, authorities and structures, commitments and refusals.

In brief overview, what were the distinctive features of Cowell College and UC Santa Cruz which marked their beginnings?

- **Small Collegiate classes**, with direct conversation between faculty and students.
- **“Core courses”** taken by all students in the College, elements of a liberal education.

Of course, this reflected experience at Chicago, Harvard, Columbia and other institutions. But such core work was rarely found in public institutions.

The College began in 1965 with a three-quarter course in world history. In 1966-67 Cowell College students moved on to a one-quarter course in American history and a one-quarter course—soon expanded to two quarters—on the Middle East, South Asia, and China. At its fullest, probably 1968-69, the Cowell College Core Course was a six-quarter-course sequence taken by all freshman and sophomore students in the college.²

- **The critical disposition.** The aim throughout was to foster students’ interpretive and critical capacities. Substance, then, centered on important concepts and ideas, both to illustrate their force, and to invite critique. The core course was not designed to ‘teach a canon’, but to recapitulate focal arguments. There was nothing in this orientation which departed from tracks well-trod in the past, at Chicago, Reed, Columbia, all of which were cited in faculty discussions,

² The history courses were taught by William Hitchcock and Page Smith, with contributions by Mary Holmes, Jasper Rose, John Dizikes, and others. The comparative societies component was taught by Richard Randolph, Bhuwan Lal Joshi, and Bruce Larkin.

except that faculty members' performances were inevitably stamped by their own idiosyncratic approaches.

- **Confining the courses to *three* each term.**

The Office of the President of the University of California had overseen a proposal to run all campuses on the quarter system, from 1966. Since UCSC opened only a year earlier, it opened to the new system. (Oddly, the course of events was to see Berkeley revert to semesters, and the other general campuses remain 'quarter' campuses.)

The founding faculty decided that it would require only *three* courses at a time, for the explicit purpose of enabling students to focus their attentions on a smaller number of subjects than the more conventional four or five.

- Offering undergraduates only **Pass or Not Passed** (later Pass or No Record) grades, with unpassed work not appearing on the transcript.

Several arguments were made for what became properly known as the Pass/No Record system. It focused on achievements. It recognized that there might be many reasons for a student not to complete a course satisfactorily, and that no purpose was gained by recording that lack of success. It made calculation of a 'Grade Point Average'—seen as an even greater fraud and deceit than grades themselves—impossible. And it spared students from "grade grubbing", a practice seen as distracting and humiliating.

- **Narrative evaluations.** As part of the package to obtain University-wide Academic Senate approval of the proposed P/NP grading system, the founding faculty undertook to write 'narrative evaluations'—brief prose assessments—of students' work in many of their courses. These would form part of the student's 'full' transcript.

Not everyone favored these. There were arguments that faculty should write only for the student, or only for the student and the College (so that advising would be effective). But the argument that employment and graduate school admission required some record more informative than P/NP won the day. And it is doubtful that anything less would have won approval, as the University-wide Senate only gave provisional approval, subject to review, in any case.

- **Commensality.** Once a week the College gathered for dinner, with many faculty present in the first years.
- **Sections and writing in the core course.**
- Open **opportunities for sport** and preparing for life-long activity, taking student health as the guiding principle. In this explicit commitment, conventional intercollegiate athletics were denigrated. (Under a later Chancellor, bent on 'mainstreaming' UCSC, conventional team sports began to receive the lion's share of money and care. The idiocy of his bent for public relations was most evident in his effort to have the sea lion designated as the UCSC 'mascot', rather than the original banana slug.)
- **Interdisciplinarity**, especially among faculty.
- **Equal college share in recruitment, appointment, and advancement.** On the argument that the College offered much of the teaching and advising of students, the College faculties acted much as the departmental groupings (named Boards of Studies, to emphasize their limited role) in all personnel actions.
- **Faculty located in the Colleges.** After temporary housing in a Natural Sciences building in the first year, while the structures of Cowell College were being built, the Cowell College faculty

who were not doing laboratory science had their studies in the College.

- **Students organized by College. The ‘residential college system.’** This may have been the point most often mentioned by University administrators and in the press. It had two significant effects on student learning: if entering as freshmen or sophomores, they shared the Core Course, and they were subject to academic supervision by the Senior Preceptor of the College and his or her staff. But in other respects ‘residential colleges’ were never fully achieved—not in Cowell College, and certainly not in the colleges added thereafter: there were not rooms for all, non-resident students were imperfectly drawn into the College, and students free to select majors and courses from throughout the University often gave the College little attention, especially in their junior and senior years. The key was housing: fewer than half the College’s students came to be in College dorms.
- **Foreign languages** taught by Fellows of the College. Unlike the practice at some state institutions—such as UC Berkeley—where much of the task of teaching foreign language fell on Teaching Assistants, Cowell College set a pattern that foreign language would be offered by long-term regular faculty. (As it worked out, many did so as Lecturers, rather than Lecturers with Security of Employment or as Professors, a sign of less salary and status.)

These twelve practices reinforced one another, putting stress on community, conversation, history and foreign languages, respect for students, intellectual collegiality, and shared study and scholarship.

Are These Practices Replicable?

In a nutshell—as a statement of my sense from observation—some of these practices proved themselves and could

be widely adopted. Of course, they will not be. But here's my short list:

- **Pass/No Record.** I believe there is a compelling case that grades, and even moreso the 'grade point average', are fraudulent and distractive. UC Santa Cruz' recent faculty having decided mindlessly to impose conventional grades, I've found myself coping with student cases for which grades are bizarre, the one-sized-suit-fits-all, the Procrustean Bed. But my real venom is directed at the 'GPA'. I've argued elsewhere that any scientific paper based on evidence and calculations of a kind similar to that used to generate a 'GPA' would be thrown out in a moment by peer reviewers: simply, students take different courses, and the courses they take are graded differently, and as a result using the *collection* of students' grades to make discriminations among them—some are in, others are out—is profoundly unjust.
- **Core Courses.** Common work makes sense, because it makes for conversation. But I must make a disclosure: as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago 1950-54, I took courses which every other undergraduate was also taking.³ So I take that to be the natural way. There must also be gains for all when some are taking courses others do not. But a 'core course' of only six quarter-courses (of an undergraduate program total of 36) is almost certainly a plus.
- **Foreign Languages.** Despite the more widespread use of English in the world, the case for placing weight on students' achieving *actual capacity to read and write* in a language other than English seems to me even more important than in 1965. Cowell College did make one important choice: to make taking

³ Subject to some qualifications, which do not detract from the main point. Most importantly, (i) some students 'placed out' of classes by examination, at entry, (ii) students could choose among foreign languages, and could choose to take or decline a calculus course, and (iii) there were some variations possible in the most advanced courses (for example, a student could elect to take the Humanities 3 course *in a language—texts, presentations—other than English*).

a foreign language *optional*, so that no one was coerced to learn a language. There are also more avenues open for foreign language learning today than in 1965.⁴ Many UCSC students take advantage of the UC Education Abroad Program to study overseas.

- **Interdisciplinarity, commensality, a known point for counsel, and keeping ‘classes-at-a-time’ low in number.** These less-visible choices also seem to me to have been proven sound. But large institutions are unlikely to ask their faculty to eat with and talk with undergraduates outside the classroom, in any important way. They could, however, easily allow students to focus on three [or even two] courses of study at a time. Advising in the College is smart, an act of ‘subsidiarity’.

What Next?

The ‘college’ as we’ve known it may be a disappearing species, to be replaced by networked and decentralized learning. I expect young people to continue to find ways to live and talk together. They—or others—may design new institutions in which informed, text-based conversation is fostered, and thoughtful, systematic learning takes place. The many projects toward ‘distance learning’ ballyhooed today rarely show any new thought, and it would be unwise to assume that no better ideas can be conceived. Of course, universities and colleges today are entrenched institutions, answering to functionaries’ careerism, extraction and profit, however disguised. They sell certification for money. But if smart people find they can learn more effectively *outside* ‘colleges’ than within them, those ‘colleges’ will wither. There is new experience today: perhaps its conclusions will be made actual in novel, ‘experimental’, institutions.

⁴ Each year the quality of computer-based foreign language instructional materials increases, and I foresee programs adopting instruction in which learning from digital material is reviewed and refined by in-person sessions with teachers.

