

# The College that Students Helped Plan

*Building a college from scratch is among an educator's most cherished dreams. Few ever get the chance, and those who do often find the morning-after reality rarely matches their earlier visions. The State University of New York's new and experimental College at Old Westbury is an example of a college that is just being built, and its planning has aroused interest nationwide. Three questions dominate Old Westbury: 1) Can a truly experimental college flourish within a giant state university system? 2) What stamp of character will be imprinted on Old Westbury by a president—Harris Wofford—who is not a seasoned educator, but is a lawyer, a political ac-*

*tivist (arrested with Dick Gregory at Chicago), and a JFK New Frontiersman? 3) Is genuine student participation in institutional planning practical and viable?*

*Old Westbury, now in its first year with eighty-five students, was shaped by Wofford and a small staff, several outside academics—and some twenty-five students from such campuses as Goddard, San Francisco State and Antioch. What really happened depends on whether you were Ralph Keyes (one of the student planners), or Jacqueline Grennan (one of the consultants), or Wofford. Their reports, and those of other planners, follow.*

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## **1 From Out of the Smoke** By Ralph Keyes

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A press agent's dream, the State University of New York's new College at Old Westbury is set in 570 acres of aristocratic splendor on the former Nassau estate of an eccentric horse breeder. Its image is one of excitement, exuberance, experimentation. President Harris Wofford, ex-JFK advisor and onetime Peace Corps dynamo, has brought together a team of Peace Corps-like staffers, turned-on intellectuals and groovy students. Such phrases as "ending the lockstep march," "creative tension," and "asking the larger questions" prance smartly in and out the estate gates. Passionate talk of this being the "most ambitious laboratory in the world for in-

novation in higher education" is frequent and sincere. This, in other words, is to be a college truly innovative, presuming it can duck the suffocating hug of SUNY's massive mother bureaucracy.

I had the luck to spend three months as a student planner midst the luxury of Old Westbury during its gestation period, and I have renewed contact regularly since. This relationship has been a stimulating educational confrontation, yet it has left me with nagging doubts to temper commitment and affection. Today these doubts have turned into hard questions as to whether Old Westbury, despite its image and proclamations, really intends to "innovate"—or even whether it really understands what innovation entails.

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**Ralph Keyes**, assistant to the publisher of *Newsday*, was a student planner at Old Westbury.

The best way to get a grip on how Old Westbury was shaped is to look in on the planning debates, pitched battles fought out over the seminar table and in smoky back offices starting in early 1967 by eight college administrators, a shifting population of student planners and myriad outside consultants. At the head of the table sits Harris Wofford, his educational outlook deeply influenced by years at the University of Chicago during its period of most aggressive commitment to the liberal arts. Even more than his alma mater, Wofford looks upon the prescribed curriculum of Great Books at St. John's College as an educational ideal. The Common Seminar, Socratic Dialogue and the Search for Truth are processes Old Westbury's president has found exciting and hopes will characterize any institution he leads. At the same time, Wofford's experience abroad—on a fellowship in India, in an Israeli kibbutz, with the Peace Corps in Ethiopia—and such elements as his training as a lawyer, his civil rights work and early leadership of the Student World Federalists have tempered any temptation to sculpt Old Westbury in ivory. If too academic for activists, he is too active for academics, and those interested in creative tension should find the mixture pleasing.

Backing Wofford are other adult planners, graduates of Chicago and St. John's, who share his approach with varying degrees of fervor. But it is the president's voice that echoes Hutchins most clearly, asking: "Isn't it true, or likely to be true, that there are *some* things which *every* person needs to learn in order to be free, things as essential to our minds and souls as water and salt, bread and wine are to our bodies?"

"No!" is the cry from student planners across the table. Reading Huxley, Hesse and A. S. Neill they visibly cringe at the mention of Great Books. Raised permissively and educated progressively, they argue passionately for a do-your-thing style of education. Wofford reads their position with reasonable accuracy as: (1) words have run dry, at least most words used by those over 30 will not work with those under 30; (2) college should be a place where everyone, except perhaps the president, is encouraged to do his thing; (3) the curriculum should be a con-

stantly changing smorgasbord, with students and teachers both the cooks and customers; (4) partnership means not token integration of students in the government of the college, but real student power, and (5) through it all, the college should be a loving community where dialogue is both honest and gentle.

If the intellectual positions were reasonably clear in this heated confrontation, the utter confusion of power distribution caused frustration, followed by resentment. The original mandate promised to "admit students to full partnership in the academic world." But the Old Westbury president exerted charismatic leadership, a gentle despotism much like that of Lincoln, who once smiled down at a cabinet united against him, saying, "Eight nays and one aye, the ayes have it." Staunch in his opposition to government by committee, Wofford led when leadership was called for, and when decisions needed to be made, it was usually he who made them (this not always being apparent at the time). "Full partnership" essentially meant all had equal status in attempting to influence the leader. The seminar-style planning process, indeed, was sometimes referred to as "educating the President."

Out of the smoke (coincidentally, Old Westbury's administration building burned to the ground in the spring of 1968) arose a plan that attempted to blend St. John's with the Peace Corps, Oxford with Antioch, Chicago with Goddard. At the core was a common humanities seminar in which "the larger questions" would be discussed by small groups using common sources; social science workshops and independent study would take the remaining two-thirds of students' time. In a dilution of the classical ideal, films and works of art would be deemed as appropriate as books for source materials; besides Plato, Homer and Shakespeare, the suggested common humanities readings would include Camus, Hesse and Malcolm X. Modern skills in the social sciences, teaching and modern languages would be studied in workshops. Students presumably would get to do at least one-third of their own things in the time allotted for independent study, including the opportunity to

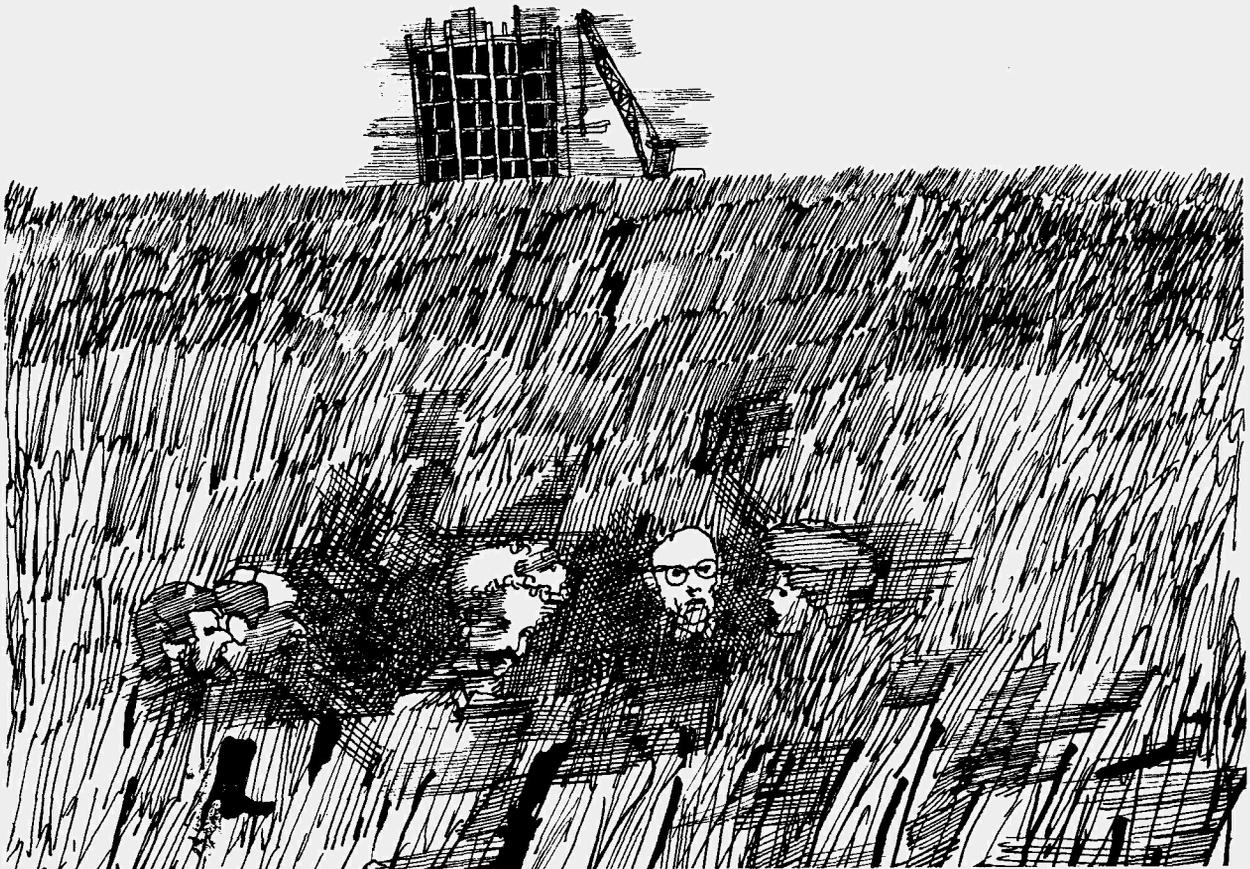
organize their own group-educational programs.

The staple of the Old Westbury cuisine would be small-group seminars in which Socratic Dialogue would follow questions wherever they lead; even the workshops would start with a common social science seminar. Lectures would be limited, generally to visiting speakers. And grades and examinations would be done away with, at least in the usual sense, to be replaced by a mixture of written evaluations, oral exams, consultation, evaluated papers and occasional comprehensive objective examinations. Credits proved impossible to elude, given the university system of which Old Westbury is part, but traditional departments would be *verboten* (at least until the faculty arrived in large numbers).

In the Oxford-Cambridge tradition, a federalist structure was planned to allow several constituent colleges to try diverse approaches as Old Westbury grows—to an estimated 5,000 students by 1970. The first college, which opened

last fall, focused on urban problems, an idea Wofford at first resisted but then enthusiastically endorsed as a “new way to approach liberal studies.” As part of the urban orientation and activist bent of this first curriculum, students will work on field assignments for their second semester (and probably at least two other semesters in later years). Initial assignments will be concentrated in New York community-action and teaching programs.

This is, of course, a decided improvement over most university feeding troughs. But when you get down to it, there is very little really new or experimental about the planned pedagogy at Old Westbury. The basic seminar-forum format is St. John’s all the way. Though the commonness of the program is emphasized at every turn, seminars are nevertheless assured they can take off in their own directions. Independent study is



promised, but the catalog tells students that the social science workshops will point out "appropriate areas" for such study; this part of the curriculum, moreover, is the part in which students will be able to write "a major undergraduate thesis" and in which teaching technology can be studied. Thus, "independent study" proves to be a miscellaneous section of the curriculum in which items not categorized elsewhere find a home.

Even Old Westbury's field program, for all its improvements over sterile academia, has faults. Planning time, staff and resources devoted to the off-campus program are overshadowed by those granted the academic section. The college's sole student dean was for too many months also director of field studies, a burden too great for any one man. And the catalog proclaims cryptically that the study of history is intended as "one of the best correctives to the short-range perspectives produced by an intensive field experience."

In short, no matter how vigorously its hands may finger the modern world, Old Westbury was profoundly obsolete at inception. Students and their sympathizers simply won't buy its sentimental commitment to Great Books, Thoughts of the Ages, Socratic Dialogue, The Western Tradition, and Common Everything. They might have 10 or 20 years ago, and in another decade or two they might again, but not now. Old Westbury's philosopher-kings, I sense, are at-

tempting to recreate experiences they found to be exciting in their own college days. In a forty-ish staff, this means they are still reacting to the atomized elective system, still looking to Hutchins for direction, still reading the 1945 Harvard General Education Report, still reveling in post-World War II better-world idealism, still idealizing the kibbutzim that were. To say that the common seminar approach "may be a major form for education in the future," as Wofford does, is to try to have it both ways—to recreate Chicago *and* call it a trail-breaking departure.

It just won't wash. General education, honors programs, the Great Books, common programs, may have been a legitimate and necessary Anglophilic response to the excessive specialization and vocationalism of the Germanic university system prevailing in this country after the turn of the century. But we are now in a different stage. They may not always be able to define it clearly, but students are profoundly aware of this anachronism. When they talk of "doing their thing," they are simply trying to implement an axiom of modern educational psychology—that learners assimilate best what they discover themselves. These students have been raised on New Math, New Physics, history by sources and politics by experience. The excitement and self-respect engendered by participatory learning won't succumb easily to Great Books lists.

Hip students today (and Old Westbury's students *are* hip) almost instinctively grimace when

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*Is there nothing that everybody ought to learn? The Keyes paper suggests that students come to college now with minds so well trained and rich that all they need is to be left alone so that the seeds already planted will flower. I don't believe it. What is wanted, apparently, is pluralism and creative anarchy. Keyes says, "Whether this current is good or bad is not the point." Well, it's my point. No current should be yielded to merely because it is strong.*

*Am I to take seriously the suggestion that nothing matters except field work? How can field work avoid resulting in a big, buzzing confusion? The implication is that unless something*

*is new it is not worth having. Many old things are not worth having, but I find no argument to prove that everything that happened yesterday will be useless tomorrow. If this were so, everything studied today would be useless tomorrow or the day after. An institution in which everybody "does his thing" appears to be the ideal. Why is this so? Why should such an institution be a community, to say nothing of a loving one? Why should the members of such an institution engage in dialogue? Is there an implication that there is no truth about anything?*

—Robert M. Hutchins

Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions

promised a "common" course. Individuality is the program, and dated talk of community conflicts with their alienated near-nihilism. Christopher Jencks argued for them with this comment in a 1966 paper: "What undergraduate education needs today is not a return to the good old days of 'community' and 'shared objectives,' but an advance toward pluralism and creative anarchy."

Whether this current is a good one is not the point. It is there, runs deep and won't succumb easily to pleading. Even those who would coax today's learners back to the classics have no tactical alternative to starting where students are. Attempting to impose a predefined intellectual goodness on their cocky selves only alienates still further.

It is not so much that students are rejecting deep intellectual experiences, but they don't want these alone; not that they don't wish to read, talk and write, but that they don't wish to deny other forms of communication; not even that they don't want to read Great Books, but that they want to discover these for themselves. The thought that there is some abstract body of knowledge, some residue of learning, some classical ideas essential to an educated man is in basic conflict with their increasing sense of the subjective, the profoundly personal nature of all perceived reality. The over-intellectuality and verbiage of a fierce quest of ideas *in vacuo* rubs

against their grain. Pre-college training today is so rigorous, television so broadening and drugs so mind-expanding that contemporary college students are scornful of mind-body separation. They've turned on, sampled sex, trained their sensitivity, grooved with light shows and are not about to be told that growth occurs best by slithering an idea around a seminar table.

One realization Old Westbury must come to is that programs intending to be "common" must be prepared to deal with those who don't wish to join them—many, I predict. St. John's clearly prescribes and makes no bones about saying participate or get out; Goddard requires virtually nothing. Old Westbury strives for a little of both, but it's oil and water. Its libertarian soul shuns frank compulsion, but enthusiastic talk of "inviting rather than compelling," or "making the program so exciting all will want to join in" begs the question. There is no substitute for prescription if you mean business about a common program. Promise of "full partnership," "breaking the lockstep march," and "each becoming his own teacher" smacks of far more flexibility and autonomy than Old Westbury's highly defined program intends to allow.

"I hope Old Westbury has one of the largest Common Programs of any college in the country, plus one of the largest freedoms to chart your own course," says Wofford. This seeming inconsistency can be attributed to a neo-Marx-

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*When Ralph Keyes speaks of the issue of "full partnership," he puts his finger on a sensitive issue. How often in the early days did I hear people who should have known better bitterly accusing Harris Wofford of having a blueprint for Old Westbury in his mind which awaited only the proper time for implementation, and that all the discussions and time-consuming debate served merely as window dressing. I have never been troubled by the term "full partnership." I find it possible to consider myself a full partner while at the same time recognizing that I personally do not make all the decisions, and that on occasion I am not consulted when decisions are made. Despite this, I share in the de-*

*cision-making process. Some believe that is a game we all play. But I do not. The incredible thing about Old Westbury is the unparalleled opportunity—frightening to some—to exercise one's freedom. Few have seized this opportunity to move the college towards a program embodying their "truth." But out of this somewhat chaotic environment, exciting ideas are somehow being realized. I confess that after a year and a half of total immersion in college planning, I am still stunned by critics who are able to write off what we are doing at Old Westbury as conventional.*

*—Robert L. Goldberg  
Director of Administration, Old Westbury*

ian commitment to the dialectic, but carries within it massive susceptibility to outraged cries of hypocrisy. And, goodness knows, today's students are not sparing with that charge.

What is more disturbing is Old Westbury's basic resistance to individuality and distrust of the learner as his own best guide. Talk of being "alarmed at the anarchy of merely individual exploration of psyches" reeks of intellectual paternalism. Justified or not in the abstract, the attitude inevitably contaminates the open quest for individual growth. And individual growth must be the program for today's higher education, not because of any inherent validity, but because it acknowledges and begins with the inevitable human subjectivity which over-intellectuality attempts to deny. "It is less significant *what* is taught than *how* it is taught," argued one student planner, an educational psychology student, who vainly resisted Old Westbury's tide. She lost the debate.

**N**onetheless, I think Old Westbury will be a success. This is an uncomfortable conclusion, but I feel it rather strongly. Asked to defend the point, I am tempted to fumble about like Sancho Panza when asked what he saw in Don Quixote, then sing out, "I like him!" And Old Westbury *is* an immensely likeable place. It just has a good feel about it. For what Old Westbury does offer, more than any other college I know, is a rare collection of decent, flexible, compassionate human beings. If their defined academic program is questionable, their instincts rarely are. Old Westbury ambles along with the mixed blessing of executives hired more on the basis of human qualities than proven bureaucratic ability. This approach has proved an unquestioned asset in ensuring a humane, flexible staff. Over-bureaucratization is hardly one of Old Westbury's failings.

Admission is a case in point. Administered by a former Peace Corps official and recent Antioch graduate who entered the field cold, the admissions process was generally regarded by the staff as a jewel of the first year's operation. "List three questions you think should be asked

of students applying to Old Westbury and answer them," was a typical query on the application form. Nearby applicants were brought to the campus, interviewed twice, given a tour of the grounds and participated in seminars led by an Old Westbury staffer, occasionally Wofford himself. Others were interviewed in the field. The usual criteria of grades, board scores, etc., weighed far less heavily than staff impressions of "brightness" and "being interesting." An extraordinary 90-plus percent of those accepted chose to attend. Some rejectees felt so much a part of the Old Westbury family that they returned—after rejection—to visit their interviewers.

Ongoing gentle and not-so-gentle humor at Old Westbury indicates something about the place. One caustic faculty philosopher specialized in satire. His memo, entitled "Progressive Education at Winterhole," read:

Here, amid the murmuring pines, ten thousand babies crawl around educating themselves at their own pace. Nurtured by a deep commitment to the philosophical ideal of personal freedom, they are not subject to inhibitions of rules or mores from an oppressive society. Since there is no such thing as teaching, Winterhole has no teachers at all. Inner motivation is the only source of learning. Director A. S. Schlemiel fondly recalls the story of Freddy, who at thirteen had not yet decided to learn to control his sphincter muscles. In fact, at this writing, Freddy is twenty-one and has not yet made the inner commitment. Proud, but soiled, Freddy crawls through life (he has not yet decided to learn to walk either), a truly free man.

This same professor's later piece of scholarship was a play, "A Day at Old Messberry," starring himself (Rory Redsink), V.P. Jerry Seagul and President Harris Waffle. It opened:

SEAGUL: (Addressing assembled staff with some agitation) I *know* there's no more money in the treasury, Bob—but we'll just have to find it somewhere. How else are we going to send our students and faculty for a six-month camp-out at the North Pole?

WAFFLE: Jerry, I wish you wouldn't use that terminology. What is "north" supposed to mean? I sincerely hope that every pole is both a north pole and a south pole—and an east pole and a west pole, for that matter. After all, it's one world, isn't it?

REDSINK: For Chrissake, Harris, there *are* no east or west poles. North and

south are defined magnetic . . .  
WAFFLE: (Interrupting) I suppose that your  
so-called *experts* (heavy sarcasm)  
have come up with that idea.  
Well, Sarge and I could never  
have invented, set up and staffed  
the Peace Corps in thirty-nine  
minutes and three seconds if we  
had recognized such limitations.

What is good about Old Westbury, what is central, is what comes from its activist-libertarian soul rather than its up-tight intellectual ideology. One of the best decisions Wofford made was to insist on starting small, with 85 students, and early—a year and a half after planning started and two years before the master plan deemed necessary. He himself counts that and the involvement of student consultants as Old Westbury's two best initial moves.

It is fashionable to appear innovative, and

Old Westbury now is an integral part of SUNY's dynamic image. If for no other reason than that, Old Westbury will not be permitted to fail. But mainly it will succeed for a reason its leaders would not accept as valid: namely, their instincts are better than their words. It is precisely because I hold the view that articulated ideas are less significant than the whole man, the whole organism in context, that I have hope for Old Westbury. Today's students will not stand for the program Wofford and company theorize. They will revolt, and when they do, the way Old Westbury responds will determine what kind of institution it becomes. Call it softness or call it decency: Old Westbury will end up allowing students to do their thing.

Old Westbury will succeed despite itself.