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NOTES ON THE EDUCATION OF A COLLEGE PRESIDENT

By J. SEELYE BIXLER

THERE is an old story about a brand-new college president who on his first day in office was told by the treasurer that some bonds held by the bank had matured. "You'd better call the bank," said the treasurer, "and see what should be done." "Yes," came the reply from the bank, "the bonds are here. Do you want them converted or redeemed?" A long silence followed. Then the poor college president in a somewhat shaky voice was heard to say, "Am I talking to the First National Bank or the First Baptist Church?"

The story might well have been told about Galen Eustis and me as we sat down to talk over the problems of the college treasury when I first came to Waterville from Harvard. My financial training had been skimpy indeed, and, alas, it was not to be broadened as much as one might wish by my Colby experience. Robert M. Hutchins has remarked somewhere that a college president has five constituencies: trustees, faculty, students, alumni, and the general public, and that he has to spend just enough time with each to antagonize the other four. One could also say that a college president has three chief interests: promotion, people, and principles—or money, men, and metaphysics—and the amount of attention he can pay to each is sharply limited by the demands of the other two.

Apparently, the ability to make two greenbacks grow where one grew before is either given or withheld at birth and is only with difficulty cultivated in later life. Dr. Franklin W. Johnson, my sterling predecessor, was a very shrewd investor, and his talent was of great service to the college. My own father, a Congregational minister on a small salary with little to invest, was nevertheless attracted to an extraordinary degree by Wall Street, and he used to turn regularly to the stock market quotations after reading the first page of the newspaper. I was never able to work up the same kind of interest. So when Galen tried to show me what the college was up against and what it was doing to meet its many emergencies, he found me responsive according to my lights, but he also discovered that

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much of the light was darkness. Mr. Carroll Perkins, chairman of the board's investment committee, was strict in his insistence that I should attend all meetings. "You will not contribute a great deal," he told me, "but as part of your job you ought to know what is going on." I could see the reasonableness of this and for ten years I went faithfully to those Monday afternoon sessions where board members and college officers talked in such an erudite way about commodities and prices. If nothing else, I learned to admire the loyalty as well as the shrewdness of the men who made the decisions. My own comments were limited to stocks whose names fascinated me, such as "Climax Molybdenum" or "Shahmoon," and I used to wonder periodically if I had courage enough to correct the committee's pronunciation of "Fruehauf." Yet with it all I was astounded at the committee's memory. If a question was raised about what Peoria and Eastern Illinois had done on September 20, 1918, someone was sure to know that it had risen half a point on that day but dropped back three-eighths of a percent the day following. Such knowledge was much too wonderful for me; I could not attain to it. And after the first ten years I became less and less regular in attendance, knowing that the matter was in safe hands and that plenty of other problems were clamoring for attention.

Of equal importance with the question how to retain money was the question how to get it. Here the president could hardly refrain from being an active member of the team. Joe Smith, in a very kindly article published in the *Alumnus* when I came to Colby, stated that the trustees had chosen a scholar and teacher, and that in the field of money-raising they were willing to let nature take its course. Alas, the course that nature chose was a rocky one. I shall never forget the sessions of our development committee held before board meetings at the Eastland Hotel in Portland during those first years. It seemed as though we did nothing but sit and look at each other dolefully. Assignments had not been carried out; new prospects were not appearing; money was not coming in. Three women's buildings were in use on Mayflower Hill, but in addition there were five bare, brick shells on a bleak, windswept pasture, and nothing else. Kierkegaard, the melancholy Dane,

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has written of the blank despair that grips the religious soul. We felt the despair and weren't even sure of its religious connotations. I think everyone might at that point have given up and gone home if it had not been for the irresistibly contagious optimism of Dr. Johnson. In his ability to put a bold face on the matter and to refuse to admit anything but ultimate triumph he was one of the most remarkable people I have ever known. In the course of time we worked out a more intelligent plan, more friends stepped in to help, and our hopes for Mayflower Hill as well as for academic changes began to be realized.

Of all the surprises, one of the pleasantest was the increasing amount of interest shown by the parents. Dr. Hutchins's five groups might well have been expanded to include them because their influence was significant. Instead of being discouraged by the rising tuition fees, the parents seemed to be eager to find more channels through which to contribute. I remember very well when Bill Millett came in to the office with the suggestion that we might try a Parents' Day in the fall. We thought we would invite our visitors to drop into class in the morning, then give them a free lunch with a speech or two thrown in, then take them to the football game, and afterwards to tea. Our feeling was that we should be lucky if we had thirty or forty. As I recall it, one hundred came the first year, two hundred the next year, something like four or five hundred the third year, and then the total quickly reached the one thousand mark. Not only did our friends respond enthusiastically to this autumn invitation, but throughout the year they came out in large numbers to alumni meetings and to special meetings called by their own representatives, even when they knew that the object was money. Their aggressive eagerness to push the college forward continued to be most gratifying.

Today many colleges, schools, and hospitals are seeking such large sums of money that the question is often raised whether the country has enough resources to satisfy the demand. The reply of the professionals is that the salvation of our charitable institutions lies with the corporations, great and small. At first they were slow to respond. The habitual reply of officials to all appeals was that stockholders would never approve of this use of their money. It is interesting as well as cheering to see

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how rapidly this attitude is changing. The legality of gifts to colleges has been tested in the courts. Many corporations can now be appealed to on the ground: a) that college graduates are needed as business leaders, and b) good colleges help to build the kind of society where business can flourish. If corporations continue to think along these lines and to see the almost unlimited opportunities ahead we shall indeed have reason to be thankful.

When one considers Colby's strenuous efforts and the solid basis of its appeal it is really surprising that it has not received more gifts of the larger sort. Its greatest benefactor was Dr. George G. Averill who during the course of his life contributed over a million dollars. In my eighteen years at Colby nothing else that was in any way comparable was received. If my memory is correct, the nearest was a gift of one hundred fifty thousand dollars from the Davella Mills Foundation which had to be matched by another hundred thousand. This was received as part of our campaign for the Life Sciences Building. For the most part Colby's money has come from generous people who gave freely but were not able to make the larger and more spectacular donations. And it has been very interesting to see how many contributors have been attracted from outside the college's immediate family. The fancy of the public was caught by the picture of Dr. Johnson, coming to Colby from Teachers' College at the age of 60, making up his mind during his first year in office that the college could not continue where it was, and then persuading the board on June 13, 1930, at the worst possible yet only possible time, to vote "to move the college if and when feasible."

A college cannot move or do anything else of significance unless it has enthusiastic alumni support. When I appeared at Colby as a graduate of another college, I used to wonder whether the alumni would take me into their circle. The first moves were tentative. At one meeting where I made an impassioned plea for support, I couldn't help overhearing the comment one elderly lady in the front row made to her neighbor. "He ain't so good-looking as the other fellow, is he?" she remarked. As time went on I found that more and more alumni, instead of holding back with a shyness that matched

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my own, would come forward with the most cordial of greetings. So alumni trips, instead of being ordeals, became occasions to which I looked forward with eagerness. Each year I met more friends and each year it seemed as if the friends became warmer. Before we left, Mrs. Bixler and I knew that we could not have found a group more congenial to work with or more generous and outgoing in their expressions of feeling. We were strangers and, in the best Biblical sense, they took us into their hearts and lives in a wonderful spirit of comradeship.

The heart of the college is of course the faculty. A college president has no more solemn obligation, just as he has no more fascinating task, than that of choosing the best available faculty members and giving them the best available facilities with which to work. During the last eighteen years the Colby faculty has grown in more ways than one. The other day Norman Smith was reminiscing about the faculty meetings that our living room at 33 College Avenue was large enough to house. He recalled his coming in early to help arrange the chairs and, at the end, Mrs. Bixler's appearance with brownies and coffee and cocoa to introduce the social hour. When I went to Colby I thought that a faculty meeting should be the outward and visible expression of an inward spirit of harmony and cooperation. The limitations in this view were brought home to me when one member of the faculty remarked that he did not like coming to the president's house for faculty meetings because as a guest he couldn't express his mind with the vigor and independence to which he was accustomed. The point was of course that a faculty meeting ought to bring out the clash of opinions that are a sign of growth. It is impossible not to sympathize with this to some extent. And yet, what proportion of faculty debates really produce good ideas and good action? And why is the proportion as small as it is? I speak as one who is himself by profession a faculty member. In the words of the old song: "I'm a teacher born and a teacher bred and when I'm gone there's a teacher dead." Yet I must confess that I am less convinced than I used to be that a teacher as such must always have a clearer vision of the truth than his non-professional neighbor. We are all familiar with the remark: "A professor doesn't have to meet a payroll."

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I used to ask myself whether having to meet a payroll would actually open anyone's eyes to the facts. Somewhat surprisingly I have come to the conclusion that to some extent it might. I mean simply that one can see cases where the security of the teacher's life leads to a certain kind of irresponsibility. It is hard to account in any other way either for the extraordinary ideas sometimes propounded in faculty meeting or for the extraordinary amount of time taken to explain them. Not having either to meet a payroll or to punch a time-clock may not be an unmixed blessing. By the same token, when a person with the native intelligence needed to gain a Ph.D. degree coupled with a teacher's concern for people does discipline himself and does achieve the mastery which allows him to see ideas steadily and in their wholeness, the result is a human as well as professional triumph. There are no finer people in the world than great teachers and over the years Colby has had its share. My faculty colleagues at Colby were both a constant intellectual stimulus and a source of the satisfaction that comes only with the richest friendship.

Speaking of faculty discipline I should like to mention one other matter. All of us are familiar with the "Publish or Perish" policy of some of our larger universities and with the natural and legitimate faculty protest against it. A young aspiring teacher can be crushed in spirit and driven into a bad nervous state by the feeling that he must publish, and his effectiveness in the classroom can be seriously hampered. On the other hand, if he does no writing at all, I believe his teaching will suffer. There are of course brilliant exceptions whom all of us can call to mind. Yet, by and large, the discipline of putting one's ideas down on paper and submitting them to a larger and more critical audience than students provide is one which the teacher neglects at the price of failing to grow as he should. It has been a satisfaction to see the Colby faculty finding themselves in greater agreement with this view as time has gone on.

The least understood group in the college constituency is the board of trustees and in some ways it is the group which has the greatest power—either for evil or for good. I came to Colby knowing very little about trustees but with the general

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feeling that if a conflict between faculty and trustees should arise, the faculty were bound to be right and the trustees just as bound to be wrong. It is a mark either of mental growth or mental degeneracy that experience has modified that opinion to some degree. In a conflict with faculty, trustees are apt to be right at least part of the time! There are of course trustees and trustees. At the board meetings of fifteen to eighteen years ago it seemed to me that the lawyers enjoyed nothing so much as a chance to hold up the proceedings so that they could haggle over the dotting of a legal "i" or crossing of a legal "t". Largely under the influence of Neil Leonard, himself a lawyer, this was changed and our board became more and more concerned with the larger issues and competent in dealing with them. I have been particularly happy to have faculty members on the board because, in addition to representing the faculty point of view, their board membership has given them a chance to see how well some business and legal minds deal with problems of teaching and learning. We who teach need to be reminded that we are not the only ones who have an interest in and an understanding of educational questions. A layman's fresh approach is at times full of insight. When one considers how little most of Colby's board members have had to do with schools in a professional way, one marvels at their willingness to spend so large a part of each board meeting discussing educational issues. It is good to note also that this concern has strengthened instead of weakening their ability to deal with the college's financial problems.

All these various college groups have their final justification in what they do for the students. It is the student in whom we are ultimately interested. Yet what havoc has been wrought in educational thought and practice by the expression "student-centered." Our efforts do, indeed, center in the student, but not in the student-as-such. It is the learning, reflecting, and advancing student with whom we are truly concerned. The progress and achievement of the student is actually our aim. This means that it is *the student capable of going ahead* that really commands our attention.

Do we have students with such capabilities now? Of course we have some, but are they enough? It seems to me that in

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these days of pressure for admission one of the central problems of college administration lies right here. None of us wants Colby to be a place which denies entrance to the average, healthy, normal boy or girl. On the other hand, none of us wants Colby to be a college that tolerates mediocrity.

The dilemma is not imaginary. Our belief in democracy requires us to put our best colleges at the service of the average. Our understanding of the needs of the intellectual life, however, forces us to see that we cannot be content with average work. A student who thinks only passably well has not really thought at all. In talking to the alumni about this problem I have often said that the boy we want above all else at Colby is the one who can be stimulated by excellent teaching to "play over his head" in the classroom just as through good coaching he is often led to rise above his supposed limitations on the athletic field. For this we need first of all a very shrewd admissions policy. Our officers must be able to pick candidates with latent abilities that can be brought out. It goes without saying that we also need teachers with a passion for ideas and an enthusiasm for sharing them. In the third place, we need more than a sprinkling of students who are gifted themselves and can communicate their own interest to their less gifted fellows.

My feeling is that we shall be helped immeasurably in finding such candidates and stimulating them after they are found when the general public has a more intelligent view of what the colleges are trying to do. So long as society in general judges a college by its athletic record, thinks of its opportunities as leading to business "contacts," and supposes its life to resemble that of a pleasant social club, the cause is hopeless. Fortunately the war shook us out of most of our complacency, and competition with Russia is rapidly eliminating its last vestiges. The nation is at last looking to its colleges with great expectations. But one difficulty is that it does not know what form these expectations should take and is not clear in its own mind about the relation of academic achievement to the demands of good citizenship. This is where the college president, who meets various sections of the public on frequent occasions and under varied auspices, has an extraordinary chance to do constructive work as an interpreter.

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The editor of the *Quarterly* asked for a few reminiscent opinions. I have used up so much space on the two subjects of promotion and people that little room is left for philosophy. But I may perhaps be allowed one final comment on the subject of curriculum reform. I came to Colby all fired up with the hope of introducing a new curriculum based on history, with the history of philosophical ideas as the main strand and the history of science and history of literature as sub-divisions. I soon discovered how hopeless it would be to try to work any such change at that particular period in Colby's development. This led to the question whether such changes are desirable at any time. A good teacher will teach well in any curricular setting. If, then, a college has a well-established curriculum that is producing good results, should one ever attempt to upset it? Aren't new proposals apt to be merely "gimmicks"—just "a bag of tricks" as someone has called them?

The answer depends of course on what the particular gimmicks or tricks are in themselves. Yet I think it can be laid down as a general rule that even a good curriculum tends to go stale and that real improvements can from time to time be made and should be tried in spite of the anguished cries and massive opposition they provoke. The opposition can be very powerful. It must be felt and experienced to be understood. And of course some of it is well reasoned and not based merely on unwillingness to modify one's methods of teaching. Yet the changes made in the Colby curriculum during the last eighteen years, slight as they are in comparison with what might have been done, seem to me to have pointed in the right direction and to have made for a livelier advance toward the citadel of truth. The most important change, the adoption of the "January Plan" was brought about almost singlehandedly by the persuasive influence of my brilliant successor. To me this is only one of many indications that Colby has now on the bridge one who will not lose his bearings and will steer the college on the right course through whatever troubled seas may be ahead.

That he and the college may receive the same magnificent loyalty shown in recent years to this wonderful institution and those who have tried to serve it is my dearest wish.