

Upon Ten Years at Hunter

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The milestone of a decade of participation in the Hunter College community is a good time to stop for a look both at the past and at the possibilities for the ten years ahead. There must have been few spans of time in the history of the institution when a newcomer could have felt so absorbed in a rapidly changing universe.

In these ten years the student body has doubled in size; we have become part of a City University with an attendant emphasis upon graduate programs; the Park Avenue Division has become co-educational. The faculty has increased in numbers; many curricula have been added; the School of General Studies has grown greatly; a new President has been inaugurated; and there have been revisions in the administrative structure. What do all of these changes mean in terms of student services for the decade ahead?

When I arrived at Hunter in the fall of 1955 I was happily surprised to find many kinds of personalized endeavors that generated the climate of a small college, even though we were set down in the center of a vast metropolis. I observed small classes with freshmen taught frequently by experienced scholars, assemblies at which the entire student body was present, individual interviews with all incoming students, and numerous traditions of a past day—Sing, Boat Ride, the Alumni “breakfast,” to mention a few.

It is true that we had our share of that variety of student, common to all urban commuting institutions, whose focus of existence is outside and who rides in on the subway and out again, ending up at last with a diploma and little more to show for her presence in our midst. But we had many others who loved the College and its traditions and who participated intensely in its life, sometimes in small closely-knit groups sponsored by a department or a religious group, where annual ceremonies, a continuing dedicated adviser, and a returning nostalgic alumnae group gave members the sense of having a past and a future as well as a present.

I seem to be writing in the past tense as if all of these phenomena belonged to a departed day. Of course they do not. Some of the traditions have been abandoned because they no longer appeal to the new generation of students; but other customs have arisen that show vitality and make a real contribution to the life of the College.

I wish only to suggest that Hunter in the past has seemed to place more store on personal contact, in class and out, than have most urban colleges, and I emphasize this as a prelude to the question: How can we, in the ten years ahead, sustain and foster this individualized quality in the experience of our undergraduates? The query may be more relevant in light of the revolts against mechanization and anonymity that have occurred on campuses across the country, but it must of necessity have been on our consciences anyway. All of us, looking back on our own undergraduate days, know well that the episodes of great illumination that stand out in our minds were either at those moments when we hammered out our social and political concepts in debate with a fellow student or an instructor, or when we sat alone with our books formulating the background for such encounters. (Meyer Liben's article on CCNY in the 30's, in the September 1965 issue of *Commentary*, is an excellent description of such education.)

What are the requisites for this kind of college experience? They are three: a faculty (including counselors) who are not only actively engaged in scholarship themselves but who are willing to take the students into partnership with them in their search; a superb library which can supplement and extend the classroom; and physical facilities where faculty and students can come together for intellectual stimulation. By this I mean seminar rooms, faculty offices, student-faculty lounges, dining areas, and other such accommodations that facilitate face to face communication.

The strength of the Park Avenue Building is also, ironically, its weakness. Its closeness to museums, theaters, libraries and concert halls (one can be at the doors of Lincoln Center in ten minutes by the 65th Street cross-town) makes it also the most sought-after residential area in the city. The unavailability and the subsequent cost of building space mean that the kind of student and social center where faculty and students can meet is difficult to come by. Roosevelt House cannot begin to take care of our expanded undergraduate needs. I cite these lacks only by way of saying that we have a certain number of “givens” in our situation. We have a student body that has to get out of the building as fast as possible to make room for others; we have faculty members who



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talk to students leaning against the walls of the hallways before undertaking their own long commuting trips home. We have a counseling staff too small to take care of all the needs of students. Furthermore, with the necessity for financial support for other divisions of the City University, particularly the burgeoning community colleges and the doctoral programs, there seems little likelihood that we can expect immediately from public revenues the sums required to expand greatly either our plants or our staff. These are realistic hurdles which we must face and for which we must find solutions.

How can a Dean of Students' office help young men and women, who are attending college under these conditions, arrive at a productive undergraduate experience? Ideally, we can do three things: we can assist and support them individually at times of critical decision making; we can work with them in developing a satisfying group life with other students and with faculty; we can do our best to utilize those facilities we have to contribute the most possible toward promoting these goals.

The choice of a major that the student will find exciting the rest of his life, one which he will enjoy in his leisure and which may provide the basis for a satisfying vocation, is likely to be the most important decision in the first two years of college. Discussions with faculty and with counselors help to identify and extend these interests. The knowledge that the major can be utilized vocationally is a great reassurance, and in this the serv-

ices of our career counseling and placement office can play a significant role. Students may clarify their alternatives for tentative vocational choices and may learn more about vocations related to the majors. They may arrange part-time or summer employment to test out some of these interests.

Another area in which students frequently need assistance is in the matter of becoming independent persons, able to make wise decisions on their own, to be self-reliant, to respect themselves, and therewith to trust and relate with warmth to other human beings. This kind of maturity should be the preamble to a good marriage.

Counselors do not tell students what to do. That would only perpetuate their dependency upon some external authority. The counselor tries to help the student understand his own feelings and the courses of action open to him, leaving the choice to the student himself.

Even in a tuition-free college most students have to do a good deal of financial planning. They need to work out a plan of part-time employment, loans, and scholarship grants. Here again the counselor can help.

These are examples of the ways in which counselors work with students on an individual basis. Now I should like to mention briefly some of the group activities by which we attempt to make the life of the College more personal. The first is the orientation program whereby, through the assistance of faculty and a special group of trained upperclassmen known as "Orientation Assistants," we try to help new students become integrated into college life. One part of this orientation is the freshman weekend held at the beginning of each semester. Upper classmen and faculty participate with the freshmen in discussions and recreation. We are also blessed with a strong and dedicated Student Government Association which sees as its purpose the improvement of all aspects of student life. The forums and discussions they sponsor have added a great deal to our sense of community. The departmental and special interest organizations, the religious clubs, the Greek letter societies, and house plans offer opportunities for students to extend their interests and social contacts.

The Dean of Students' office takes as its primary obligation the support and development by every means possible of those personalized aspects of college life that have been important in the past. We need the continued assistance of the Alumni. It is heartening to have the assurance that this is forthcoming. You have helped us both with your loving labor and with your money. These are important in the tasks ahead.

If we combine our energies and our creative imaginations with yours, we shall go a long way toward our goals of sustaining those aspects of Hunter life precious to all of us, and of finding fresh ways to meet our emerging needs in the challenge of a new day.