When Experimental Was Mainstream: The Rise and Fall of Experimental Colleges, 1957–1979

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Throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, dozens of experimental colleges were founded across the United States. While these institutions are usually remembered as either a fringe movement of the 1960s or a niche for nonconformist students, this essay argues that their genesis was markedly mainstream. Drawing from popular trends, higher education leaders in the late 1950s designed the institutions to be the most efficient means of educating a rapidly growing population into an open-minded, liberally educated citizenry. Despite initial growth, by the end of the 1960s, rifts emerged between students and experimental college leaders. These conflicts, combined with a broader loss of material and ideological support, led the movement to lose its legitimacy as a mainstream reform. By highlighting the history of experimental colleges, this essay prompts a reconsideration of this movement’s importance and its connections to larger trends in undergraduate and general education in the mid-twentieth century.

In 1958, Hofstra University unveiled plans for a new “experimental college” that would replace traditional grades and course requirements with independent study and new interdisciplinary courses. Hofstra’s leaders proposed that the new college within the larger university would offer a more efficient pathway to a rigorous liberal education for the rising number of “good-average” students seeking a college education.¹ The plan immediately received praise from journalists and educators, who said it could “revolutionize college education.”² Hofstra was only one of several institutions to establish experimental

¹Hofstra College Study Committee, “Proposal for the Establishment of an Experimental College,” Liberal Education 45, no. 2 (May 1959), 205.
colleges over the next few years, and by 1960, professional associations, foundations, and government reports had all called for more such institutions. While these experimental colleges were heterogeneous, they shared a core set of pedagogical principles—interdisciplinarity, independent study, and intimate intellectual community—and a common mission of bringing a rigorous liberal education to an expanded body of students. Support for the colleges grew throughout the 1960s, and by the end of the decade, higher education leaders had founded nearly forty new experimental institutions. By the mid-1970s, however, the vigor of the experimental college movement had dissipated substantially; many colleges had closed, and those that remained were increasingly viewed as institutions specifically for unconventional students. In less than twenty years, what began as a widely praised, respectable effort to improve undergraduate education had become a small collection of alternative colleges.

In the years since their heyday, most portrayals have missed experimental colleges’ genesis as a mainstream reform of the late 1950s. Instead, authors have generally characterized the institutions as either a 1960s fringe movement or grouped experimental colleges like Hampshire College and The Evergreen State College together with other alternative institutions that serve a “very small market niche.” This may be because the origins of experimental colleges as a movement have received little historical analysis. While authors have written accounts of many individual colleges, only a few scholars have examined them as a comprehensive group, and this scholarship usually seeks to explain why some institutions survived and others failed. Much less attention has been placed on what gave rise to this movement.

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4 This paper examines experimental colleges that were comprehensive undergraduate programs and comprised the entirety of students’ coursework for at least two years. These were created as either stand-alone institutions or independent subcolleges within a larger university.


6 Histories of single institutions are often written by individuals who were personally involved with them, for example, Katherine Trow, Habits of Mind: The Experimental College Program at Berkeley (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies...
movement in the first place. Additionally, studies often group together experimental colleges from different periods, such as those inspired by John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn in the 1920s and 1930s—Bennington, Black Mountain, and University of Wisconsin’s Experimental College—along with Great Books colleges such as St. John’s and Shimer.\footnote{Arthur Levine, \textit{Why Innovation Fails} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980); V. R. Cardozier, ed., \textit{Important Lessons from Innovative Colleges and Universities} (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993); L. Jackson Newell et al., eds., \textit{Maverick Colleges: Ten Notable Experiments in American Undergraduate Education} (Salt Lake City: University of Utah: Utah Education Policy Center, 1993); Townsend, Newell, and Wiese, \textit{“Creating Distinctiveness”}; Gerald Grant and David Riesman, \textit{The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); and Kliewer, \textit{The Innovative Campus}.} While important connections exist between these earlier colleges and the experimental colleges of the 1950s and 1960s, grouping them together conflates their distinct histories.

By studying experimental colleges as a coherent movement rooted in popular intellectual trends, this essay demonstrates that higher education leaders in the late 1950s designed these institutions to be the most efficient means of educating a rapidly growing, college-going population into an open-minded, liberally educated citizenry.\footnote{This essay draws from several types of sources to capture the breadth of this movement. To understand experimental colleges’ popularity and connections to mainstream educators, I examined professional higher education journals from 1955 to 1980, such as the \textit{Association of American Colleges Bulletin} (Liberal Education after 1959), \textit{AAUP Bulletin}, and \textit{Daedalus}, supplementing this with selected foundation and government reports. I paid particular attention to AAC Annual Meeting notes, including an exhaustive review of the Presidential, Board of Directors, and Liberal Arts Committee’s reports. To study the many individual colleges that made up this movement, I drew from online and local library sources. Some institutions had extensive online archives and received substantial newspaper coverage, while for others I had to rely on secondary sources. Finally, to understand the intellectual and social context of the period, I referenced secondary literature.} Experimental colleges proliferated throughout the following decade, fueled in part by an alignment between the goals of mainstream reformers and the new student culture of the 1960s. By the end of the decade, however, when activism was shaking many campuses, experimental colleges experienced even more dramatic rifts because their students had greater expectations of personal freedom and participation in institutional governance. In the 1970s, these conflicts with students, combined with a broader loss of material and ideological...
support, led the movement to quickly lose its legitimacy as a mainstream reform and instead become an alternative niche.

Analyzing the experimental college movement helps enrich our understanding of undergraduate education in the 1950s and 1960s. These decades have been viewed as a “golden age” of growth in higher education, and historians have detailed the dramatic expansions of federal funding, research, and certain institutional sectors, like community colleges. Scholars have also scrutinized the less savory aspects of this period, such as the impact of the Cold War and the Red Scare. Comparatively, the scholarship on changes in undergraduate education is still developing. Scholars have documented, in broad strokes, the decline of general education requirements from the late 1950s through the 1970s. They have given a great deal of attention to the ascendance of the general education movement in the late 1930s and 1940s and to student pushback against requirements in the late 1960s. Yet, the transition from the general education movement to student rebellion against it hasn’t been examined in as much depth.


By studying experimental colleges as an important reform movement, this essay adds two elements to our understanding of this transition. First, it illustrates how, through experimental colleges, reformers continued to promote general education requirements for longer than is ordinarily noted, extending well into the 1960s. Second, it illuminates some of the dynamics that made these requirements so vulnerable to student pushback. As experimental college leaders promoted general education, they also sought to cultivate greater student independence and collegiality with professors. Students were excited by these innovations and flocked to the schools, but they balked at the curricular requirements that came with them. Thus, by viewing experimental colleges as a continuation of the effort to invigorate general education, we can see how they also opened the door to conflicts that would eventually contribute to the gutting of that very curriculum. In this way, this essay also adds to existing literature about the initial synergies and ultimate conflicts between liberal intellectuals of the 1950s and the young radicals of the 1960s, by showing how that dynamic played out in specific higher education institutions.13

The Late-1950s: Context for Experimentation

In the late 1950s, a potent combination of material abundance and external pressure gave higher education leaders the resources and impetus for experimentation. The 1950s American economy was unchallenged globally and grew steadily, leading to the growth of an unprecedentedly affluent society, the rapid expansion of the middle class, and an era of economic optimism and surplus mentality.14 Paralleling this economic growth, college enrollments rose dramatically. The GI Bill helped double the number of college students between 1944 and 1955, and reports as early as 1957 predicted that the baby boom would cause an even more rapid explosion of college students in the 1960s. Increased enrollments meant bigger budgets, and expanded federal research funding provided a new source of outside income.15

With this abundance also came intense pressure. The “disturbing” scale of expansion daunted college leaders. They were concerned that enlarging colleges would dilute the quality of their education and make institutions more impersonal and bureaucratic. The Sputnik crisis in 1957 amplified these anxieties, with reports highlighting the weaknesses of undergraduate education and claiming that college students were “going soft.” Higher education leaders in the late 1950s were thus forced to think in bold new ways about the future of their institutions. Previous research has documented how the policymakers and institutional leaders of this period created master plans to calculate how much existing schools could expand and how many new institutions would need to be created. But some educational leaders were not only concerned about creating seats for more students, they also wanted to transform the nature of the education they offered. To test innovative pedagogical practices, these leaders used the opportunity provided by growth to create a new type of institution: the experimental college.

Experimental colleges emerged as local initiatives—usually spearheaded by tenured but unrenowned liberal arts professors—that received national support from philanthropic foundations and prominent educators. This resulted in a movement that was decentralized yet stitched together by shared connections and a common educational vision. For example, in 1956 the presidents of Amherst, Smith, Mount Holyoke, and the University of Massachusetts felt the “imminent demands upon American colleges to provide space and opportunity for a vastly enlarged body of students.” However, they were reluctant to expand their own institutions because they feared their colleges would lose their character if they grew and, as “successful, prestigious” institutions, they were resistant to change. With support

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from the Ford Foundation, the presidents commissioned four liberal arts professors, one from each college, to draft a plan for a new institution, which would eventually become Hampshire College.\(^{21}\) After consulting with over two dozen outside scholars, in 1958 they published *The New College Plan*, which they said reflected the “widespread opinion in the academic world.”\(^{22}\) The plan immediately received national attention. Theodor Distler, executive director of the Association of American Colleges (AAC), praised it in his 1959 annual address, and the Ford Foundation offered a $6 million matching grant to support the prospective college.\(^{23}\)

Michigan State University (MSU)–Oakland emerged from a similar local initiative that received national input. Facing competition from the University of Michigan, MSU sought to expand into Oakland County, a suburb of Detroit projected to grow. When D. B. Varner, a vice president at MSU, was appointed chancellor of the proposed school in 1957, it was a blank slate, apart from a mandate to serve the region’s primarily first-generation, commuter students. Varner began soliciting input from local superintendents and businesspeople, which expanded into seminars that brought in twenty-one leaders from around the country, including the presidents of Vassar College, Johns Hopkins University, New York University, California Institute of Technology, and Pennsylvania State University, as well as Henry Heald, director of the Ford Foundation, and Henry Luce, editor-in-chief of *Time*. Synthesizing what the presenters described as the cutting edge of educational approaches, Varner developed a plan to use independent study, educational television, and interdisciplinary team teaching to bring a top-notch liberal education to commuter students.\(^{24}\)

Other experimental institutions were created through similar dynamics but took the form of “cluster colleges”—small, comprehensive colleges within larger universities.\(^{25}\) For example, in the mid-1950s at Wesleyan, the younger faculty wanted the college to grow and become a more research-focused university. President Victor

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\(^{21}\) Despite national acclaim for the proposal, leadership changes at the sponsoring institutions shelved the plan. Hampshire was formally founded in 1965, after a renewed campaign for development. For clarity, I refer to the initial proposal as the New College Plan and the eventual college as Hampshire.

\(^{22}\) Barber et al., *The New College Plan*, 4.


Butterfield pushed back against this; president for over a decade and a philosophy professor at the school since 1935, Butterfield did not want Wesleyan to lose its small, liberal arts focus. Instead, inspired in part by his readings of Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead, he proposed that the institution grow by creating two new interdisciplinary clusters: the College of Letters and the College of Social Studies. With support from the Carnegie Corporation and input from scholars such as Harvard’s David Riesman, the cluster colleges were founded in 1959.26

While experimental colleges emerged from diverse local initiatives, foundations and collaborations with external professors connected the institutions with reform at a national level. The Ford Foundation was particularly influential in catalyzing the movement. Clarence Faust, vice-president of the Ford Foundation and previously dean of The College at the University of Chicago under Robert Hutchins, supported experimental colleges because he believed they offered efficiencies that could meet the need for expanded enrollments and increased rigor while also helping to “strengthen and safeguard liberal education against the inroads of increasing specialization.”27 For example, Faust thought new interdisciplinary curricula would eliminate “duplications” across courses, which would free up space in curricula to cover both new scientific advances and the humanities.28 He also hoped innovations like independent study and educational television would allow a smaller faculty to teach more content and increase intellectual rigor. The Ford Foundation believed it could magnify its impact through this type of pilot initiative. It funded experimental colleges because they were capable of rapid change and would serve as provocative demonstrations to traditional institutions, which “tend to resist change.”29 The Ford Foundation supported about half of the experimental initiatives before 1960—the New College Plan,


Monteith College, and New College of Hofstra—though its proportional support and influence decreased as the movement grew.\textsuperscript{30}

Experimental colleges were also informed by extensive collaborations between professors and higher education leaders, especially those with strong ties to small liberal arts colleges and earlier experiments like Bennington and Antioch. Riesman was a particularly conspicuous consultant to these new institutions. He had a strong commitment to interdisciplinary undergraduate teaching that dated to his years instructing Chicago’s social science sequence and he held an interest in educational innovation that he attributed, at least in part, to personal connections to Meiklejohn and Dewey.\textsuperscript{31}

Riesman had connections to projects such as New College of Florida, Wesleyan’s cluster colleges, the New College Plan, MSU–Oakland, Monteith and, later, the State University of New York (SUNY) Old Westbury.\textsuperscript{32}

These national connections helped create a shared vision for experimental colleges and brought them support and acclaim. From 1957 to 1963, experimental college leaders founded nearly a dozen institutions and conceived of at least another dozen more. By 1960, the US Office of Education had highlighted the potential of experimental colleges in a series of reports on improving undergraduate education, and the AAC regularly applauded the colleges as well.\textsuperscript{33} In just a few years, experimental colleges were gaining legitimacy as a popular reform for improving undergraduate education. For a list of the institutions discussed in this article, see table 1 below.

1957–1964: The Vision and Pedagogy of Early Experimental Colleges

While experimental colleges of the late 1950s and early 1960s were diverse in many ways, they shared a core vision that embodied the ideals of late-1950s liberal intellectuals: invigorating liberal education

\textsuperscript{30}Fund for the Advancement of Education, Decade of Experiment, 91–92.


\textsuperscript{32}Grant and Riesman, The Perpetual Dream, 220; Hayes, “A History of the College of Social Studies,” 19; Barber et al., The New College Plan, 54; Riesman, Gusfield, and Gamson, Academic Values and Mass Education; and Harris Wofford, “New College at Old Westbury,” in Gaff, The Cluster College, 182.

Table 1. Experimental colleges founded 1957–1972

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Parent institution</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Founded</th>
<th>Closed, reformed, or open</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oakland</td>
<td>Michigan State Univ.</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>∼1978 (reformed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New College Plan/ Hampshire College*</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>1958/65</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleges of Letters &amp; Social Sciences*</td>
<td>Wesleyan Univ.</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monteith College</td>
<td>Wayne State Univ.</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>1979 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New College*</td>
<td>Hofstra Univ.</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>∼2006 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Valley State Colleges</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>∼1983 (reformed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New College of Florida*</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>1975 (reformed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raymond College*</td>
<td>Univ. of the Pacific</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>1979 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franconia College*</td>
<td>NH</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>1978 (closed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitzer College*</td>
<td>Claremont Colleges</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beloit College's “Beloit Plan”*</td>
<td>WI</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>1978 (reformed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union for Experimenting Colleges &amp; Universities*</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>1982 (closed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Program</td>
<td>San Jose State College</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>1971 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Bay</td>
<td>Univ. of Wisconsin</td>
<td>WI</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>∼1978 (reformed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin Morrill College</td>
<td>Michigan State Univ.</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>1979 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Westbury</td>
<td>SUNY</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>∼1981 (reformed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small College</td>
<td>CSC Palos Verdes</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>∼1980s (closed)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Parent institution</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Founded</th>
<th>Closed, reformed, or open</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tussman Experimental College</td>
<td>UC Berkeley</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>1969 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Cruz</td>
<td>Univ. of California</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairhaven College</td>
<td>Western Washington Univ.</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>~1978 (reformed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescott College*</td>
<td>AZ</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Residential College</td>
<td>Univ. of Michigan</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Division*</td>
<td>Nasson College</td>
<td>ME</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>1969 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bensalem College*</td>
<td>Fordham Univ.</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>1974 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Evergreen State College</td>
<td></td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paracollege*</td>
<td>Saint Olaf College</td>
<td>MN</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>2000 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramapo College</td>
<td></td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of the Atlantic*</td>
<td></td>
<td>ME</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutchins School of Liberal Studies</td>
<td>Sonoma State Univ.</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnston College*</td>
<td>Univ. of Redlands</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>1979 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livingston College</td>
<td>Rutgers Univ.</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>2007 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockton College</td>
<td></td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western College Program</td>
<td>Miami Univ.</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire State College</td>
<td>SUNY</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New College</td>
<td>Univ. of Alabama</td>
<td>AL</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities Cluster College</td>
<td>Bowling Green State Univ.</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>1977 (closed)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The schools on this list self-identified or were identified by contemporaries as "experimental." Some institutions were excluded because they were labeled experimental for a single initiative and others were omitted due to lack of information. The year reformed indicates major alterations to the structure or mission of the institution; some others that remained open were reformed less substantially.

*Indicates private
through interdisciplinarity, independent study, intimate intellectual community, and efficient social reform.

The overarching aim of experimental colleges was invigorating liberal education. Liberal intellectuals saw liberal education as essential for democracy because they believed it resolved social fragmentation and created independent, open-minded citizens. Yet, late-1950s educators were concerned that liberal education might be at risk because overspecialization increasingly gave students a disjointed education with little common knowledge. With this in mind, experimental college leaders emphasized a coherent liberal education. For example, at the founding meetings of MSU–Oakland, participants agreed the liberal arts were necessary to cultivate “the growth of the individual as a thinker, creator and mature participant in a democratic society.” This was because they gave students an understanding of their own culture and encouraged “an inquiring spirit and independence of thought.” The authors of The New College Plan similarly affirmed liberal education as the pedagogy “appropriate for a free man.” Wesleyan’s Butterfield worked to protect and enrich the school’s long-standing liberal arts tradition through its cluster colleges, and the founders of Wayne State University’s Monteith sought to expand the impact of liberal education by giving their professionally focused commuter students “that common body of ideas and knowledge that every educated man should possess.”

Experimental colleges also endorsed interdisciplinarity. This fit the ideals of liberal intellectuals who thought that integrated studies cultivated the open-mindedness that democratic citizens needed. The interdisciplinary individual could work across differences and make connections in an increasingly fragmented society, an outlook that many educators shared. In 1959, former US Commissioner of Education Earl J. McGrath argued that “only a revitalized and expanded system of interdisciplinary education can produce the

38 From Monteith’s founding plan, as quoted in Riesman, Gusfield, and Gamson, *Academic Values and Mass Education*, 44.
well-rounded citizens we need.” An US Office of Education report similarly applauded integrated curricula, encouraging schools to organize individual courses into a more interrelated “course of study.” Experimental colleges merged disciplines through several innovative steps. Many schools eschewed traditional departments. Wesleyan’s cluster colleges and the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay created new multidisciplinary departments, while New College of Florida dropped departments altogether. Monteith College organized faculty in three divisions corresponding to three sets of required interdisciplinary general education courses. This allowed faculty to plan, teach, and evaluate these courses together. Hofstra’s New College and the proposed New College Plan similarly organized faculty around interdisciplinary general education courses.

Concern about conformity led experimental colleges to also emphasize independent study. Intellectuals of the late 1950s were increasingly apprehensive of conformity—not just the conformity they saw in authoritarian communist regimes but also the growing uniformity of American suburban life. This sentiment was captured in Riesman’s best-selling _The Lonely Crowd_, and it influenced educators as well. A prominent Rockefeller Brothers Fund report in 1958 described the dangers of the increasing uniformity of American society and argued schools must cultivate “a nation of free individuals.” Faust similarly lamented there was too much hand-holding in schools and advocated “making ‘self starters’ of the students in their intellectual development.” Experimental colleges used independent study to combat this conformity. California State College (CSC) at Palos Verdes, for example, founded its Small College to experiment with a new independent curriculum that would avoid making “an assembly

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40 McGrath, “General Education: A Revival,” 345.
44 Pells, _The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age_, ix; and Cohen-Cole, _The Open Mind_, 7.
46 Faust, “Rising Enrollments and Effective Use of Faculty Resources,” 260.
line” of “standardized students.” Schools such as Beloit and New College of Florida, as well as the New College Plan, broke traditional courses into self-paced study modules capped by “rigorous examinations on recognized fields of knowledge.” MSU–Oakland used television to record and share material with flexibility and independence. Other means of independent study extended beyond courses. Wesleyan and New College of Florida, along with the New College Plan, encouraged students to design their own concentration in consultation with an advisor and sought to cultivate student independence through alternative forms of grading, such as competency examinations or pass-fail grades.

It is important to note that while experimental colleges promoted independence, they planned to achieve this through structured guidance from faculty. The authors of *The New College Plan* argued that students were “capable of far more independence” than normally assumed, but only after getting “proper training.” Similarly, Sumner Hayward, chief architect of the experimental Beloit Plan and a promoter of independent study programs across the Midwest, described the importance of giving students “training in independence,” as did Hofstra’s New College.

Experimental colleges also sought to create a more intimate intellectual community, reflecting liberal intellectuals’ concern about the alienation of modern mass society. This fear was heightened for higher education leaders, who worried that their institutions would become more impersonal and bureaucratic as they grew. Indeed, even the figurehead for the massive “multiversity,” Clark Kerr, feared

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51 Hayward, “Liberal Arts College in a World in Transition,” *Liberal Education* 51, no. 4 (Dec. 1965), 495; and Hofstra College Study Committee, “Proposal for the Establishment of an Experimental College.”

growth would negatively affect undergraduate education. Experimental colleges offered a solution: small campuses focused specifically on undergraduate education and intellectual community. Kerr, for example, drew inspiration from his undergraduate experience at Swarthmore when he helped envision University of California, Santa Cruz as an experimental collection of small colleges. President Robert Burns of the University of the Pacific justified creating Raymond College by arguing that the challenge of expansion was best handled by “growing smaller” into several clusters. Leaders also sought to create collegial community among students and faculty. The University of Wisconsin at Green Bay did this through architecture; it connected its buildings with concourses so people would be encouraged to engage with each other as they passed in the halls. Wesleyan’s Butterfield utilized outside examiners to “remove the teacher from the role of a judge” and promote collegiality between students and professors.

Finally, experimental college leaders saw their institutions as efficient social reforms. This aligned with other liberal intellectuals, who in the late 1950s had started to move beyond their preoccupation with the dangers of communism and began adopting a critical spirit that led them to advocate for progressive social reforms. One of these reforms was making college more affordable. For example, MSU–Oakland was chartered to achieve its learning objectives “with less dollar cost.” The authors of The New College Plan sought to offer an education “of the highest quality” with a “faculty half as large.” Leaders expected independent study would reduce faculty hours and allow students to graduate early. Schools like Hofstra’s New College, CSC Palos Verdes, and New College of Florida compressed students’ education into three years by switching to a twelve-month academic calendar, saving students a year of lost earnings. Beloit and Hofstra even

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53 Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 5. For effects on undergraduates, see 48–49.
60 Barber et al., *The New College Plan*, 7.
developed schedules that helped students work while in college to pay their bills.62

Administrators also designed institutions to be accessible. Monteith, MSU–Oakland, and Hofstra’s New College were all intended to serve commuter students with average academic achievements. Monteith and, later, the University of Michigan’s Residential College went so far as to select their students at random from their parent universities to ensure their reforms could succeed with all types of students.63 By trialing curricular innovations, experimental college leaders hoped they could help more students experience a high-quality liberal arts education at a lower cost. The ideal of experimentation was not to offer an alternative to the mainstream, it was to create a potential replacement for it. This hope was shared by others—the Ford Foundation hoped the schools would be a model of more efficient higher education and a US Office of Education report in 1960 called experimental colleges “perhaps the most practical way” for institutions to “have an appreciable effect on the patterns of higher education.”64

The Mid-1960s: A Momentary Alliance

The growth in enrollments and funding that had spurred the creation of experimental colleges persisted throughout the mid-1960s, aided by the Higher Education Act of 1965. Combined with this, changes in student attitudes led leaders of experimental colleges to believe their institutions were speaking to the needs of students, which bolstered the movement. As a result, roughly two dozen new experimental colleges were established between 1964 and 1969, and their reforms became increasingly popular at traditional institutions.65

62 Hofstra College Study Committee, “Proposal for the Establishment of an Experimental College”; and Hayward, “Beloit Plan.”
63 Katrina Green, “Monteith College: Spreading Innovation,” in Newell et al., Maverick Colleges, 58; and Theodore M. Newcomb et al., “Self-Selection and Change,” in Gaff, The Cluster College, 137–60. While experimental colleges sought to expand access, few directly discussed racial or gender inclusion (as is apparent in the earlier quote about education for the “free man”). At schools like Monteith and Hofstra’s New College, increasing access meant including commuter and working-class students. At others, like Hampshire and Wesleyan, it simply meant educating more students without sacrificing quality. Pitzer was an exception to this for women, and SUNY Old Westbury and Livingston College prioritized access for racial minorities.
64 Quotation from Hatch, “The Experimental College,” 2; and Fund for the Advancement of Education, Decade of Experiment.
The mid-1960s marked a turning point in student culture. In 1964, student protests erupted on the UC Berkeley campus. Inspired by Mario Savio’s denunciation of the university as a “machine” that treated students as materials rather than human beings, Berkeley’s Free Speech Movement (FSM) ushered in an era of heightened activism on campuses nationwide. In 1965, students at San Francisco State founded an “Experimental College” and began offering their own classes, dismissing traditional courses as irrelevant. By 1971, students were leading courses on more than a hundred campuses across the country. Overall, student attitudes shifted significantly in the mid-1960s. While reports on student values in the early 1960s emphasized apathy and alienation, by the mid-1960s, faculty viewed students as energetic, active, and concerned about their impact on society. The New Left, Students for a Democratic Society, and the counterculture had begun to shape students, though these groups were not yet as influential or extreme as they would become later in the decade.

While not all higher education leaders were enthused by this increase in student engagement and activism, many saw an opportunity amid the turbulence. For example, a 1965 editorial published in *Liberal Education* downplayed the significance of the Berkeley protests and said that while they did not want to encourage more Mario Savios, they were happy that students’ concerns were “closer to the heart of the academic enterprise” than earlier generations.


67 These student-run “experimental colleges” and “free universities” are different from the comprehensive institutions included in this essay because they only enabled students to take a limited number of courses to supplement their traditional education. James W. Brann, “San Francisco Students Run Own ‘College,’” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 1, no. 3 (Dec. 21, 1966), 1, 4.


of University Professors were also tentatively encouraging; they issued joint statements supporting student rights while simultaneously stressing student responsibility, condemning violence, and trying to discourage further protests.\footnote{Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students, \textit{AAUP Bulletin} 54, no. 2 (1968), 258–261; and AAC Board of Directors, “Report of the Board of Directors,” \textit{Liberal Education} 54, no. 1 (March 1968), 110–20.}

Other leaders championed student activism more wholeheartedly. For example, in 1966, Wesleyan’s Butterfield wrote that students’ complaints about their status as “IBM cards” and their “irrelevant” courses were a foremost concern for the future of liberal education, and he encouraged the creation of new experimental colleges as one way to address this.\footnote{Victor L. Butterfield, “Counter-Attack in Liberal Learning,” \textit{Liberal Education} 52, no. 1 (March 1966), 8. Along with founding Wesleyan’s experimental cluster colleges, in 1968 Butterfield was appointed director of the AAC’s Special Committee on Liberal Studies, and from 1969 to 1970 he was acting president at New College of Florida. “Victor L. Butterfield Dies at 71; President Emeritus of Wesleyan,” \textit{New York Times}, Nov. 20, 1975, 44.} Samuel Gould, SUNY chancellor and former president of Antioch, chartered the experimental SUNY Old Westbury on the premise that students’ “concern for relevance, their search for individual identity and their questioning of everything” could lead to “more relevant courses, more disciplined and serious study, deeper personal understanding and greater involvement with public problems.”\footnote{As cited in Francis P. Koster, “Study of an ‘Experiment’: Old Westbury College. An Analysis of the Failure of a State Supported Experimental College,” 1976, 32–33, \url{https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED111231.pdf}. Biographical information from Wolfgang Saxon, “Samuel B. Gould, 86, Unifier of SUNY, Dies,” \textit{New York Times}, July 16, 1997, A17.} These leaders did not see student activists as political radicals but rather as serious students seeking a more meaningful education. For example, Butterfield underscored that most FSM activists were not “beats” but rather “the cream of the Berkeley student crop.”\footnote{Butterfield, “Counter-Attack in Liberal Learning,” 8.}

Similarly, F. Champion Ward, who took over as vice president at the Ford Foundation after Faust’s retirement in 1966, stressed that while many students were critical of their universities, their desires for reform often matched those of educators.\footnote{Like Faust, Ward also served at Chicago under Hutchins. “Clarence H. Faust Dead at 74; Teacher and Aide of Ford Fund,” \textit{New York Times}, May 22, 1975, 42.} Ward commended students who questioned the rigidity of established disciplines and who wanted colleges to be “both liberal and relevant.” Ward pointed to the Ford Foundation–supported New College of Florida and praised its experimental approach for maintaining “intellectual rigor” amid the unrest on other campuses. He further argued that sharing
responsibility with students added cohesion to universities and had led to “no recorded disasters.”78 Accordingly, the Ford Foundation continued to support experimental colleges in this period, giving millions to Hampshire College, New College of Florida, and the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities.79

Experimental college leaders and students in the mid-1960s were particularly aligned behind three goals: a more intimate intellectual community, greater student freedom, and a more relevant education. The first goal, a more intimate intellectual community, stemmed from a shared concern about the impersonality of the multiversity. Many students desired a more personal experience, and this drove them toward experimental colleges.80 For example, students chose the University of Michigan’s Residential College because it offered an alternative to the “impersonal, competitive, and confusing educational experience” at a larger, more traditional university.81 Surveys of first-year students at Nasson College’s New Division, University of the Pacific’s Raymond College, UC Santa Cruz, Tussman’s Experimental College at UC Berkeley, and Hofstra’s New College found that students’ primary attraction to the institutions was their sense of community and increased faculty-student relationships.82

To foster a more intimate community, students and administrators also began involving students in campus decision-making.83 SUNY chancellor Gould wanted students at Old Westbury to have “full


83Professors also supported partnership by helping eliminate paternalistic in loco parentis policies. Julie A. Reuben, “The Limits of Freedom: Student Activists
partnership” in governance and be included on the planning committee for the college. The president of Western Washington State College, Harvey C. Bunke, told students that Fairhaven College would increase “face-to-face personal contact with their professors,” including having a direct role in college governance. Full partnership appealed to leaders’ aspirations to prepare students for citizenship and satisfied students’ desires for a more participatory and democratic form of education.

Experimental college administrators and students were also aligned in their desire for greater student independence. Paralleling higher education leaders’ fears of conformity, for example, student planners for Hampshire College expressed a desire for “independent, divergent, and highly creative thinking” and lobbied for a more independent education based on their own personal interests and concerns. Students flocked to New College of Florida because of the freedom its independent study program provided. Mervyn Cadwallader, founder of San Jose State’s Experimental Program, also noted students’ attraction to the freedom they thought it offered.

Finally, the relevance of education was a point of alignment. Students and administrators wanted an education that was more applicable to students’ lives, as they thought this would lead to more meaningful and self-motivated learning. Students wanted an education that


88 Grant and Riesman, The Perpetual Dream, 224.

would address the problems they saw in the world around them and, correspondingly, experimental colleges taught community-focused and problem-posing courses. These alignments generated student interest and encouraged experimental college leaders. As the decade wore on, however, they would begin to fray.

The Late 1960s and Early 1970s: Conflict and Transformation

Experimental colleges continued to be founded throughout the 1960s, but as the decade progressed, the relationship between experimental college leaders and students began to reflect the growing distance between 1950s liberal intellectuals and the 1960s New Left. They shared core concerns—the impersonality of the multiversity, the conformity of society, and the irrelevance of education—but their increasingly divergent views about how to address these issues led to animosity and conflict. Ultimately, these conflicts loosened the colleges’ structures and gave them more alternative reputations.

From 1967 to 1970, a larger, more extreme wave of student activism erupted across the country. Influenced by intellectuals like Herbert Marcuse who decried the “repressive tolerance” of modern institutions’ incremental reforms, student activists of the New Left increasingly called for abandoning or radically reforming traditional university practices. The pages of Liberal Education, which had remained largely silent on student activism through 1966, were suddenly filled with opinions of student actions, and faculty attitudes polarized as it became clear that student activism and the counterculture would become more influential than they had anticipated.

Student activism engulfed the campuses of most experimental colleges throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. Within the first year of holding classes, students at the University of Michigan’s Residential College had organized sit-ins to demand reform. By

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90 Sanford, “The Campus Crisis in Authority”; Wofford, “Creating an Experimental College,” 12–13; Kliewer, The Innovative Campus, 114–45; and Butterfield, “Counter-Attack in Liberal Learning.”
94 Also see “The Embattled University,” special issue, Daedalus 99, no. 1 (Jan. 1970).
1968, they had won the right to self-govern their housing policies, and they immediately dropped dorm curfews. By 1970, students had reshaped fundamental aspects of the school’s curriculum; they made the extensive required general education courses optional and dropped the sophomore comprehensive examinations altogether. In the winter of 1969 at Michigan State’s Justin Morrill College, students tore down the door separating the male and female residences in what is remembered as “the liberation of Phillips [Hall].” The uprising led to a joint student-faculty commission that gave students self-governance over their living arrangements and disciplinary procedures. That same year, students at Fairhaven College mobilized to replace strict core course requirements with loose distribution requirements because they thought freedom of choice was more important than a “common intellectual ground.”

These conflicts revealed that while experimental college leaders and students shared common concerns in the mid-1960s, this alliance was more fragile than leaders had imagined. Tensions sometimes stemmed from different understandings of key goals, but the biggest point of contention was that students held a more extreme vision of how to implement these goals and had less respect for administrators’ authority. This was especially evident as students and administrators sparred over four issues: student freedom, full participation of students in institutional governance, a relevant curriculum, and students’ affinity for the counterculture.

Students’ dismantling of required interdisciplinary curricula in the name of freedom was perhaps the most distressing to administrators. At the University of Michigan’s Residential College, students eliminated general education requirements in order to promote “personal, social, and political freedom.” This change upset many of the founding faculty, and by 1971 over half of them had left. In 1968,

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97 “Provost’s Commission on Snyder-Phillips Report: Co-Educational Living, 1970” folder 34, box 2318, Office of the Secretary of the Board of Trustees Records, UA.1.2, Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections, East Lansing, MI.


during the second year of operation of Fordham University’s Bensalem College, students voted to remove all required courses and made faculty advising optional. The next year, Bensalem founder Elizabeth Sewell resigned, stating, “I have learned here that total freedom can be the most destructive and terrible thing in the world.”

Two years later, only sixteen of the sixty-five students at Bensalem worked with a faculty member at all. While leaders and students shared concerns about social conformity and a desire to cultivate student independence, they diverged dramatically in their interpretation of how to attain those goals. Leaders expected students to be eager to develop their independence through structured independent study guided by professors, but students wanted greater freedom of choice and questioned professors’ authority. As founder Cadwallader discovered at San Jose State’s Experimental Program, he had “assumed that if students were given respect, attention, and affection, they would be excited by a required liberal curriculum,” but instead he found students “did not want any requirements, let alone a completely required curriculum.”

Many colleges that had been originally planned with substantial general education requirements, such as Hampshire, MSU–Oakland, Fairhaven, and Raymond College, saw these curricula reduced or eliminated. Experimental college leaders wanted to create open-minded, independent individuals, and they thought curricular structure and faculty guidance was necessary to achieve that end. Students similarly valued freedom but viewed it more radically as both a means and end. They wanted their own interests to be the only determinant of the curriculum and had little respect for professors as authorities on freethinking.

The issue of governance was also a central point of contention between students and administrators, as they held different views on how far-reaching full partnership should be. At Michigan’s

101 Cadwallader, “Experiment at San Jose,” 8. Cadwallader also worked at Old Westbury and The Evergreen State College.
Residential College, for example, the original planners wanted student/faculty relations to be more collegial, while students wanted to be a “fully franchised constituency” in institutional governance.\textsuperscript{104} Relatedly, when SUNY chancellor Gould said Old Westbury should give students full partnership in academic affairs, President Harris Wofford interpreted this to mean “a strong executive in a strong dialogue with all the constituents.”\textsuperscript{105} Students, however, interpreted full partnership to mean popular democracy. Unsatisfied with Wofford, students capped their first year with a two-week sit-in. Wofford resigned just two years later, saying the experiment had opened “Pandora’s box.”\textsuperscript{106} Even though experimental college leaders wanted full partnership with students relative to earlier generations, for students this had a more specific and radical meaning. To students, participatory democracy meant one vote per person, and thus students’ greater numbers should outweigh the administration’s votes. Any alternative to this was unacceptable, “apologetic liberalism.”\textsuperscript{107}

Experimental college leaders also struggled to make their institutions sufficiently relevant for students. Both students and school leaders were concerned about the social relevance of their institutions, but compared to administrators’ vision of incremental social reform, students preferred a more dramatic break from tradition. Students were not satisfied with the neutral position professors took because they wanted colleges to respond more immediately and directly to social problems. In the words of a student activist at Old Westbury, “The college should be committed not only to ‘understanding’ these things but to \textit{doing something about them} [emphasis in original].”\textsuperscript{108} Students’ impatience to “break down traditional ivory tower isolation,” clashed with administrators who wanted academic courses to deepen students’ understanding of social issues for later application.\textsuperscript{109} Students and faculty also had different understandings of what it meant for courses to be relevant to students’ own lives. Leaders like Cadwallader at San Jose State thought classical texts, taught correctly, would be relevant to students, but he found his students wanted to study contemporary events,

\textsuperscript{104}As cited in Bright and McClellan, “A Short History of the Residential College,” 3.
\textsuperscript{106}Wofford, “New College at Old Westbury,” 191.
\textsuperscript{107}“New College at Old Westbury,” 192. For more on students’ view of participatory democracy, see Jim Miller, \textit{Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
\textsuperscript{108}Cited in Wofford, “New College at Old Westbury,” 190.
\textsuperscript{109}“A [Student] Proposal for Hampshire College,” 2.
popular media, and other cultures. Similarly, at Fairhaven and Raymond Colleges, students fought to receive credit for life experiences and the study of nonacademic topics.\textsuperscript{110}

Finally, many institutional leaders were challenged by the fact that they were not attracting the “good-average” students they had intended to.\textsuperscript{111} Instead, experimental colleges became beacons for the counterculture and attracted “nonconformist” students who expected freedom and an equal say in governance.\textsuperscript{112} This development shocked many college leaders. As Old Westbury president Wofford said, “One of the problems with experimental colleges is they attract too many experimental people.”\textsuperscript{113} He made it clear that the school should not be a place for “grooving in the grass,” yet when the campus opened it had attracted students who were doing just that.\textsuperscript{114} Many colleges struggled to shake a “touchy-feely” identity and began to gain reputations as alternative, niche institutions for countercultural students.\textsuperscript{115}

While many leaders feared that their goals for experimental colleges were fundamentally threatened by student actions, other leaders were more encouraging and even worked with students to support their efforts. These were often younger professors who had themselves participated in the counterculture and activism of the 1960s, not the older professors who had first envisioned the schools.\textsuperscript{116} At institutions where faculty sympathy was particularly strong, experimental colleges embraced a markedly more alternative approach than that first envisioned in the late 1950s. One of the most colorful examples of this was the University of the Pacific's Raymond College. Raymond was


\textsuperscript{111}Hofstra College Study Committee, “Proposal for the Establishment of an Experimental College,” 205.


\textsuperscript{113}Harris Wofford, “Dreams and Realities: How Big the Wave?”, in MacDonald, \textit{Five Experimental Colleges}, 159–60.

\textsuperscript{114}Wofford, “Creating an Experimental College,” 13. At Old Westbury, which enrolled a substantial proportion of black and Puerto Rican students from New York City, additional conflicts existed between the nonconformist white students and the more academically focused minorities.

\textsuperscript{115}Michael Kahn, “The Kresge Experiment,” \textit{Journal of Humanistic Psychology} 21, no. 2 (Spring 1981), 66.

\textsuperscript{116}Grant and Riesman, \textit{The Perpetual Dream}, 189.
first founded in 1962 as a Great Books cluster college but, following student critiques of course requirements and an infusion of younger professors, it was transformed into the Embryo program in 1971. The Embryo program had no formal courses or curriculum; students and faculty met on the first day and organically formed study pods based on shared interests. These lacked close faculty supervision, and students wrote their own evaluations and could choose whether or not to attend.117 Similarly, Johnston College at the University of Redlands was founded in 1969 with no common graduation requirements and no stable year-to-year curriculum. During the yearly community planning retreat, faculty and students met “with no set agenda” and could just “let it flow.”118 UC Santa Cruz’s Kresge College, founded in 1971, employed “participatory consensual governance” and left “as many decisions as possible to the newly forming college community.”119 UC Santa Cruz leaders even conveyed to students that Kresge was different from previous experiments. They described it as their “most avant-garde experiment” and hoped it would provide “a defense against charges of incrementalism” from students.120

The changes that students brought upon experimental colleges in the late 1960s and early 1970s dramatically transformed how the institutions looked and functioned. These shifts contributed to the perception that experimental colleges were not spaces for ordinary students but, rather, were niches for alternative and nonconforming students. The colleges were no longer praised for structured independent study and interdisciplinary core classes; instead, they attracted students looking for freedom and few requirements. The late-1950s vision of experimental colleges becoming the new mainstream had, a decade later, all but vanished.

The 1970s: The Causes of Dissolution

After 1970, only a handful of new experimental colleges were established. Instead, over the next decade many experimental colleges closed, and still more were “reformed” into more traditional institutions. Less than half retained their experimental form. The dissolution of this movement resulted from three elements colliding in the 1970s: student activism and counterculture, weakened financial support, and a shifting intellectual climate among both students and administrators.

119 Robert Edgar, as cited in Grant and Riesman, The Perpetual Dream, 80.
120 As described in Grant and Riesman, The Perpetual Dream, 78.
Given the uproar of student activism and the rise of countercultural values on campuses in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it is tempting to see experimental college closures as the fallout of student actions. In reality, students' impact varied substantially across institutions. Bensalem College did close primarily because of student-faculty conflicts. After students voted to eliminate virtually all requirements there in 1969, faculty support quickly plummeted, and in 1971 leaders voted to shut the school.121 Conversely, campuses like University of Wisconsin Green Bay and MSU–Oakland experienced few conflicts with students, and some schools, like Hampshire and Evergreen, experienced periods of protest but have generally maintained positive relations between faculty and students.122 Nevertheless, on most campuses, clashes with students did weaken long-term support. Administrators and professors reported being burned out by endless meetings with students. Leaders also felt that, as students pushed in more extreme directions, the institutions they had founded were no longer recognizable, leaving many experimental college leaders frustrated, bitter, and prone to quitting.123 Early supporters like Riesman deplored how the schools' original "telic" visions were trampled by students' "popular" reforms that prioritized freedom of choice.124

While student activism attracted attention and reshaped many experimental colleges, it was not the sole cause of their dissolution. Indeed, most experimental college closures and reforms took place in the mid to late 1970s, years after activism peaked. It did, however, undercut internal support and make schools targets for external reproach.

Material challenges arguably put the most strain on experimental colleges. The financial situation for all colleges deteriorated considerably at the start of the 1970s. A 1971 Carnegie Foundation report found that over two-thirds of colleges faced precarious financial situations,

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121Coyne, “Bensalem.”


124Grant and Riesman, The Perpetual Dream, 16. For a broader description of Riesman's relationship with student activists, see Geary, “Children of the Lonely Crowd.”
and this crisis worsened throughout the decade. To make matters worse, the surge of students dramatically slowed in the 1970s, and many institutions struggled to maintain enrollments, compounding their financial woes. As small, new institutions, experimental colleges felt these problems acutely. They had feeble endowments and low enrollments, and many were operating with yearly deficits. It did not help that their hope for a more cost-efficient education failed to bear fruit—when Hampshire opened, it immediately exceeded its budget, and Monteith similarly found that independent study did not reduce costs. Franconia College in New Hampshire closed because of declining enrollments and insolvency, despite efforts to keep it afloat. Other small institutions, such as Prescott College and New College of Florida, survived only after major financial restructuring and fundraising.

Funding for experimental colleges from the Ford Foundation also dried up by the early 1970s. While the foundation had helped inspire a decade of institutional experiments, its goals of reducing student-to-faculty ratios, removing duplications in curricula, and decreasing time-to-degree generally failed to materialize. Many faculty and students had been attracted to experimental colleges as a means of increasing community and improving the quality of liberal education, but they were rarely as invested in the Ford Foundation’s goal of reorganizing higher education in a more efficient fashion. Consequently, in the 1970s, the Ford Foundation shifted its educational priorities toward other methods of increasing access and efficiency: supporting minorities in higher education and promoting distance learning.

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Shifts in student attitudes also impacted experimental colleges in the 1970s. The most dramatic change was the greater emphasis students put on careers. Surveys of students from the late 1960s to mid-1980s documented a steep increase in the importance of being financially well-off, and students similarly shifted from a preference for liberal arts majors to professional majors. National student support for experimental reforms decreased as well. By 1975, only 30 percent of students supported pass-fail grading, down from 50 percent in 1969. These trends were equally evident at experimental institutions. A 1977 survey at the University of Michigan’s Residential College found that students’ vocational concerns had risen precipitously, and a study at Brown University found an equally dramatic drop in the popularity of interdisciplinary courses and pass-fail grades. For cluster colleges such as Fairhaven and Raymond, the experimental campuses faced worse enrollment challenges than the parent universities. Students who matriculated at experimental colleges had become less supportive of their missions and fewer new students wanted to enroll.

The priorities of higher education leaders also shifted. The liberal intellectual vision that ignited the experimental movement in the late 1950s persisted throughout the 1960s, but in the 1970s higher education leaders’ attention was drawn elsewhere. Faced with the economic and enrollment challenges of the 1970s, university leaders were under immense pressure. This was aggravated by a growing sense that the government and general public were losing faith in higher education.


134 Packard, “Fairhaven: Harbinger or Hostage?,” 90; and Lyon, “Embryo,” 42.
and liberal education in particular. For example, the 1973 AAC President’s Report bemoaned a lack of government support and cited polls showing that the public’s confidence in educators had halved over the previous six years. Consequently, higher education leaders initiated efforts to improve their public image. That year, the AAC hired a public relations firm to help explain the value of the liberal arts to the public, and throughout the decade there was a heightened focus on programs to help improve liberal arts students’ career outcomes. Inadvertently, however, these efforts took momentum away from innovation within the core of liberal education. The AAC Board of Directors worried that they were failing to address “the heart of the matter—the aims and content of liberal education.”

A telling example was the AAC’s Project on Change in the Liberal Arts. Launched in 1973 as “the most significant” project ever conceived by the AAC, it was terminated five years later without creating any new curricular models of note. The intellectual inspiration for experimental colleges, innovating liberal education, had faded into the background.

These factors, put together, weakened support for experimental colleges: financial challenges and declining enrollments undercut material resources, while shifting student and administrator attitudes, combined with the residue of student protests, dampened ideological support. On some campuses, a single factor was decisive—Franconia was closed largely due to financial struggles, and Bensalem was brought down primarily by conflicts with students—but usually the collision of multiple factors is what led to closure or reform. For example, in 1975, the president of Wayne State University decided to close Monteith College, justifying his decision with a financial argument that it would save money and with an ideological argument that the welfare of the whole university “must take precedence over the inter-

est of a small group.” Similarly, Michigan State closed Justin Morrill College for financial and enrollment reasons in 1979 and reassigned its former faculty to work primarily with “nontraditional’ students.”

When financial cuts were required at Raymond and Fairhaven, administrators targeted the experimental colleges because of their perception that the schools’ reputations for nonconformity limited their applicant pools. While there was variation across schools, experimental colleges were primarily closed because of the combined influence of material struggles, weakened ideological support among students and administrators, and the aftereffects of student conflicts.

Conclusion

In the late 1950s, higher education experienced its “golden age”: enrollments climbed, funding increased, and the sector’s prestige soared as grand campuses were constructed and research output reached new heights. Despite this prosperity, many higher education leaders worried that as institutions grew they would become impersonal, bureaucratic, and fail to cultivate the open-minded, liberally educated citizens the country needed. To preserve and invigorate liberal education, reformers created new experimental colleges that could implement the period’s most promising reforms more easily than existing institutions. In the 1960s, synergies with students helped the movement grow, but these eventually soured as students fought for more personal freedom and a greater say in governance, ultimately undoing many of the leaders’ reforms. These conflicts, combined with broader losses of material and ideological support in the 1970s, led to the movement’s dissolution. By 1980, the surviving institutions were reduced to an alternative niche, a far cry from the formidable movement they had once been.

Since the 1970s, few efforts to reform undergraduate education have been as dramatic as the experimental college movement of the late 1950s and 1960s. Yet, surprisingly, experimental colleges have little purchase in the collective memory of higher education leaders. By shedding light on this little-studied development in the history of higher education, this paper has aimed to clarify the mainstream

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142 Freeland, Academia’s Golden Age, 70.
origins of the movement. For educators unsatisfied with the status quo of undergraduate education, the fact that bold, experimental reforms have previously attained such legitimacy and scale may provide inspiration that such change could occur again. That hope, however, must be tempered and informed by an understanding of the unique historical circumstances that gave rise to the movement and an awareness of the difficulties it faced, particularly the inherent challenge of overseeing a coherent “training in independence.”