

Can Antioch College Return From the Dead Again?

By BILL DONAHUE SEPT. 16, 2011

The long corridors of Antioch Hall are dark. The fluorescent lights, perhaps 50 years old and never updated, do not work. The vinyl floor tiles are loose. There are cobwebs and puddles on the floor, and the whole place smells of mold. You have to squint, almost, to picture this four-story brick building as the birthplace of one of the most vaunted experiments in American higher education.

Antioch College held its first classes here in 1853. There were women among the school's early students, as called for in the charter of the Christian Connexion, the church group that founded Antioch amid the cornfields and forests of Yellow Springs, Ohio. Blacks soon matriculated as well. And the college's first president, Horace Mann, the Massachusetts-born education reformer, instilled a spirit of moral resolve that has lingered ever since. At the 1859 commencement, just weeks before he died, Mann exhorted that year's Antioch graduates: "I beseech you to treasure up in your hearts these my parting words. Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity."

In the decades that followed, Antioch flourished as a cradle of social activism and freethinking. It was the most liberal of liberal arts colleges. It never had fraternities, and its long-defunct football team had only one winning season in 40-plus years of existence. In the 1960s, it supplied the civil rights movement with a steady stream of volunteers who traveled South to register black voters. Coretta Scott King went to Antioch, as did the paleontologist and writer Stephen Jay Gould.

Yet Antioch College has been on shaky financial ground for its entire existence. Four times — in 1863, 1881, 1919 and 2008 — it has had to close. Next month, it will reopen again. The college has been sending recruiters to college fairs nationwide for a year now, eventually hoping to draw brainy iconoclasts willing to pay \$35,000 in annual tuition and room and board. The plan is to have 110 students next year and 1,200 students in a decade or so. But when Antioch kicks off the school year on Oct. 4, it will do so as a sort of nanoschool, having chosen to commence with just 35 freshmen from a pool of 145 applicants. This starter batch of students will enjoy four-year full scholarships, paid for with the interest earned from Antioch's \$25 million endowment. They'll begin, according to Antioch's promotional literature, "with the premise that the way we live now is not sustainable." They will be enrolled in a series of "global seminars" — on energy, food, water and health — as well as more standard liberal arts courses like Drawing I and Existentialism. Following Antioch tradition, they will be expected to spend nine quarters on campus and six off campus engaged in "co-op" jobs (on organic farms or in chemistry labs, for instance) meant to reinforce their classroom work. There may be a lapidary society or perhaps a judo club. No one knows yet. Decisions on college life always used to be made by a community government heavily populated by students.

But on a sweltering afternoon in July, the students were still many weeks away from showing up, and only support staff and Antioch's new teachers were present. For this year, there will be just six faculty members, each of them 40 or younger. They sat that day in a classroom, in a small circle of chairs, for a meeting with a few retired Antioch professors, who sought to pass on the college's DNA to their successors. "When I was a student here," Victor Ayoub, who is 88 and taught anthropology, said, "we had quite staunch Republicans. We had communists, and it never affected their standing in the community." Another retired professor added, "We have to think about Antioch and its exceptionalism." A third said: "And love is important. We cannot forget love."

The dialogue was exceedingly meta and free-ranging and permeated by the sort of hope that can come only at the beginning of things — before, say, the first bruising faculty fight. The spirit of reverence was so thick that when the meeting, scheduled for two hours, stretched 40 minutes past that, no one complained. Toward the end, Karen Shirley, who taught art at Antioch for 30 years, leaned toward the new hires

and spoke in low tones. “We have been waiting for you for so long,” she said. “You are the future of what is the most important thing in my life.”

Antioch College is almost certainly the first American liberal arts school to start up in the 21st century, and it’s a rebirth that comes at an unsettled moment in higher education. Increasingly, critics are asking whether going to college is worthwhile. In their new book, “**Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses**,” Richard Arum, of New York University, and Josipa Roksa, of the University of Virginia, argue that many of today’s students learn almost nothing. Arum and Roksa updated their work with subsequent studies to weigh the effectiveness of 29 schools by reviewing data from the Collegiate Learning Assessment. The students in their sample took the C.L.A. at the beginning and at the end of their four-year college careers, and 36 percent of them showed no significant improvements. “Gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and written communication,” Arum and Roksa write, “are either exceedingly small or empirically nonexistent.” Arum and Roksa attribute this to the fact that college students devote only 16 percent of their time to academics, while 75 percent of their time is spent doing things like sleeping and socializing.

Another set of critics speaks of a “bubble” in higher education. Just as people in recent decades poured money into stocks and real estate while assuming that the value of their investments would never fall, the country has been devoting more and more resources to an industry that has, over the past quarter-century, delivered little more than empty promises while the cost of tuition rose 440 percent. One of the biggest proponents of the bubble idea is Peter Thiel, a founder of PayPal, who recently told *The National Review* that no one is “measuring the return” that higher education yields. “It is, in fact, considered in some ways inappropriate to even ask the question of what the return is,” Thiel was quoted as saying. “We are given bromides to the effect of, ‘Well, you know college education is good, but it’s good precisely because it doesn’t teach you anything specific; you become a more well-rounded person, a better citizen; you learn how to learn.’ ”

But even as more Americans are entering college than ever before, the percentage of those seeking liberal arts degrees is dwindling. In his new book, “**Liberal Arts at the Brink**,” Victor E. Ferrall Jr., emeritus president of Beloit College

in Wisconsin, says that in 1900 “as many as 70 percent” of all undergrads were studying the liberal arts. College was an enclave for well-heeled gentlemen, for whom being culturally refined was *de rigueur*. After World War II, when great numbers of students were able to attend college on the G.I. bill and the academy became democratized, a new practicality took root, and higher education became increasingly vocational.

Today’s youngsters start going to career fairs in eighth grade, Ferrall argues, and they are inclined toward very specific academic programs — casino management, say, or video-game design. A 2010 report by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce ratifies their decisions, saying that higher education needs to focus on occupational training, lest the failure to do so “damage the nation’s economic future.” The Obama administration is, of course, focused on minting workers for the health and green-energy industries, rather than Latin and Greek scholars.

By Ferrall’s estimate, in 2009 there were 225 colleges where “the majority of students major in the liberal arts and live on campus,” and their collective population, about 350,000, represented roughly 2 percent of all those enrolled in higher education.

Liberal arts colleges aren’t closing in droves these days; the sector has already been through a contraction — 167 private four-year colleges closed between 1967 and 1990. But liberal arts schools are financially squeezed in an age when prospective students are often seeking deluxe athletic centers and duplex apartments. Many schools, like Bates College, where the comprehensive fee is \$55,300, actually incur per-student costs as high as \$80,000 and cover the shortfall using interest from their endowments. “The annual challenge,” Ferrall writes, “has become not how to choose which applicants to admit but how to attract enough students to fill their dormitories and provide sufficient tuition income to continue operating at current levels.”

Ferrall predicted to me that Antioch, as a residential liberal arts school, will struggle. “I’d guess that alumni gifts will keep it going for three or four years,” he said. “Then it will either morph into a different kind of school, or close.”

In 1964, in the ethos of the time, Antioch College undertook to bring education to the streets by opening its first expansion campus in Putney, Vt. Soon there were more than 30 campuses. One was in an inflatable vinyl bubble in Maryland; another was in a former perfume factory in Los Angeles. But if the expansion was haphazard at first, the Antioch empire streamlined itself over the years. By the mid-'90s only four campuses of what was now called Antioch University remained. Professors were untenured. Students were older, generally, and they lived off campus, pursuing graduate degrees that were quite vocational — in counseling, for instance, or sustainable business.

The university became, in short, more in tune with modern exigencies than the college was, and starting in the mid-'80s, it kept the enterprise afloat, allocating around \$1.5 million to the college each year. Increasingly, the college became a bit player in the larger Antioch constellation, and as many supporters of the college see it, the muscular university soon began to kick the struggling college around.

“To the university,” says Scott Sanders, an archivist at Antioch College, “we were the aging family member who needed to be put in an old folks’ home. They didn’t want to take care of us. Pipes burst on campus. Roofs didn’t get repaired. Downspouts went forever without being cleaned out, and we saw constant budget cuts.”

As the college eroded, alumni contributions plummeted. “Alumni lost confidence in the university board and its stewardship of the college,” says Steven Lawry, the president of Antioch College in 2006 and 2007.

Meanwhile, the college’s students, who had always leaned to the left, were becoming more radicalized. In 1973, after the school’s president announced plans to halt an affirmative-action program, 230 students went on strike one April morning, chaining the doors of administration buildings and later scuffling with police. The protesters refused to go to classes and ended up shutting Antioch down for more than six weeks. Someone set a fire in a dean’s office; telephones and typewriters were smashed. One professor was maced. The New York Times published more than a dozen stories about the strike. The following autumn, 200 freshmen who were

enrolled did not come to campus. By 1979, the student population was less than 1,000.

In 1991, a group called Womyn of Antioch persuaded the school's trustees to approve a groundbreaking sexual-offense policy. Suitors were required to get verbal consent "with each new level of physical and/or sexual contact/conduct" — in other words, to ask: "Can I touch your knee? And now can I . . . touch your buttocks?" "Saturday Night Live" parodied Antioch in a skit entitled "Is It Date Rape?" The national press corps flocked to the campus. When a photographer from Newsweek prepared to take a picture of Gerry Bello, Antioch '97, he told me: "I ripped off all my clothes and said, 'Sure, you can take pictures of me, but you're not going to be able to run them!' "

By 2007, Antioch was in the third of four tiers of the 215 schools that U.S. News & World Report ranked in its "Best Liberal Arts Colleges" issue. There were fewer than 300 students. The university's trustees voted to pull the plug, shutting down the college and voiding the tenure of its faculty members.

Few things galvanize a fan base like failure. At a weekend-long reunion in June 2007, Antioch alumni pledged \$7 million to establish a new Antioch College Revival Fund.

Bello was so moved that he left Texas, where he was doing construction work, and resettled in Yellow Springs. A handful of other alums likewise decamped to the village, by then a crunchy haven of coffeehouses and organic groceries, and in the summer of 2008 they joined six or so Antioch professors in founding a sort of Antioch College in exile called the Nonstop Liberal Arts Institute. Headquartered in a drafty, concrete-floored Yellow Springs warehouse, Nonstop offered courses that included "Local Sustainable Agriculture," "Introduction to Poststructural Thought" and "Queer Animals," a look at wildlife through the lens of queer theory. For the 2008-9 school year, the Revival Fund supplied Nonstop with almost a million dollars in operating expenses. Professors received competitive salaries, and tuition was just \$1,500 per year.

But the Revival Fund financed Nonstop for just one year. In 2008, a new entity, the Antioch College Continuation Corporation, made up of former university

trustees, major donors and alumni leaders, emerged to take control of the purse strings and stopped backing the operation. Its chairman, Lee Morgan, Antioch '69, is a retired printing magnate who drives a built-to-order British convertible, a Morgan Plus 8, and is the main force behind the Morgan Family Foundation, which has given \$2.75 million to the new Antioch. Morgan was not impressed with the direction Nonstop had taken. When he and I dined at TJ Chumps, a sports bar just outside Yellow Springs, he called the college-in-exile a “monoculture” and dismissed its most zealous operatives as “cromagnons.”

Morgan was an activist in his Antioch days — he was instrumental in a student-led sit-in against a Yellow Springs barber who excluded blacks. In the '70s, he was an advocate for employee ownership, and he granted his employees at Antioch Publishing shares in the company. In 2008 and 2009, he helped Antioch College extricate itself from the university. The sales negotiations were complicated (they lasted 14 months) but friendly. The university didn't really want a derelict campus — a science building with outdated bunsen burners lying around, for instance — or a \$20 million endowment fund earmarked solely for the college's use. So in the end the university sold 25 buildings, along with a 1,000-acre wooded glen and unfettered use of the endowment, to the Continuation Corporation for just \$6.2 million. After the 750-page closing documents were signed, a ceremony was held on the lawn of Antioch College. Morgan was handed the keys to the college. There were 30 or so of them on a ring, and he hoisted them over his head and roared with delight.

Not everyone is thrilled by the new Antioch. Arthur Dole, a 1946 grad who went on to teach professional psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, is currently withholding what he describes as a “five figure” gift to the college because he says that it has insulted its tenured professors by not rehiring a single one of them. A small but vocal cadre of recent Antioch alumni share Dole's sentiment. Tenure exists, Bello says, “so that we have academic freedom, so that the pope can't kill Galileo for saying that the earth goes around the sun. Tenure exists to keep people from being burned at the stake.”

Like many involved with Nonstop, Bello says he still feels betrayed by the corporation's decision in 2008 to abruptly halt financing for the ad hoc school. A computer-science major, he now spends much of his time hunched at the

Emporium, a Yellow Springs cafe, poring over Antioch-related documents. He is, for example, studying the personal investments of Antioch's board members, to see if they hold arms-industry stocks, and he is pushing the jettisoned faculty to sue the college. He's fighting an uphill battle, but on a recent morning, as he sipped coffee in a T-shirt emblazoned with the motto "Kicking Ass for the Working Class," he vowed to press on. He said, "Horace Mann didn't say, 'Try really hard until you're tired.'"

At the center of the fracas over how the new Antioch will create itself from the ashes of the old is the college's new president, Mark Roosevelt. A great-grandson of Teddy Roosevelt and also a onetime Massachusetts state legislator who later served, from 2005 to 2010, as the superintendent of Pittsburgh public schools, Roosevelt was hired last December. He is 55, and has five framed pictures of Abraham Lincoln in his office, as well as a bottle of cider vinegar that he sips judiciously to sooth a bad liver.

His experience at Antioch has been marked by "a lovely instability," Roosevelt said. "What we're undertaking is a high-wire act," he said. "This has never been done before. I don't think a college has ever created a university and then seceded from it."

Roosevelt maintains that his first task is to establish "civil dialogue" between warring alumni factions. "A lot of the alumni got their noses bent out of shape," he said. "I understand that. I appreciate that. But my feeling is that people will come home. Our disagreements are small, and I think we can work them out." When I visited Roosevelt's office this summer, he swiveled in his chair toward his computer and Googled Lincoln's quote about appealing to the "better angels of our nature."

Roosevelt isn't sure how, exactly, he will guide campus discourse. Will he halt the old Antioch's practice of letting students spray-paint political graffiti on designated walls? He doesn't know. And how will the curriculum handle conservative ideas? The faculty he put together, largely for its ability to teach a broad range of topics, doesn't include any outspoken right-wingers, he concedes, and he is leery of relying on guest speakers. "We have to do it in class," he said. "We have to teach students to be dexterous at presenting — and understanding — the political

views of people who disagree with them. They'll need to if they want to win some victory for humanity.”

In 1989, Roosevelt was the lead sponsor on a bill that, when it passed, made Massachusetts the nation's second state, after Wisconsin, to protect gay rights. But his experience in Pittsburgh may be more apropos. There, when he arrived, the city's cash-starved, voter-elected school board was so besieged that Pittsburgh's mayor was poised to appoint a replacement board. “It was stressful,” Roosevelt said. “I rarely slept through the night.” Roosevelt secured a \$100 million pledge from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and used it to establish a scholarship fund, the Pittsburgh Promise, that now sends roughly 750 high-school seniors to college each year. He closed 23 of Pittsburgh's 88 public schools. He may need to restructure Antioch as well.

With Lee Morgan, the Antioch corporation chairman, Roosevelt is working to establish community housing on campus for faculty and older adults — and then integrate its residents into the curriculum. (“You could send a kid overseas for three months and have him start an elderhostel for his co-op,” Morgan told me.) Roosevelt is also hoping to partner with neighboring colleges so that they share, say, a visiting poet. Antioch's wellness center will be open to Yellow Springs residents, and the college will do some language teaching online.

“We're not going to spend like an Amherst or a Williams,” Roosevelt said. “We can't do that. And we're going to have to say no to some things. Do we really need a course on Rousseau? Not necessarily. The core of what we need to deliver, I'd argue, is intimacy: quality teaching from quality teachers you get to form a deep relationship with.

“Our teachers need to tell students, ‘Trying and failing is O.K.’ What Antioch's always been good at is letting student growth be unpredictable — and at not silencing voices outside of the mainstream. I've spent most of my life in the mainstream — in the legislature and as a superintendent. But look at history.” Roosevelt spoke of the stationmasters on the Underground Railroad, and of conscientious objectors during World War I. “Those people were dissenters,” he said. “But they were important, and I think that, when it comes to the issues ahead

of us — like food and sustainability — we’re going to need the voices of people outside the mainstream.”

When the six new professors — there are plans to hire another 10 over the next four school years — were dispatched to the second floor of McGregor Hall for their first-ever visit to the faculty office suite, Roosevelt characterized the field trip as a “sociology experiment.” The offices weren’t assigned, and in keeping with Antioch mores, the teachers were obliged to reach a consensus as to who would look out onto Antioch Hall and who would gaze down at the cracked concrete steps of the library.

The literature professor, Geneva Gano, began moving in 12 boxes of books, even though, officially speaking, the offices couldn’t be occupied, on account of a problem with the fire alarm. The chemistry professor, David Kammler, got serious, putting on a back brace before he started heaving file cabinets around. But little was revealed about hierarchies or power dynamics, save for the fact that Lewis Trelawny-Cassity, a lanky philosophy professor from Georgia, ended up with the largest office of all by exercising Southern gentility, not saying a word until the others had all chosen their places. It was essentially a bunch of careful professionals, still not quite at ease with one another, being polite.

A while later the new faculty members went out for drinks at the Gulch, an old-school Yellow Springs dive. It was around 8:30 on a Thursday. A gentle breeze wafted into the bar from the sidewalk, and the faculty sat together at a long table, loosening up a bit. Their first inside joke evolved: They would turn to me just as they were on the verge of saying anything remotely juicy and declare, “This is off the record.”

Mostly, though, the professors talked about how they planned to guide students — which was what had really been missing that first week at Antioch. Even when the students arrived, there would be so few of them — just 35, compared with 53 staff members, including the secretaries, deans and maintenance crews — that the school’s staff threatened to smother them with an earnest attention approximating baby lust.

But soon, as luck would have it, the faculty met the first freshman. Eva Erickson strolled into the Gulch, wearing fatigue shorts and a T-shirt that said: “Antioch College. No Football Team Since 1929.” Erickson, who is 22, was a freshman at the old Antioch before it closed; she stayed on in Yellow Springs, studying at Nonstop and working a dozen odd jobs, raking leaves and selling shoes as her parents fretted over her devotion to a college that didn’t exist. Now she recognized the professors from photos she’d seen and rushed toward the table. “Oh, my God,” she said, her hands fluttering up toward her face. “This is going to sound creepy, but I know all about you guys.” Erickson sat down and said she was from Salt Lake City. “And when you say that,” she said, “everyone thinks you’re a Mormon.”

“It’s an interesting place, though, with an alternative community,” said Gano, the literature teacher.

“But what are you interested in studying?” another professor asked.

Erickson started to speak, and everyone at the table leaned in, eager to hear.

Bill Donahue (bill@billdonahue.net) has written for The Atlantic, Wired and Inc., among other publications. He lives in Portland, Ore.

Editor: Dean Robinson (d.robinson-MagGroup@nytimes.com)

A version of this article appears in print on September 18, 2011, on Page MM58 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Back in the Ol’ Hippie Hothouse.